

Which English to focus on?

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The English in EFL textbooks and the English students need

Most ELT in Latin America, as elsewhere, is carried out working with a textbook, usually related to the Common European Framework nowadays, and perhaps also to an official syllabus. The textbook usually determines to a large extent which English, or combination of varieties of English, is focused on. For example:

- British English, or American English, or international English (different varieties of English of fluent users, non-native as well as native).
- English for everyday life in an English-speaking country, or English for international travel and work, or English mainly for study, work and professional development in the student's own country.
- More colloquial English, or more formal English (or both, perhaps contrasted at times).
- English for general purposes (social, transactional, etc.), or English for specific purposes (academic, business, medicine, engineering, etc.).

Textbooks are usually selected – and always should be – with the teaching-learning context and the students in mind. However, there's little choice in EFL textbooks that are readily available and accessibly priced in Latin America. Almost all are either American or British English, and English for general purposes (or, as has often been said, for no particular purpose).

That isn't an issue with ELT for children. Textbooks for children, especially young ones, should be visually attractive and the activities should be easy and fun for the children, but the specific variety and uses of English don't really matter much, except in certain schools or language institutes. American and British bilingual schools and language institutes obviously select American and British textbooks respectively, and they tend to focus on visits to and stays in the United States, Britain and other countries, which some students may already have experienced and a few may experience every year.

The problems with EFL textbooks and varieties of English arise especially with older teenagers and adults, when probable or actual specific uses of English become predictable or completely defined. For example, high school students planning to continue into higher education are likely to need English for general academic purposes and later for professional or skilled work, and undergraduates in medicine or nursing clearly need English for health sciences.

British, American and internationally intelligible English

Overwhelmingly, most English courses for teenagers and adults in Latin America are based on either American or British English textbooks. American English textbooks dominate from Mexico to central South America, with British English ones used more going south towards Argentina and Chile. Does the textbook distinction between British and American English really matter?

As a British co-author of both British English and American English textbooks (with a Canadian co-author for some British English textbooks) and a teacher-director in a British language institute with some American, Australian and Canadian colleagues, my answer is "No, it doesn't". As I've just suggested,

those of us familiar with major dialects of English can produce their main stereotypical features (as teachers and as materials writers), and, anyway, learners of English usually shift to the variety they eventually have most contact with, not necessarily the variety in their school English classes. A Mexican working in a German car factory is likely to pick up German-British English, and an Argentinian working in an American-owned bank is likely to pick-up American English. The English-speaking workers in the car factory in Mexico and the English-speaking workers in the bank in Argentina can communicate with one another in their different varieties of English because all major varieties of English are internationally intelligible, like all major varieties of Spanish.

What did I mean by “stereotypical features” above? Well, for example, in EFL textbooks, British English uses “have got” for possession and American English “(do) have”, but that’s simply not borne out in Britain and the United States or in British and American songs, TV and films. Of course, there are typical British and American forms and words, but so are there typical regional forms and words in Britain and the United States. Among reasonably educated people, they’re almost always intelligible.

What most learners of English as a foreign language definitely do need is internationally intelligible English, whatever its minor peculiarities (American or British or Latin American) and comprehension of good non-native English as well the main varieties of native English. The English most Latin American students hear in the classroom isn’t either real British or real American English, but the English of their Latin American teachers (good, it is to be hoped, and probably with notable British or American features, but non-native English). The English they read in their textbooks, supposedly British or American, may be stereotypically British or America in dialogues, but in texts, especially formal ones, there’s often little or no difference, just the occasional difference in spelling: note that there are no British-American spelling differences in this article so far, and only one word that’s standard in British English and not in American English, though it is also used in the United States – film.

All the above said, it’s perfectly logical and appropriate that most textbooks used in Latin America should have so-called American English. But other variations in English may matter much more.

English for different people and purposes

In the first section of this article I listed several varieties of English apart from British and American English (which themselves include, respectively, London, Liverpool, Welsh and Scottish English, and New York, New Orleans, Mid-Western and Californian English). I’ll consider now four of those other varieties or types of use:

- 1 English for everyday life in an English-speaking country or community (fairly colloquial English).
- 2 English for international travel and work (standard international English).
- 3 English for use in the student’s own country, especially for study and work (fairly formal English).
- 4 English for a specific field of work, e.g. business, medicine or engineering (mainly formal English).

Obviously, more than one variety can be taught and studied, and actually learned, given adequate conditions and time.

Most international EFL textbooks work mainly on a combination of 1 and 2, with topics and situations related to English-speaking countries (particularly the US in American English books and the UK in British English books) and international topics and situations. That’s logical for international books, which don’t ‘know’ the nationality or needs of the different students using them, and it provides

contexts and content for the practice of basic grammar (noun phrases, verbs tenses and phrases, sentence structures, etc.) and vocabulary (especially structural words, like pronouns, prepositions and determiners). It can work fairly well, at least up to upper elementary level. Those two varieties may also make English seem glamorous for some students, even if everyday life in the US or UK and international travel are not in the present or the future of most Latin American students of English and varieties 3 and 4 might be much more useful for them. To make English seem more useful for their students, some teachers shift away from the textbook's focus on 1 and 2 towards the topics, situations and specific language in varieties 3 and 4 that their students really need or might need.

Here are some examples of English of varieties 1 and 2, typical of many international textbooks:

Hi there. How are you? / OK, I guess. / And your wife? / She's kind of stressed. / And the kids? / Great.

Is your sister that tall girl with blond hair? / Yeah, but that's not her natural hair color. She has brown hair. / Oh! What's she like? / A good pal, but a bit crazy sometimes.

Where are you going this vacation? / Bangkok. / Sounds cool. And you? / I'm staying home this year.

Hi. What can I do for you? / Uh, I'm looking for a laptop. / How much do you want to spend? / Well,...

Ambrose Hotel. How can I help you? / I want to make a reservation for next month. / Yes, sir. When...

This beautiful hotel is in the heart of downtown Prague. While you can step out of the lobby into a medieval and renaissance wonderland, the hotel has all modern conveniences. Every room has a...

And here are some examples of English of varieties 3 and 4, rare in international textbooks:

Excuse me. Are you Susan Hill, the exchange student from Dallas for Prepa Hidalgo? / Yes, I am. / Welcome to Mexico! I'm Laura Ortega and this is José Téllez. We're students in Prepa Hidalgo, and we'll be looking after you. / Nice to meet you, Laura, José. I'm really looking forward to this! / Let's...

Good morning, Mr Tanaka. Is your hotel satisfactory? / Yes, thank you. / The Technical Director, Mr. Ferreira, will be here at 10 o'clock, so we have half an hour. Would you like to look at the latest sales figures while we wait? / Yes, that's a good idea. / Fine. This way, please. Would you like a coffee or...

Normal values for an adult human are approximately 120 mmHg systolic and 80 mmHg diastolic pressure, but there are large variations from person to person. There is also variation in an individual, from heartbeat to heartbeat and in the course of a day (the circadian rhythm).

Obviously, there's overlap between varieties and types of use of English, with basic grammar and structural words common to most. Note also that varieties (or types of use) 3 and 4 in particular are two sides of one coin: Latin Americans abroad (not so many of them) and Latin Americans dealing with visitors from abroad (many of them, working in travel, hospitality and tourism, and in international industry and business). However, the above examples for 1, 2, 3 and 4 should illustrate that there can be significant differences, and should raise the question of which variety or varieties/uses are or may be most needed by specific students. That question becomes increasingly important from upper elementary level on, when basic grammar has been covered and styles, registers and lexicons of English become more significant for learner-users.

But remember, finally, that teachers can only prepare learners so far. If they become real users, most learners acquire the variety or varieties of English they need, more British or American or

international, more colloquial for everyday life, or more formal for work in their own country, or technical and mainly for reading, or several of those. If you're a non-native speaker of English, or another additional language, you've probably experienced that in your own development in the language: what you learned in the classroom became something rather different as you actually used the language in your life.