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## Advocating World Englishes: An Interview with Dr. Mario Saraceni

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### Introduction



Mario Saraceni graduated from the University of Chieti (Italy) and was awarded an MA and a PhD from the University of Nottingham (UK). He is currently a principal lecturer and a course leader for BEd TESL and BA (Hons) English Language programs at the School of Languages and Area Studies of Portsmouth University (UK). Before coming to Portsmouth, Mario taught MA-ELT students (including me!) at Assumption University (Thailand).

Mario says that teaching is one of his passions and that he has always wanted to be a teacher. He further says, “I consider myself lucky to be able to make a living out of a passion.”

Mario is primarily interested in all issues related to World Englishes. He first became interested in World Englishes issues during his MA at the University of Nottingham nearly 20 years ago when he took a World Englishes course. He elaborates, saying, “Like many other students, my understanding of ‘Englishes’ was limited to differences between American English and British English, but I soon found that was only the tip of the iceberg. So my interest started from there, and then it just grew the more I read and started to develop my own ideas about it.”

Mario has published articles, book chapters and books on issues related to World Englishes. Some of his papers and books have generated ‘hot’ discussions and debates in society and among World Englishes scholars themselves. *The Relocation of English: Shifting Paradigms in a Global Era* (2010), for example, has triggered ‘controversies’ because in this book, Mario argues that English is no longer exclusively associated with the identities of nations traditionally referred to as ‘Anglophone’ and that the English language can be re-conceptualized so that the links with its ‘ancestral home’ may be severed, and the language may become fully part of the linguistic repertoire of ‘the self.’ Some people question his

argument by saying that nobody can ‘relocate’ English and that the forms of what is called ‘standard’ English cannot and should not be abandoned.

To this end, Mario states, “English is spoken in a million different ways and I have no interest at all in describing them. In the end, what really counts is how we position ourselves towards this thing that we call English. The idea of ‘relocation’ is the total disconnection between ‘English’ and ‘England.’ I do not consider English the language of England at all. I’m not interested in finding links between English and [sic] the English culture.’ They are completely irrelevant and they just perpetuate an ideological construct that makes us think of languages as if they belonged to nations and specific territories. I use English because it enables me to speak to you. And I will use anything else that enables me to speak to you. If I know any Indonesian words, I will use them. I have no regard for language boundaries. They are only artificial inventions. I have the highest regard for our ability to share experience, establish relationships, etc, which is what we use language for. If we use a language that happens to be called ‘English,’ fine. I don’t want to know where it comes from. It does not come from anywhere, but it is continually re-constructed every time we use it. We should not abandon anything: instead, we should adopt everything that we can adopt in order to understand each other as well as we can.”

Mario has also been suggesting that what learners of English need are well-trained teachers who are culturally sensitive. It is interesting as he is now teaching English in the UK, where one might expect that native-English-speaking teachers (NESTs) are highly favored by those who study in the country. When asked whether he has faced any occupational barriers resulting from the fact that he is a non-native-English-speaking teacher (NNEST), interestingly, Mario answers that in the UK, NNESTs are in fact valued more than in many other parts of the world: “I’m not saying that it (a preference for NESTs) does not exist in the UK at all, but I have always found that people are absolutely obsessed about ‘native speakers’ pretty much everywhere I have travelled. People in many parts of the world have a racist and completely distorted view of the ‘native speaker.’ This is not the case so much in the UK,” he adds.

“Does it mean that people in the UK do not feel very strongly about national identity?” I asked. To this, Mario explains that most people in the UK consider themselves native

speakers anyway, so it makes no sense to idealize the ‘native speaker’ since the whole idea of ‘native speaker’ as the (concept of an) ideal speaker of the language is just not there so much. “While they say ‘English is our language,’ many people also know that they cannot really use the language that well, especially in international situations. To many people in the country, their grasp of the English language is often very poor and insecure,” he further observes.

Since in many countries, enrolling in a teacher preparation program as a student-teacher is often seen as the first step of being a teacher, it is then very important to increase student-teacher awareness on the issues of World Englishes, especially regarding the issue of NEST/NNEST and the ownership of English, and more importantly, it is imperative to help these student-teachers to acknowledge and respond to the oppressive ideologies they may encounter later. According to Mario, the first step that should be taken is to stop considering English as somebody else’s language.

He further suggests, “Let’s throw the link between England and the English language to a dark corner where only irrelevant historical anecdotes are kept. Let it be covered with dust and forgotten. If we are able to do that, then the whole NEST/NNEST nonsense will cease to concern us. If we do not, we will keep discussing about who is a better teacher, who has a whiter skin and who holds the best passport to teach English. It is a mentality that needs to change. Student-teachers need to adopt a new understanding of ‘English’ and then, equipped with that understanding, resist all the old, stale views that are still so prevalent around the world.”

Mario also strongly believes that teacher-educators need to be role models: “They don’t have to preach, necessarily. But by demonstrating that they consider English their own language and by never mentioning irrelevant words like “England” or “United States” as part of their teaching, then they can show that, hey, it’s got nothing to do with the West, white people, blah blah, but it’s got everything to do with you, me, and anybody else that we care to talk to.”

In addition, Mario finds having discussion about the issues of World Englishes with student-teachers effective: “They respond quite well to the idea of a de-centralised English, and even when they disagree, it is useful to the discussion, because it invites everybody to think and reflect,” he adds. Mario further admits that he has also learned a lot from his teaching. His

students' questions and objections have forced him to think about many of the issues discussed in World Englishes quite deeply. As a result, "My ideas on World Englishes now are very different from what they were in the past."

When asked about his biggest frustrations in teaching and writing about World Englishes issues, Mario mentioned two sources, namely (1) the World Englishes framework itself, and (2) a very strong resistance toward World Englishes.

Regarding the framework of World Englishes, many people, especially those who are in favour of the orthodox World Englishes theory, believe that the supposed plurality is actually only a multiplication of singularities; in other words, World Englishes is British English + American English + Australian English + Indian English + Singaporean English + Nigerian English + etc. According to Mario, "This is not very useful because all it does is to say 'every country has its own English.' But so what? What are we supposed to do with that? Nothing."

That is why, in his opinion, what is more important is "to re-think our understanding of 'a language' and move towards 'linguistic repertoire' or even just 'language' as a non-countable noun, where nationally-defined boundaries do not count so much."

Another source of frustration comes from a very strong resistance in people about letting go of old beliefs about language. Mario has experienced it a lot: "I find it very frustrating when I talk to people and realize that they still see themselves as imperfect users of English who need to be taught proper English by 'white' people. They do not say 'white,' but it is clear that that's what they mean."

However, despite all these problems, Mario has also witnessed a growth in awareness and in the acknowledged importance of this issue. For Mario, that is what is encouraging. Another source of encouragement for him is his students who get something valuable in their minds after their World Englishes course, when they say that they have had a life-changing experience.

After being involved in the World Englishes field for more than 15 years, Mario still feels that he has not done so much. He is now writing a book called *World Englishes: A Critical*

Analysis, in which he will discuss many of the issues he has talked about in this interview: “It will come out in the second half of 2014,” he says.

After that, he is going to conduct a research project in which he will investigate the representations of “English” in public discourse, in different parts of the world, including Southeast Asia.

“Don’t you feel exhausted?” I asked.

Mario says that he avoids burn out by balancing his work and his personal life. He does quite a bit of African drumming, hiking and photography, which he finds re-energizing. Yes, Mario has a long to-do list, and he has to get the balance right.

### **References**

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