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The UK, EFLese Sub-Culture and Dialect

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Our latest article is from recent star interviewee, [Mario Rinvoluceri](#), who questions the cosy, safe little world many EFL teachers are living in, only ever dealing with anodyne subjects such as travel and holidays, and completely ignoring important areas like war and religion. A hard-hitting article, which will



have you
questioning
your own
lessons and
wondering
what to do
about it.

[The Mario Rinvoluceri Interview](#)

[Review of Ways of Doing](#)

And if you like the following article, **DON'T MISS** the one it inspired:

[Window-dressing vs Cross-dressing in the EFL Sub-culture](#)

by Scott Thornbury

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The UK, EFLese Sub-Culture and Dialect

What do I mean by talking about a UK, EFLese sub culture? As with any culture I am talking about the behaviours and beliefs of its members. I call it a sub-culture because it draws on many of the values of the larger culture round it. I would suggest that EFLese is a sub-culture to a section of the UK middle class. Which part? People who are university educated (until recently less than 20% of the population), white, class B (in the old system), and largely Guardian-reading.

What are some of the striking features of this sub-culture:

1. An extraordinary unawareness of the cultures and languages of the learners.

The dearth of books on the UK market to help EFL teachers understand the structure of the cultures and languages of their students is amazing. The first practical book I have seen that deals with the culture of Japanese learners came out in early 1999, *Safety and Challenges for Japanese learners of English*, by Gray and Leather, Delta Publishing. How many books do you know of that offer analyses of the grammar and discourse rules of learners from Finland or Thailand?

Of course it is impossible for a UK EFL teacher to speak the 20 languages of the students in front of her but it is relatively easy for her to be aware of some salient features of the pronunciation, intonation ,grammar, syntax and discourse systems of their languages.

Michael Swan and CUP in 1987 brought out *Learner English*- a teacher's guide to interference and other problems, which is a first step in the right direction. Why have no sister books to this pioneering title been produced?

The UK EFL teachers' ignorance of the descriptions of their learners' languages and cultures is validated and encouraged by the Cambridge bread-ticket exams' failure to require any serious study in this area by candidate teachers. This indicates to me that unawareness of the learners' cultures and languages is a salient feature of the EFLese sub-culture. Could it be that it is rooted in an island superiority complex, strengthened by past imperialistic beliefs, and fed by an all-pervasive sense of belonging to the First World?

Every time a new wave of foreign students comes to UK they generate a new wave of complaints across UK EFL staffrooms. When the Shah Padi Shah sent us young Iranian technicians to teach English to in the mid 70's you would hear this kind of moan in the staffrooms:

- " just because they're good at listening comp they think they're good all round"
- " They always want to move up two levels "
- " the hand-writing..... why can't they write **on** the line? "
- " Reza doesn't seem to care at all about accuracy "

Faced with lots of Japanese in the 90's, UK EFLers came up with gripes like these:

- " Why do Japanese students seem to want to go down to below their real level ?"
- " They talk a lot in the canteen in their own language so why are they so dumb in class?
- " You know Yusak(u) actually went to **sleep** in my class this afternoon! "

These extraordinary islander staffrooms often talk about cultural difference in complaint mode against their students' (clients') cultures and rarely in terms of understanding how bizarre their own behaviours and beliefs can feel to some one not raised between John O'Groats and Land's End. I have yet to read, in the EFL literature, a full account of how filthy (yes, I mean physically filthy) we appear to people from the islands between Hokkaido and Okinawa, how noisy, word-superfluous and garrulous to people from Finland, how fiercely unfriendly, ungenerous and inhospitable we appear to Arabs, how bovine, slow-witted and uncunning we appear to Southern Greeks, or how unkind to children and old people we appear to Italians.

(NO DOGS- NO CHILDREN)

2. A capacity to infantilise students without noticing

Crooning in my ears I have the slow, maternal, didactic speech of female colleagues teaching low level classes. Those special language teaching voices for masking oneself from genuine, straight, human, conversational contact with the students. Do you have a low level "grammar voice", "dictation voice" " class room management voice". Do you have several masked ways of saying " Very Good" ?

These are a few of the outward signs of a teacher state of mind in which her view of the student as a person is moulded by the latter's L2 language ability; lower-intermediate language ability = lower intermediate professional status + lower intermediate thinking + lower intermediate feelings, lower intermediate sexuality.

Of course the way UK EFLers infantilise their classes is in direct response to the way late teenage and adult learners regress as they step over the threshold of the language classroom. Back in the classroom these learners revert to earlier, learnt behaviours which hang uneasily from their adult shoulders. The regressing student and the infantilising teacher form a happy, mutually-reinforcing couple. And yet, out of school, both are adults.

3. Production of off-key language

On entering her classroom the UK EFLer switches codes and starts talking fluent EFLese. Interestingly, spoken EFLese has some of the features of real written English. Let me list a few of the contrasts between UK oral English and UK oral EFLese:

UK oral English	UK oral EFLese
" Coming? " (natural form)	"Are you coming?" (long form)
" she ws saying she'd be there "	" She said she would be there"
" Drop by anytime" (phrasal)	" Visit us anytime " (latinate)
" nice bloke" (register-correct colloquialisms)	" nice man " (studied absence of register markers)
normal speed of diction	slowed diction with over- emphasis
" A stitch in time..." (use of half proverbs)	" A stitch in time saves nine " (use of full proverbs)
much understood	everything spelt out

Fortunately the task of teaching EFL in UK is divided between host families and EFL teachers. Though I have no direct evidence, I guess the version of EFLese the host families have created is closer to the normal spoken form of the language than the teachers' variety.

4. The EFLese culture and dialect as seen in UK coursebooks and supplementary materials

Richard Acklam's INDEX , the revised edition of which was published by International House, is a marvellous tool for examining the EFLese culture and dialect in a fast, synoptic way. The book consists of 5 different indexes to 23 UK produced coursebooks and 28 supplementary materials books. Acklam catalogues the contents of these 51 books according to:

GRAMMAR

FUNCTIONS

TOPICS

WRITING

MISCELLANEOUS.

(What follows is a criticism of my own work as much as of other EFL authors, since 3 of the 28 supplementary books are mine : **Grammar Games, More Grammar Games and The Q Book**)

Let us have a look at each index in turn, starting with grammar .

There are 90 grammar areas that Acklam highlights and of these 60 are concerned with the VERB. One of the amazing features of EFLese is that it chooses to spend most of its conscious teaching time on the VERB regarding the noun phrase as a distinctly poor relation.

In devoting two thirds of the grammar index to the VERB, the author of the Index is faithfully reflecting the joint EFLese wisdom of the coursebook writers, people like Abbs, the Soars, Freebairn, Mohamed, O'Connell, Doff, Hopkins, Gower, Hartley and Viney.

Prepositions, which are the English equivalent to the case system in languages like Russian or Greek are covered in just 2 of the 90 areas listed:

- Prepositions (Place, Time, Direction)
- Word and Preposition Combinations

Lindstromberg, in his 1998 English Prepositions Explained, just manages to squeeze his prepositional thoughts into three hundred pages. Will the EFLese canonical writers notice and use his work?

The Grammar index includes old chestnut areas like MAKE/DO. What have the collocational quirks of these two verbs got to do with grammar? Why not focus student attention on a similar pair like WIDE/BROAD (a broad-eyed child? A broad angle lens? Wide minded? Broad of the mark?) Most EFL coursebooks since the 50's have had a unit that focuses on MAKE and DO and, by making so,terminally confuse students. But who, in the tradition, would dare to leave this pair out? Within the EFLese culture there are clear implicit rules about what grammar areas can or cannot be left out. It is a question of time-mellowed custom and practice, rather than of clarity of thought.

The FUNCTIONS index is a shrivelled little section: with only 20 functions listed. These include:

- Giving Advice
- Agreeing/Disagreeing
- Making Apologies
- Making Complaints
- Describing People
- Describing Objects
- Describing Pictures
- Describing Places etc.....

Functions have clearly lost ground as a classificatory system in the EFLese vision of language, if you compare with the situation in the late 70's and early 80's..... yet they still manage to hang in there. That they are an absurdly unwieldy classificatory system has not yet impelled EFL course writers to dump them. Take the DESCRIBING function above why has Acklam omitted these:

- Describing the weather
- Describing body organs
- Describing systems
- Describing pain etc.....ad infinitum

Other glaring omissions from these EFLese Functions are these:

- Offering condolences
- Chatting some one up
- Tearing a Strip of some one
- Keening the dead (partly covered by Making Complaints)
- Making Innuendoes
- Praising God
- Offering insults etc.....

Perhaps the most interesting list in INDEX is the Topic Catalogue. What do coursebook writers and publishers feel language learners should listen to, read about, talk and and write about in the L2 ?

Let us look up the following in the 87 item topic list: CONCEPTION, BIRTH, BABIES ILLNESS, DEATH, RELIGION. None of these items figure on the 87 strong topic list except RELIGION. It merits one 5 page treatment in Headway Advanced; Acklam has found no other references to RELIGION in the other 50 EFL books (including my three). SUPERSTITION, though, comes up as a topic in four of the 51 books and VIRTUAL REALITY in one.

How well would a person like Salman Rushdie fit into the UK EFLese sub-culture's topic choice?

Korea, Malaya, Algeria, Kenya, Cyprus, Aden, Biafra, Belgian Congo/ Zaire, Mocambique, Angola, The Six Day....., India-Pakistan, Vietnam, Malvinas/Falklands, Afghanistan, Iran-Iraq, The Gulf , Armenia-Azerbaijan, Bosnia, Kosova these are some of the wars of the second half of the 20th Century.

When you look up WAR in the EFL topic index you find that 5 books deal with the topic and 4 of them only at advanced level. POVERTY does not figure as a topic word but these do:

CARS and MOTORING

CHARITY

ENTERTAINMENT

FASHION/CLOTHES

HOLIDAYS HOTELS

There is much more that could usefully be said about EFLese topic choices but four conclusions stand out for me:

1. The EFL discourse world avoids the shadow side of life with little or no reference to death, poverty or war.
2. English is a utility for the rich around the world, that is to say the middle classes in the countries of the Metropolitan World and for the elite class in the dependent countries (Third World). The UK material writers' sub-culture is sensitive to and subservient to this reality.
3. Ambition, rage, jealousy, betrayal, destiny, greed, fear and the other Shakespearian themes are far from the soft, fudgy sub-journalistic, woman's magazine world of EFLese

course materials.

4. UK EFL writers' topic choice and treatment is powerfully ideological, precisely because of its avoidance of any specific ideological statement.

Do non-UKish materials writers create a different world?

Let Leon Szkutnik give a brief, conclusive answer to this question from his beginners' book *English as Experience*, (Warsaw, 1987) here are the texts of the first two units:

Unit 1. A woman

He
is
worried
because
she
is
late.

She
is
late
because
she
is
a
woman.

Unit 2 A railway station

WAY IN
WAY OUT
Where am I?
A railway station?
Travel?
But where to?
What for?
No, thank you.
Not today..
So
the way out
but where to?

This is a thousand miles from the cosy consensus of UK EFL.

COMMENT ON THIS ARTICLE

READ THE RESPONSES

And if you liked Mario's article, DON'T MISS the one it inspired:

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EFL Sub-culture
by Scott Thornbury

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Association (MATSDA) visit their [Web site](#). *The TEFL Farm* would like to thank both Folio and Mario for giving us permission to republish it here.

Mario edits the *Pilgrims* web magazine, [Humanising Language Teaching](#) and works for Pilgrims as a teacher and teacher trainer.

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