

DISRUPTING ASSUMPTIONS IN TEACHING ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE IN SWISS PRE-SERVICE PRIMARY SCHOOL EDUCATION

Vierorts wird der Unterricht für Englisch als Fremdsprache (TEFL) seit zwanzig Jahren auf die gleiche Weise erteilt: Zukünftige Lehrpersonen lernen, Lesen, Schreiben, Sprechen, Hören, Grammatik und Vokabeln anhand von Modellen wie inhalts- oder aufgabenorientiertem Unterricht zu unterrichten. Sie lernen etwas über den lokalen Lehrplan, den GER und die Geschichte der Unterrichtsmethoden sowie pädagogisch-didaktischen Grundlagen. Ihre Grundausbildung ist solide und fundiert, doch lernen die Studierende nur selten, die Inhalte, die ihnen vermittelt werden, oder die Materialien, mit denen sie in den öffentlichen Schulen arbeiten sollen, zu hinterfragen. Aus diesem Grund wurde als kleiner Teil der berufsbegleitenden EFL-Lehrpersonenbildung ein kurzes, unabhängiges Studienmodul entwickelt, das den Studierenden hilft, ihre künftige Praxis in einem anderen, kritischeren und reichhaltigeren Licht zu betrachten, und das hoffentlich ihre Denkmuster darüber, wie Sprache unterrichtet werden sollte und kann, durchbricht.

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Introduction

The requirements for teaching foreign languages range from country to country, from generalist teaching models to subject-specialist models (see Enever 2014). Switzerland is somewhere in-between with a semi-specialist approach to pre-service primary school teacher training. For over twenty years (since English was introduced into the public schools) at the Zurich University of Teacher Education (PHZH), the following topics have been covered in the two compulsory TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language) courses:

- Aims and objectives
- Methods and approaches
- Scaffolding, strategies and language support
- Individualization and differentiation
- Speaking, Listening, Reading, Writing (development of skills / subskills)
- Vocabulary (selection, learning strategies and support, practice, assessment, ...)
- Grammar (explanations, practice, lan-

guage awareness, parts of speech, ...)

- Assessment and testing
- Use of German and other languages, motivating use of English
- Corrective feedback
- Classroom management and instructional settings
- Homework
- Songs, rhymes, chants, games
- Stories and graded readers
- ICT
- Authentic materials
- ICC (Intercultural Competence), English as a lingua franca, language awareness

Generally, each topic is treated during a separate 1.5-hour session. Within any of the given topics, it is assumed that individual lecturers bring in newer research, question assumptions and help pre-service teachers become reflective practitioners.

Within this curriculum, there is also room for individual interests - approximately 30 hours of independent study are dedicated to letting students follow

up on a topic of choice or something they have identified as useful or problematic during field work, but rarely do students branch away from the traditional topics (use of German, native-speakers, etc.). Thus the content described here supports this independent-study assignment. It is an attempt to bridge the gap between some general foundations of education through content that is, for semi-specialist teachers, often not addressed in depth and for specialist teachers, based on general foundations of education with topics from educational psychology and other domains of education. It is an attempt to re-think and contribute to general curricular reform with examples that can be used by curriculum designers or individuals looking to freshen up their teaching of English or other foreign languages at any level. It questions assumptions made by teachers who experienced English language learning in a completely different way than today's youth do by 'disrupting' pre-service education through injecting some provocative but critical thoughts and perceptions into a generally accepted, yet out-of-date curriculum. This is hopefully a way of better preparing teachers for English language and general teaching so learners don't learn English despite formal instruction, but rather because of it.

Disrupting Assumptions

Assumptions

A search on google scholar of *+assumptions +"English language teaching"* will take readers on a wild goose chase of thoughts putting into question anything and everything accepted as a given. Yet the compulsory curricula up to now does not leave much room for such searches; rarely are students given enough time or provided a context in which to think about or brainstorm answers to questions such as:

- Why do we teach pre-service teachers about certain methods when the school system is often too rigid to allow for them (for instance CLIL is almost impossible for non-classroom teachers)?
- If English is spoken by more non-native speakers than native speakers, then why are often norms for corrections and language aims still based on native speaker norms? How could this look otherwise – why are we still not accepting Globish?

- If there are computer-based tools that could be used in the classroom that are adaptive, then how can teachers use them and what should class time be used for?
- If learners are learning so much English outside of the classroom (informal), then what can the classroom look like to lasso in on all this potential and should we get rid of the concept of "test what you teach" because we want learners to actually be learning everywhere, not just in school?

This is not to imply that the basic curriculum does not have its value. Nor do these comments imply that there needs to be a complete overhaul of the system – many "newer" thoughts can certainly be brought into an existing structure. Yet there has to be more space to rethink the categories, to question assumptions, to experiment and to perhaps come to new conclusions. Disrupting English language teaching can be done within the existing curriculum, or it can be done by slowly replacing the older curriculum with a re-conceptualized one through pilot projects and local educational reforms.

If pre-service teachers come to the university with the expectation of learning about how they themselves were taught and this is not put in question, then they may be too comfortable to learn anything new.

Disruption

According to Merriam Webster dictionary, simply put, disruption is to break something apart, to interrupt its normal course. In 1995, Bower and Christensen wrote about disruptive technologies from a business perspective and Christensen, Horn and Johnson (2011) went on to expand upon this idea in education. Larson (2016) clarified the original 1995 work by explaining that:

- Not all innovation is disruption – it is only disruption when the innovation takes over the incumbent.
- Disruption can be either something small – a tiny change in one standard that then reaches across the board – or large, completely replacing the original product.

- Disruption is a process.
- Not everything new is better.

If we search for the definition of “disruptive education”, we find “that which intends to break with the established model to improve the existing one” (Alena 2020) with often a focus on customizing learning, encouraging critical thinking, and using artificial intelligence. Washington (2021) goes on to expand on disruptive education as using technology for adaptive settings and customizing learning, integrating elements of gamification for small changes or entire curricular overhauls and much of the discussion on disruptive innovation in education is about the use of technology (e.g. Hampel, 2019).

Disruption, in the educational sense, can also be seen at through the lens of “learning” and there are parallels to Festinger’s 1957 concept of cognitive dissonance or Piaget’s ideas of cognitive disequilibrium mentioned throughout his works in myriad ways. Simply stated, if teachers can

push learners to be in a state of disruption whereby they are ‘itching’ to learn, then they are doing their job – learning can take place. Being “uncomfortable” can lead to learning – and at the pre-service teacher level the same holds true. If pre-service teachers come to the university with the expectation of learning about how they themselves were taught and this is not put in question, then they may be too comfortable to learn anything new. This is why the assumptions need to be “disrupted”.

This project attempts to provide a platform to students by providing them with content that they can accommodate in a small or large amount, that helps them with their process of learning about teaching with content that does not replace the existing curriculum, but attempts to improve it so that we can hope for a trickledown effect whereby classroom learning is more effective and sustainable. An analogy would be that one rearranges one’s house to have a crisp, new look on one’s surroundings – one does not throw out all the furniture when doing this, often we replace a piece or two at a time. It takes a while to accommodate a new look and a few toes may be stubbed, but there are clear advantages to the new layout. In this project, disruption, as it often is described, is not about using technology because technology is used everywhere, but rather about disrupting the generally accepted topics by merging the “old” with the “newer old” and by being critical of what is assumed so that deeper, more sustainable learning can take place.

Disrupting Assumptions Content in EFL Pre-service Training

Overview

By scouring TESOL and IATEFL International Convention sessions and keeping an eye on trends in education (e.g. OECD 2022), three common assumptions have been identified (Figure 1). These ideas are generally a minor part or not at all part of the regular curriculum that the students are exposed to in their TEFL training though they are frequent topics in conferences and there is research coming from general education on any number of these assumptions. The selected topics are also, at times, seen as urgent – there is no need to discuss whether or not to have an anti-bias approach to education,

Assumption	Disruptive thought	Supportive topics
Local curricula are well-written and based on the CEFR. Locally approved coursebooks thus provide good guidelines for teaching English and using them ensure learners a given level upon completion.	Curricula should be taken with a grain of salt and coursebooks do not guarantee learner success and can even harm a teacher’s more differentiated understanding of instruction.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rethinking the curriculum • Rethinking the local curriculum • Using the world around us (museum, authentic materials, linguistic landscapes)
As coursebooks clearly match curricular aims, teachers do not need to think about the language or images presented.	Coursebooks keep teachers from thinking through means of helping learners reach aims.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Combining subjects (CLIL) • Social Justice and Anti-Racist Education in ELT
Even though assessment should be ongoing, there is summative and formative assessment which should be strictly separately.	The world of assessment is messy and assessment categories can not be so easily separated. Teachers do not have the luxury of enough time for long learning and long testing situations. Conventional tests do not offer means of showing students what they can do.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Desirable difficulties • Rethinking strategies • Using tests for learning • Planning with assessment in mind

Figure 1
Assumptions about language teaching with disruptive thoughts and topics that help to support understanding of the disruption.

this is a basis of all curricula (Grundorientierung) in central-European nations. Though there are many other assumptions and disruptive thoughts that could be included, with this project it is hoped that future teachers will stray from the coursebooks and make better, more informed, choices for their learners. These disruptions inject ideas that perhaps will take over older ideas, or assumptions. The selected examples to follow describe a few of the topics presented to pre-service teachers in this course.


Example 1: Questioning and rethinking the current curriculum

The rationale behind this topic is to have student teachers actually take the time look at the local curriculum and compare this to the base document (Council of Europe 2001) and then also more importantly, to the newer CEFR Companion Volume (Council of Europe 2020). The issue with national curricula is often that they take years to write, and by the time they are published, classroom materials which are adapted to fit them are outdated. In the particular case of English in Swiss public schools, there are also basic curricular tenets (e.g. an anti-bias context, the teaching of personal skills (self-reflection, independence, autonomy), social skills (ability to cooperate, deal with conflict and diversity) and methodological skills (knowing how to search for and present information)) which at times get forgotten in subject-specific teaching but which should actually override or cushion the subject-specific aims.

What is also important in this section is the focus on the Council of Europe's Companion Volume (2020) which is not integrated in the regular curriculum but should be because it well-supports both the basic curricular tenets and is also closer to the world of the learners. Finally, the crystal-clear focus away from the ideal of the native speaker is something that the current curriculum does not support, and students should be made aware of English as a Lingua Franca in much more depth so that learners are not corrected according to a specific local norm and are exposed to myriad sources (see Figure 3).

Having student teachers consider the sources of the curriculum and newer definitions provided by experts in the

Disrupting Assumptions in EFL!



Welcome to this independent-study course on disrupting thinking in EFL (English as a Foreign Language)! In simple terms, disruption is something that, without changing the entire system or accepted behaviors, infuses new ideas and questions old ones with the aim of improving educational practices.

This course provides you with ideas on the following topics that might be slightly contrary to the ideas you have experienced thus far but that also expand some of the ideas to help you take your teaching a bit further. The aim of this course is to get you to reconsider practices in English language teaching, but also in education in general.

Figure 2
Introductory page.

Fokus weg von Native Speakers ELF: English as a Lingua Franca

SUBSTANTIVE CHANGES TO SPECIFIC DESCRIPTORS PUBLISHED IN 2001

Overall Listening-oral comprehension
C2 Can understand with ease virtually everything with any kind of spoken (spoken) language, whether live or broadcast, delivered at fast and/or natural speed
Understanding conversation between other native speakers
B2+ Can keep up with an animated conversation between native speakers of the target language

Settings: Glace bestellen in Spanien auf EN
Grammatik: weg von «Have you got» - Lingua Franca Core
Wortschatz: Globish
Aussprache: Lingua Franca Core
Zuhören: Akzente!
Korrekturen



Accents and exposure to MANY EnglishES!



Die Referenz im LP 21 zum **englischsprachigen Kulturraum** und die Verwendung von «englischsprachig» führt dazu, dass Studis oft – das sehe ich auch auf der Sekstufe – kulturell sehr beschränkte Lektionen durchführen – ich muss über Australien oder die USA oder GB unterrichten anstatt mit Lingua Franca-Kontexten. Das CV versucht, uns von solchen beschränkten Settings abzubringen. Diesbezüglich habe ich jahrelang Module wie «Everyone should speak American, right» und Forschungsmodule über Schweizer Kontakt mit EN ausserhalb der Schule unterrichtet, immer waren die Studis schockiert – «ich muss also nicht entweder die US- oder UK- Rechtschreibung unterrichten»? «Ich soll verschiedene Akzente verwenden?» Dafür empfehlen wir, auf der Ebene von Korrekturen locker zu bleiben, und Kontexte wie Spiele und Schule aus der ganzen Welt (e.g. ein Glace in Spanien auf EN zu bestellen) sowie Einblicke in andere Lehrmittel wie Macmillan's Global change einzubetten.

Figure 3
A focus away from native speakerism (presentation found within the content, Buechel 2022).

field contributes to their learning. They realize that the CEFR definitions of levels are much more open than they think, and this can encourage future teachers to take more risks in their teaching with the security that they are still respecting the core aims. For learners, having teachers who do more open projects, who see language not as just discrete exercises but as mediation in a world swamped in English and interacting even when one's pure linguistic prowess is not Shakespearean is possible and empowering. Including this topic can disrupt learning because it forces teachers to reconsider whose language they are teaching, what content they are providing and how they are teaching it and to whom they are responsible.

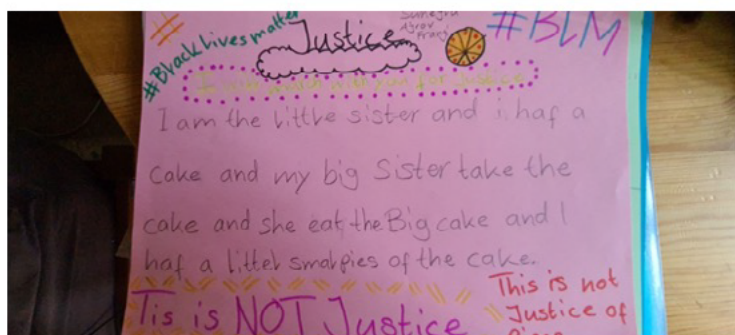
Example 2: Questioning words and pictures

The first pages of the local curriculum for learners (Lehrplan 21) lays the foundation for the subject-specific standards that follow and call for values, contexts, and content on all school levels and in every school subject that are humanitarian and democratic. These curricular foundations also refer to freedoms of belief and opinion mentioned in the second article in the Zurich Act on Compulsory Education. The Companion Volume states that language teaching needs “to take into consideration differences in behaviours (including gestures, tones and attitudes), discussing over-generalisations and stereotypes” (Council of Europe 2020, p. 24). Yet in many of the compulsory books found in Switzerland, materials actually support clichés without providing ideas for having learners work with or analyze them. For example, there are teepees and totems, there are insults (“girls can’t do that!”), some topics are

Yet in many of the compulsory books found in Switzerland, materials actually support clichés without providing ideas for having learners work with or analyze them. For example, there are teepees and totems, there are insults (“girls can’t do that!”), some topics are presented as “this is the way it is in these countries” by for example, showing a woman serving a crown-wearing man during a traditional English Christmas dinner (Arnet-Clark, Schmid & Ritter, 2019, 42-43) without providing variations for comparisons (e.g. through more pictures or a Venn Diagram activity) and in many books, there are units about food that leave the learners with very clear stereotypes about what people eat all over the world (see Loder Buechel and Lambelet 2021 for examples).

There is a clear need to steer student teachers away from such local materials and to show them alternatives that support anti-bias and social-justice education or to train student teachers to use alternative materials (such as newspaper pictures). There is a clear need to get student teachers to critically engage with cultural [mis]representations (see Risager 2022) so they can better contextualize and choose materials with which to work.

Minding our words and pictures



Why should we be careful of the pictures we show our learners? How can we counterbalance the compromises coursebooks make?

As teachers, if we want to respect the tenets of the curriculum, we have to be careful of the language we teach (is it inclusive?), the images we show our learners (do they only represent the world in a singular way?), the materials we work with (are our books promoting stereotypes or questioning them?), the settings we encourage (are we getting away from “boys” do this and “girls” do that? Are we using open, adaptive projects?).

This topic is so complex, it is hard to know where to start, so we start simply, and hope that you, dear user, will fly with the ideas and go further!

Figure 4

Introductory page - Social justice and anti-bias

There is a clear need to have student teachers think about inclusive language (Figure 5), for instance teaching the singular 'they', so they themselves are aware of this and can teach it (see Kocaman and Selvi 2021).

Example 3: Questioning tests - using them for learning

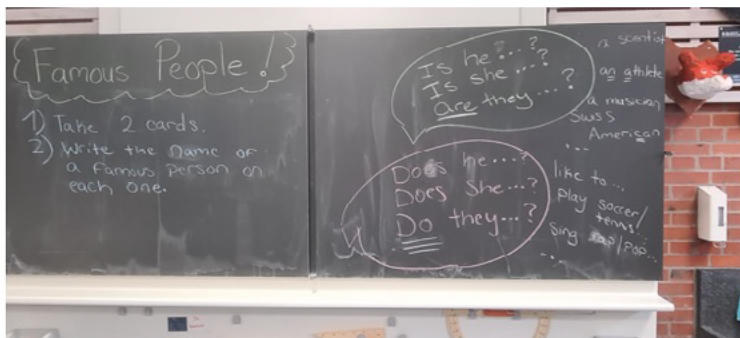
The coursebooks in Switzerland come with unit tests and traditionally, these tests are used at the end of a unit. Yet what is known about tests and testing has not yet reached the practice. There are arguments in favor of frequent, small tests (see Öncül 2017), there are arguments against vocabulary-translation tests (see Loder Buechel 2022), and there are ways of using traditionally summative measures such as tests, formatively, and formative measure such as observations or Classroom Assessment Techniques for reliable data about whether a learner has met the aim or not. For example, if, in a lesson a child fails a test on the past simple tense one day, yet the next day you are chitchatting and ask what they had for dinner and the response is "I had pizza. It was great! My grandmother visited us!" then teachers do have a bit of an ethical responsibility to recognize this mastery. An end-of-unit test can be used for other purposes, for example as a pre-test at the beginning of the unit or by letting the learners decide when they feel ready for it.

Rethinking assessment, namely testing, can disrupt old patterns of teaching. This is the point of this section (Figure 6) – to get teachers to think about sustainable practices that promote learning.

Further Examples

There are other topics in this project that are not presented here that also help to disrupt certain assumptions. For instance, the idea that English language learning should start with easy contexts and language and be made more complex later and that learners should not struggle is questioned. The role of desirable difficulties (Bjork 1994) such as interleaving, spaced rehearsal, practice testing, questioning "overscaffolding" and the concept of "forgetting" in order to remember are presented as disruptions. Furthermore, by now there is quite a body of literature on the role of strategies such as highlighting

Inclusive Language



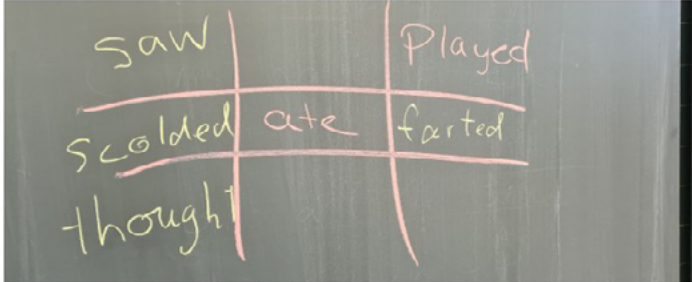
The English language is luckily one of the easier ones to know for support inclusion! There doesn't have to be a "man" or a "woman" at the end of a word ("mail carrier" works much better than "mailman" or "mailwoman" if you don't know the person)! And it's easy enough to turn "mom" into "moms" and "dad" into "dads" or use the word "parents".

In this section, you will think up games and activities for teaching the singular "they", you will look at materials on professions to make sure they are inclusive, and you will analyze some model sentences to ensure they are breaking stereotypes (e.g. why write "I like my teacher. I like I ICR." when you can either use "them" or work with people you know by name and gender).

Figure 5

Introductory page on Inclusive Language

Using tests for learning



While teachers are NOT required to give tests, many do. They are found in the coursebooks, they are seen as something to strive towards performing well on, they are ways of motivating learners to study. But there are many problems with tests and testing! In your regular courses, you learn about item types and some of the issues with them (e.g. gap fills can measure reading skills but also spelling skills; true/false/not in the text questions do not provide you with information on a learners thinking and reject the role of inference which is counter-productive to what we are teaching learners to do when they read). In this section, you will work with the text "But I do know the word in English, just not in German" that presents arguments for NOT using translation tests in the classroom. Then, you will watch a lecture and come up with additional ideas for using those end-of-unit tests for learning.

Figure 6

Using tests for learning introductory page

(see Dunlosky et al, 2013) that definitely belong in EFL. There is also the world of gamification (see Cruz 2019) that can be used for lesson planning, not just for occasional “fun”. Using the world around us for language teaching (see Figure 7) is also highlighted. Especially in multilingual Switzerland with its linguistic landscapes, use of English in advertising and tourism industry, learners are immersed in the language on a daily basis and this should not be taken for granted.

Using the World: Museums and School Trips for Language Learning

An important part of public-school education is not just teaching «content» but giving learners experiences they may not get in their private lives and opening doors to them for important memories and ideas that might give them ideas for their futures. We all remember school field trips! So why not use English (or French or Romansch or Italian) for this in Switzerland?

In this topic, you will:
Read a text about planning lessons around museum visits for language learning;

- Look in more depth at a museum of your choice;
- Go on a Goosechase of Zurich for language learning purposes;
- Add to the list of Outdoor English games.

Figure 7
Using the world for ELT introductory page

For example: if, in a lesson a child fails a test on the past simple tense one day, yet the next day you are chitchatting and ask what they had for dinner and the response is “I had pizza. It was great! My grandmother visited us!” then teachers do have a bit of an ethical responsibility to recognize this mastery.

Pilot Evaluation

This content was presented to a group of 40 adult, career change pre-service teachers in the fall of 2022 and has since then been updated and is now available to all regular students. It will be available to the larger public in 2024.

The students were asked the following questions in the 2022 evaluation:

- Were there any topics you found repeated with what you learn about in other subjects and thus are not necessary here, too?
- Were there any topics you thought should receive MORE development?
- As you were going through, did you think of any topics you think we should pursue in English language teacher education?

There was very little criticism of the content. In fact, the general consensus was, in the words of one student, but generally formulated by others “In general many English teachers would very much appreciate to have access to the toolbox also while working. I don’t know how the PHZH would be up for e.g. bringing some content to more open systems like Notion?” When asked about content they thought was missing, there were suggestions for ethics, e.g. the Ethics of Care, and humor. While some ideas such as desirable difficulties were mentioned as being treated in other general education courses, the students found the focus in English more differentiated and practical and a repetition, at this level, beneficial. Finally, one student mentioned the idea that calling this “thinking outside the box” was in fact wrong, that this section should be integrated everywhere into the basic TEFL content pages.

Conclusion

Certainly, there are larger “disruptions” to education in general that would have an impact on English language teaching as well. For instance, getting rid of specific subjects as we know them (Language Arts, Foreign Language, Mathematics, PE, Music) and turning to whole-school project-based learning with timely, teacher-interest driven projects, recreating public schooling together with businesses

in an “entrepreneurial” sort of education (imagine first graders working with business to learn about selling and marketing T-shirts?) or simply including newer subjects (e.g. financial literacy, democratic citizenship, activism, mindfulness, and so on) would redefine what is taught and how. This would promote perhaps a more CLIL approach to English language teaching through activities such as watching a video in English about sustainability to letter-writing campaigns and perhaps encourage a more societal needs-driven curriculum.

There are limitations to what has been presented here in that there is so much more that could flow into EFL that comes from neuroscience, from cognitive psychology, and other fields. Teachers should, with their many hats, be asked to keep up with some of these developments, and this knowledge should flow into schools. The selection here was an initial one that the author was fascinated by and had some experience with, but there are so many more points that are taught that could be questioned or enhanced, so many more assumptions to be questioned!

What is hoped is that students going through this course will embrace these ideas and also try them out in other subjects and thus this keeps the joy of learning and teaching alive in our attempts to make education more sustainable for all our learners. Questioning assumptions and suggesting solutions or alternative approaches is beneficial not only for students, but for instructors to learn to think more critically and question points which are sometimes so engrained in our mindsets. This project contributes to the general conversation about what makes good teaching with the full knowledge that this is perhaps impossible to define.

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