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## A Critical Look into Basic Assumptions of Teaching English as an International Language (EIL)

Gholam Reza Zarei, Ph.D. in Applied Linguistics

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### Abstract

The present paper is intended to explore some controversies that prevail in Basic Assumptions in Teaching English as an International Language (EIL). It focuses on the assumptions supposed to underlie the new approach to the English language teaching referred to as EIL. Assumptions are evaluated from different perspectives and the problems are highlighted. It is attempted to show that the new position for the English Language cannot lead us to any secure place, supposed to be characteristically distinct from its predecessors.

**Keywords:** English language; English as an international language (EIL); Basic assumptions.

### Introduction

Drawing on the ideas of Smith (1978, 1981), and Nunan (1999), Talibinezhad and Aliakbari (2001), among others, have attempted to support a so-called new position for Language in India [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com) 75

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the English language teaching and learning across the globe. The main point is that the new conditions in the world require a new orientation towards the English language teaching, and thus the proper candidate is English as an International Language (EIL) as a viable substitute for the old EFL/ESL models.

To defend their stance, different authors enumerate and explain a number of assumptions, which are largely inconsistent, self-explanatory, and contradictory. This article is intended to shed light on some inherent problems existing in the assumptions provided to substantiate the proposed orientation. The assumptions are first reviewed and then the relevant problems are explored.

### **Points of Controversy**

The following part presents the assumptions first and then they are reviewed. Attempts are made to show that the assumptions are not clearly formulated.

#### **Assumption 1: EIL is universal**

First, the assumption, as stated above, explains the global prevalence of English language. Therefore, the assumption is tautological and must be avoided. Moreover, the assumption is no more than the repetition of the statement to be made as the desired prospective position. As far as the function of an assumption is concerned, it should provide a ground on which to place the purpose. For example in the statement, “I think, therefore I am”, thinking is the assumption for the second part to be realized. That EIL can serve as an assumption for EIL is simply a problem of circularity in the justification of that position. To make it clear, there is just one *single* proposition in the claim, namely, ‘English as an International/universal Language’, which is expected to serve both as the assumption and result.

Also, the description of the assumption cannot help much with the EIL as the substitute for the EFL/ESL. That English is widely used for a wide variety of purposes and by a larger number of non-native speakers is not debatable at all, but the point is EFL/ESL view has no claim to limit the use of the language so that the substitution, namely, the counter claim is justified.

#### **Assumption 2: EIL is descriptive**

This is meant to show the functional character of EIL. EIL characterized as focusing on the functions rather than on the form of the language can be welcomed as the easing of the tight native speaker-based norms for learning English. This fact does not have anything to do with the proposed substitution. The EFL/ESL notion is supposed to explain the kind of the environment in which the English language is to be learned , and

as far as it is known, the same notion (EFL/ESL) has already embraced the communicative paradigm where the use (descriptive character) of language outweighs the usage or prescription thereof (Richards, 1983; Maley, 1983). Therefore, there is no need to make such a claim as to reject one in favor of another.

As regards this assumption, the proponents must note that the learners' equal right is not limited just to maintaining their relationship but to achieve transactional purposes as well. Thus, the emphasis on the function cannot be achieved by not giving any attention to some prescription for the form.

### **Assumption 3: Interactors in EIL are Unpredictable**

This justification is also built on some self-created assumption. As discussed above, EFL/ESL explains particular situations where English is taught or learned; the former refers to the context of language learning without the actual social use of the language whereas the latter represents the conditions with the widespread use of the language in the society (Richards et al., 1992).

Though in both conditions (EFL/ESL) the frame of reference is native speaker, the authors do not specify the target *interactors* as the native or non-native speakers whatsoever. Therefore, it seems unlikely that any approach to language learning makes a strong claim as to the nature, terms and conditions of upcoming interactions.

It is noteworthy that the setting of goals, specifying of situations, and determining of the prospective interactors for the sake of teaching and learning should remain part and parcel of any organized syllabus, no matter it is called EFL/ESL or EIL. The determination of the pedagogic purposes (native speaker standard) surely is not supposed to block the situational/interactional changes when it comes to the real use of the language. If EIL maintains that this is not the case, then what criterion is suggested to serve the pedagogical purposes?

### **Assumption 4: EIL is Intervariatal**

No doubt English is intervariatal, but the problem is that there is nothing new in this assumption at all. Before we had the idea of EIL, native speaker standard as the ultimate model had failed to acquire a uniform status/acceptance, and there had appeared some degrees of tolerance for dialectal/phonological variations. Therefore, this nomenclature (EIL) has nothing more to offer than what we may call a kind of 'a posteriori labeling'. The authors have not actually shown us a new way, but figuratively speaking, they have stuck new labels on the old bottles.

### **Assumption 5: EIL is Functional**

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It is stressed that EIL refers to functions, *not to the form of the language*. Clearly it is ignored that the proponents of EIL already claimed it to be *intervariatal*, the point that has a distinct relation to the *form* rather than the priority of the *functions*. Therefore, one cannot disregard the importance of the *form* (emphasis intentional), though by form they seem to restrict themselves to the phonological form (Jenkins, 2000) in the realization of the functions and at the same time wish for an *intervariatal* model of language.

### **Assumption 6: EIL is Non-artificial**

Once again, the proponents have resorted to an irrelevant assumption for the consolidation of their position. Though the main point is to compare and contrast the old approaches (ESL/EFL) with the new one (EIL) to prove the superiority of latter, the proponents unexpectedly turn to an artificial language to get their idea through. EIL as the substitute for the old approaches has nothing to do with an artificial language, for example Esperanto.

Moreover, if the comparison is to show the significance of language parentage and background, EFL/ESL can make a better candidate than EIL which is assumed to be an amalgamation of different and variable sources.

One may also ask why EIL advocates should not choose an artificial language that could do away with all those problems in case they are looking for a language that is supposed to be universal, intercultural, functional and international.

In the way the advocates are trying to define EIL, i. e., an approach devoid of any sort of cultural or phonological bias, artificiality seems a strong rather than a weak point. The point 'being non-artificial' seems self contradictory because they wish to have something non-artificial and at the same time try to have a language divorced from historical and cultural background.

### **Assumption 7: EIL is Cross-cultural/Multicultural/Intercultural**

Again, this part reveals the problem of tautology and verbosity. The apparently three distinct assumptions all revolve around the same axis, that is, they contend that EIL does not borrow the cultural norms for communication from native speakers but from all those speakers using English. In this way, these assumptions have no clear different purposes to convey.

More than this, EIL does not make it clear how the idea of culture is to be treated. Smith (1983) is reported to propose 'a value free or cosmopolitan English' and Stern (1992) is quoted as subscribing to 'the no-particular-culture-based language program'.

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Overall, it is not known which position will be recommended to have: (1) no culture at all; (2) all the cultures altogether or (3) just one specific culture at a time. The picture presented is absolutely distorted, that is, the advocates seem to admit all the above-mentioned options simultaneously. On the whole, they tend to say that EFL/ESL reliance on the native speaker culture is a disadvantage (hence EIL is preferred), but I believe it can be an advantage since in this case language learners can find their own standing in the world of cultures much better than if they are not exposed to the native culture of the language they are learning. As a result, they will be able to handle the cross-cultural conflicts more conveniently.

### **Assumption 8: Both Native and Non-native Speakers Need Training in EIL**

The EIL proponents already based their positions on the criticism that the EFL/ESL models are sticking to the native speaker as the ultimate goal which is not desirable. As a result, they recommended EIL as the model which could relax the standards for the learners to benefit more from the language programs.

Ironically, if ESL/EFL models are not suitable and their goals are not achievable, then how we can justify the second position that native speakers can successfully get the training for something (non-native standards) which is not quite clear (Campbell et al., 1982). If we agree that native models are not achievable in EFL/ESL models, the implication we get is that non-natives have their own standards while learning the language, not paying attention to the goals set by EFL/ESL. Therefore, there is no further need to include EIL as a new approach. The only claim that can be made is that EFL/ESL model is already EIL.

### **Conclusion**

In order to draw up a new orientation, one needs to base his explanations on some solid rigid ground to avoid further ambiguity. Though the proponents of EIL have tried to highlight the importance of the new approach, unfortunately they have deviated from the principles of comparison and contrast and have not added much to the already existing subject. The assumptions they have offered are in one way or another contradicting each other, and straying from the point of discussion.

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