Teaching Euro-English: The Results of a Survey of Swiss Teachers[1]

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English has within a relatively short time become a language used by far more non-native than native speakers. This is true all over the world, and not least in Europe. As multilingual Europe grows eastward and new international links are forged, communication in English is becoming increasingly common. According to the most recent Eurobarometer survey (2001), 32% of the continental EU population knows English well enough to hold a conversation in it, making English the leading foreign language in Europe, followed at considerable distance by French (11%), German (8%) and Spanish (5%). In fact, up to 80% of the population of some northern European countries (NL, S, DK) now say they can speak English conversationally, although the figures for southern Europe are much lower. What is more, the proportion of young people claiming to speak English is many times higher than that of their compatriots over the age of 54. This means that English will increasingly be used as the main lingua franca in Europe for the next 30-40 years at least.

Describing Euro-English

The frequent use of English as a European lingua franca may well lead to the establishment of one or more new and stable varieties of English, which we can call Euro-English. What might these European non-native speaker varieties of English be like? Projects aimed at collecting and analyzing samples of intra-European English have been launched in the last few years, but a linguistic description still lies some distance in the future

Even without a description we can still speculate with some degree of certainty as to how Euro-English probably differs from native speaker varieties. A number of linguists have predicted that Euro-English will blur certain grammatical distinctions found in native speaker English, such as countable/uncountable nouns, the relative pronouns *who* and *which*, and definite/indefinite articles. We can further predict that Euro-English speakers will regularly use structures like *I know him for a long time* or *if there would have been more voters,* or *the situation gets worse* (instead of *is getting worse*) because such usage can be regularly heard on international radio or television from extremely articulate European speakers of English. Word order differences can also be predicted, as can the use of pseudo-English loan words, such as *handy*, *fitness* and *dancing*. On a more subtle level, Euro-English might overuse or underuse certain syntactic patterns, e.g. *they have the possibility* rather than *they can*, or *already last year* instead of *as early as last year*.

A challenge to the native-speaker model

The target language where English is taught as a foreign language (EFL) is today almost exclusively an idealized form of some native speaker variety, usually British or American English. Learners are corrected when they deviate from this, and test results

[1] This is a summary of an article titled "Swiss English teachers and Euro-English: Attitudes to a non-native variety" which appeared in *anglais, Englisch, inglese, Englais…English! Bulletin VALS/ASLA 77, pp.147-165.*

usually reflect how close learners come to native speaker competence. Not only do teaching materials around the world take native English as their model, but they also largely represent English as communication between two native speakers or between native and non-native speakers. Despite its prevalence in the real world, communication in English between two non-native speakers is for the most part ignored.[2]

It is therefore interesting to speculate on the effects that the establishment of a non-native variety such as Euro-English might have on the native/non-native balance of power in ELT. Would non-native speaker teachers become the arbiters of correctness? Or would correctness lose its importance in examinations, making way for different criteria more closely connected with successful communication? Would ELT materials change to reflect more typical Euro-English communication situations? With questions such as these in mind, we[3] decided to survey Swiss English teachers' acceptance of Euro-English, as well as their attitudes to changes in native-speaker prestige and power that a larger role for Euro-English in ELT might entail.

A survey of Swiss teachers

A questionnaire was sent by post and e-mail to English teachers in private and state schools in the three main language regions of Switzerland. In all, 253 questionnaires were returned.[4] Just over half of the respondents were native speakers of English. The questionnaire was divided into two parts. In the first part, teachers were asked to react to six statements about authority and non-native-speaker English by using a 5-point scale of responses ranging from 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree'. In the second part, they were asked to judge whether 11 sentences, each containing one grammatical or lexical particularity of Euro-English, were either 'acceptable' or 'unacceptable'.

Acceptability judgements

Teachers were asked to judge whether 11 typical Euro-English sentences, shown in Table 1, were acceptable as English (A) or unacceptable as English (U).

Table 1. Euro-English items tested in the survey in order of acceptability.

	Euro-English survey items	Acceptability
1	*That big blue Mercedes is the car of my dentist.*	*81%*
2	*Already in 1999 they introduced "English for Kids" courses.*	*79%*
3	*Last October I had the possibility to attend a workshop on media.*	*78%*
4	*I had a ski accident and broke the right arm.*	*67%*

[2] This is not the case in some teaching materials for international Business English.
[3] The original survey was conceived and distributed by Maria Dessaux-Barberio, Jackie Gottschalk and Heather Murray.
[4] Proportions of respondents were reasonably close to Swiss language proportions in the general population.

5	*How do you call this?*	*58%*
6	*That's my handy ringing – excuse me.*	*54%*
7	*I know him for a long time.*	*41%*
8	*I'm in terrible shape. I should go to a fitness.*	*40%*
9	*You should see doctor.*	*38%*
10	*I'm going by the dentist tomorrow.*	*23%*
11	*That's the film who I saw yesterday.*	*14%*

The six items above the double line in Table 1 were pronounced acceptable by a majority of teachers, while the five below it (7-11) were deemed 'unacceptable as English'. However, acceptability levels varied from item to item. What are possible explanations for these differences? One fairly obvious generalization is that the sentences characterized as 'acceptable' by a majority of the respondents do not break any of the explicit grammatical rules taught in Standard English teaching materials. In contrast, sentences 7-11 do break commonly taught rules or contain easily identifiable vocabulary problems. There were significant differences between native and non-native speaker acceptability judgments on sentences 6-11: non-native teachers were generally less tolerant of errors. This finding is consistent with most error evaluation research.

Statements about non-native speakers and English

Table 2. Summary of Swiss teachers' responses to 6 statements

Statements	Summary of responses
1. Native speakers should respect the English usage of non-native speakers more.	Overall, a comfortable majority agreed with the statement, that is, they felt non-native-speaker English usage deserved more respect. However, there was a highly significant difference between native and non-native speaker teachers: native speakers agreed much more strongly.
2. Non-native teachers might be in a better position than native speaker teachers to judge which varieties of English are most appropriate for their learners.	Swiss teachers had no clear preference here.
3. Learners should have more say in whether they imitate native or non-native speakers.	For the group of teachers as a whole, there was no clear majority. More teachers of teenagers and children tended to disagree, indicating perhaps that they thought children might choose inappropriate English models.
4. I think I should spend more time getting students to communicate in English instead of spending hours trying to eradicate mistakes that are typical of Euro-English.	Unsurprisingly, a large majority of all teachers backed communication.
5. Most of the situations in my course book assume that my learners will later be speaking English with native speakers; I think there should be more	Only a slim majority agreed. Native speakers tended to show weak agreement and non-native speakers tended towards weak *dis*agreement. This same division was seen when student age-

situations showing non-native speakers communicating with each other.	groups were compared: 60% of teachers of adults agreed, while 66% of teachers of teens *dis*agreed.
6. Course books convey the notion that English is either British or American, but there are actually many different possible models for English in the world and these should appear in course books in the future.	This statement hinted that Euro-English is worthy of being a target in future ELT materials. A respectable majority (61.3%) agreed, despite the teachers' scepticism in response to statement 5. Here again, non-native speaker teachers agreed less strongly.

Discussion of results

The teachers in our survey proved to hold fairly liberal opinions in claiming to favour communication over error-correction, and to respect less mainstream varieties of English, including non-native varieties. On the other hand, they tended to have doubts about including non-native communication situations in course books and about allowing learners to choose their language models for themselves**.** The responses suggest that Swiss English teachers are, in principle, somewhat open to what would amount to rather fundamental changes in the subject matter they teach, but that they tend to cling to the *status quo* when it comes to concrete changes in the direction of Euro-English.

As for the acceptability judgments, the sentences judged to be unacceptable by the majority of respondents represented violations of taught rules rather than possible but unusual structures. I think this indicates the way in which Euro-English will come to be accepted in Europe. There will not be a revolution in which all native-speaker English course books are burned; rather, non-rule-breaking Euro-English usage will increasingly find its way into listening and reading materials, which will serve as indirect models for learners' speaking and writing. This gradual infiltration of Euro-English will spread from materials for adults (where it has already started) to those aimed at younger learners. At the same time, examining bodies, education authorities and, ultimately, teachers will have to re-consider their policies with regard to structures like *I know him for a long time*, which clearly break present rules.

Comments

Swiss English teachers were highly interested in the outcome of the survey and usually very animated in their responses. Almost every questionnaire returned contained a request for results as well as several comments[5] - a handful of respondents even attached pages of typed notes! Some teachers were adamantly against teaching Euro-English, ("Why should [my students] be satisfied with some kind of 'pseudo bastardised English'?"), while others had difficulty imagining English without the native speaker standard, ("I've never met a learner who wanted to imitate a non-native speaker.").

Several seemed ready to contemplate teaching the new variety,

[5] We are extremely grateful to all teachers who participated, and particularly to those who took the time either to write comments or to distribute copies of the questionnaire to colleagues.

> I welcome the development of Euro-English … because it confirms my growing discomfort with correcting what I call 'picayune' errors … which do not interfere with understanding, because it confirms my belief that pronunciation is the user's own business, as long as he or she is understandable …, [and] because it gives voice and power to the means of expression that many people are using.

This teacher is very much in the minority at present, and probably not just in Switzerland.

Swiss English teachers seem to be caught between accepting and even supporting the existence of Euro-English in the abstract, but rejecting it as a classroom target, mainly because they are at a loss as to how to answer all the practical questions that arise in connection with evaluation, syllabus criteria, and the teacher's responsibilities if native-speaker competence is no longer the ultimate goal. One of our respondents spoke for many when she wrote, "Although I agreed with the statements about accepting Euro-English I had great trouble finding the typical mistakes 'acceptable'".

The shift away from the 'gold-standard' of native speaker English in ELT is still some time off. Europeans, including the Swiss, probably need to become more aware of the new functions of English in their midst before they are ready to accept anything other than a native-speaker target. One thing is, however, certain: if such a shift ever occurs, it will be non-native speakers of English – both learners and teachers - who decide.