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## **Blended Approaches to English as a Foreign Language Instruction**

### **Abstract**

The teaching of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in the Anglophone Caribbean is becoming a lucrative branch of the tertiary education sector. While some learners seek a fully immersive experience, others prefer a blended option to accommodate personal and professional schedules. Regardless of the desired experience, the current regional trend suggests a significant shift from mainstream US/UK EFL providers toward the Anglophone Caribbean for accredited, cost-effective, alternative modes of instruction. This phenomenon presents unique challenges to the English-speaking Caribbean, as our institutions of Higher Education (HE) seek to establish themselves as leaders in the field of EFL instruction. This theoretical paper will therefore critically assess best practices in blended approaches, as presented in the literature, namely the use of the learning management system, Moodle and video-conferencing technology, in response to the demand for online EFL instruction adapted to the Caribbean context. An analysis of the aforementioned practices will provide greater insight into the challenges that may be encountered in online EFL delivery for the EFL programme at the UWI St. Augustine.

### **Keywords**

blended learning, EFL/ESL, foreign language instruction, tertiary education

**Introduction**

For the modern-day EFL consumer, the Anglophone Caribbean provides access to a relatively under-utilized, yet diverse pool of EFL service providers. According to the Commonwealth Organization, there are some twelve (12) English-speaking countries in the Caribbean; three (3) of which (Barbados, Jamaica, Trinidad & Tobago) are home to the region’s largest, accredited HE institution, the University of the West Indies. In addition to which, there are seventeen (17) UWI Open Campus administrative offices located throughout the Caribbean, which provide access to distance learning programmes. Each of the three main campuses offers programmes in English as a Second or Foreign language, ranging from short, intensive two-week courses to moderately-paced, twelve-week programmes that aim to improve the English-language learner’s competency in general English, English used for academic and/or business purposes (See Fig. 1). What factors contribute to the viability of such programmes? In one word: globalisation. Within the last two decades, globalisation has transitioned from the latest buzzword to an accepted reality. While discussions on globalisation focus primarily on economic, political, societal or migratory perspectives, few address the positive impact it has on the perception and gradual acceptance of varieties of English belonging to the what Krachu (1985) categorizes as Outer or Expanding Circle varieties (in which Caribbean varieties of English are debatably categorized)<sup>i</sup>. This shift in attitudes, combined with a desire to access cost-effective, accredited, high quality training, have resulted in an increased demand in EFL instruction originating from within the Caribbean. Due to this increased demand, some even suggest that EFL teaching is fast becoming a lucrative branch of the tertiary education sector especially in the Anglophone Caribbean (Bangbose, 2001; Boisselle, 2014). This phenomenon, however, presents unique challenges, as our institutions of Higher Education (HE) seek to establish themselves as leaders in the field of EFL instruction. One such challenge is meeting the needs of learners who prefer blended-learning to accommodate their personal and professional schedules. In order to respond to this demand effectively, it is necessary to critically assess best practices in blended approaches to online EFL instruction, so as to identify potential pitfalls and make recommendations toward the successful design and implementation of new courses.

Fig. 1

ENGLISH AS A SECOND/FOREIGN LANGAUGE PROGRAMMES AT THE UWI*				
INSTITUTION	COURSE	DURATION	Delivery	COST (US\$)
UWI Cave Hill	English as a Second Language			
	• English for Business Purposes	4,8,12 weeks	Face-to-face	1200.00
	• General English	4 weeks	Face-to-face	1000.00
	• Intensive English for Pre-University Students	4 weeks	Face-to-face	1000.00
	• Intensive TESOL for Teachers	2 weeks	Face-to-face	600.00
UWI Jamaica	English as a Second Language	4 weeks	Face-to-face	2200.00
UWI St. Augustine	English as a Foreign Language	10 weeks	Face-to-face	1400.00

\*Table compiled from information provided on the ESL/EFL pages of the individual campus’ websites.

### **The CLL and EFL instruction: an evolving relationship**

The Centre for Language Learning (CLL) is The UWI St. Augustine (UWI STA) campus' unit specially dedicated to delivering “innovative, high quality language training and services to the UWI learning community and the wider public and engaging [*sic*] in relevant research in keeping with its mandate to promote multilingual competence” (CLL, 2014, p. 2). It prides itself on offering the longest-running, self-financing EFL/ESL programme in the region and is home to the only IELTS examination centre among the islands in the southern Caribbean<sup>ii</sup>. The CLL is equipped with modern facilities including a Self-Access Facility, which provides access to a collection of print and multimedia resources, as well as a SMART television. There are twelve classrooms (two of which contain interactive whiteboards), two language labs, a lecture room and an auditorium. The CLL has relatively reliable Internet connectivity and has also recently acquired a generator to address power outage issues, which, previously, were occasional occurrences. As a revenue-earning centre, CLL employees are frequently afforded opportunities to pursue professional development in a variety of areas, including computer literacy, quality assurance, human resource management, educational technology, foreign language task-design and assessment.

Despite efforts to establish an ideal language-learning environment, enrolment numbers in the EFL/ESL programme are on the wane. Currently, no significant research has been conducted to identify the potential cause(s). However, experience suggests that this may be due to any one or a combination of the following: a significant increase in online EFL/ESL courses (both free and paid), insufficient or antiquated EFL/ESL marketing strategies, changing political and economic climates that hinder a student's ability to finance his/her studies abroad, difficulty obtaining the required travel documents, and/or a reluctance to being physically separated from his/her family and support systems. Interestingly though, enrolment figures for candidates sitting the IELTS exam are on the increase. While it is debatable whether the average IELTS candidate (usually an English user originating from the Outer circle) fits the profile of the average EFL/ESL learner (usually an English user originating from the Expanding circle), there is likely to be a measure of overlap. This overlap represents a potential market for the CLL's EFL/ESL programme. Furthermore, within recent times, changes in educational policy in the Latin American and Caribbean region have resulted in an increase in government and enterprise-sponsored EFL training initiatives. The UWI, as the region's premier HE provider, has already been approached by representatives from countries such as Colombia, Ecuador and Haiti to this end. Discussions, with regional specialists in the fields of EFL/ESL and educational technology, are currently underway to establish a regional policy to treat with solicitations from neighbouring territories for EFL instruction. Herein too, certainly, lies a potential market for the CLL's EFL/ESL programme.

As the CLL embarks on efforts to revitalize its EFL/ESL programme and increase its competitive advantage by diversifying its clientele, it is now faced with new challenges. How can it cost-effectively and efficiently meet the new demand for EFL instruction while maintaining the high-quality instruction for which it is known? Recent trends in education suggest that the answer potentially lies in technology (Boisselle, 2014; Keengwe & Kidd, 2010; Thurab-Nkhosi, 2013). Researchers suggest however that the decision to implement a technological solution should be considered on a case-by-case basis and that learner needs should inform the decision-making

process (Boisselle, 2014). From that perspective then, it should be noted that upon its client's request, the CLL is considering offering a blended approach to EFL instruction. As was previously mentioned, based on the availability of qualified human resources as well as adequate technological resources, the CLL seems to be well positioned to respond to this request. However, it is also noteworthy that the client originates from one of the lesser-developed Caribbean islands, in which Internet connectivity is an issue and access to technological resources is limited. In light of the aforementioned, the following sections will critically assess best practices in blended-approaches to EFL instruction, focusing especially on the affordances and limitations of resources such as Moodle and video-conferencing.

### **Blended-learning in an oral society**

Boisselle (2014) suggests that historically the Caribbean region comprises of oral societies in which greater value is placed on face-to-face interactions than on virtual ones. She continues that this potentially contributes to the perceived resistance to Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) that are commonplace in developed countries. By extension, this may be a key factor in the lack of buy-in currently experienced in online or blended programmes. The question therefore arises, how can this obstacle be overcome? It is first necessary to establish what is meant by the term, *blended*. An exact definition of the term is difficult to arrive at since what is considered *blended* varies from context to context, according to the prevailing educational ideologies and access to technological resources. Researchers agree however that the blended approach to teaching and learning is a pedagogical approach in which there is a combination of online and direct face-to-face delivery either between learners or between learners and educators (Boisselle, 2014; Keengwe & Kidd, 2010). The UWI (2012, p. 1) in its blended learning policy defines it as: "...the appropriate organisation of face to face approaches with web-based and other information and communication technologies for advancing student-oriented, active, collaborative teaching-learning processes."

Given that the above definitions include elements of face-to-face interaction, and yet buy-in is still low, it may be necessary to re-evaluate how these are realised so as to better satisfy the learner's need for face-to-face interaction. Moreover, discussions on blended-learning in the Anglophone Caribbean generally consider blending either at the programme or course levels. For example, Boisselle (2014) opines that a blended course is one in which the ratio between online and face-to-face delivery is 30:70, 70:30 or any variation therein. Whereas Thurab-Nkhosi (2013) describes blended programmes as those in which approximately 50-75% of courses offer an online component that is complemented by traditional face-to-face delivery. These programmes and courses are accessible to local or international students that are enrolled in undergraduate or postgraduate studies. Regrettably, a seeming lacuna in the research exists in gauging how blended-learning approaches can be used to transform short courses in a context in which stakeholders are predisposed to face-to-face interaction and learners have access to limited technological resources. I expect that by examining best practices in blended approaches to EFL instruction in light of the preceding, that I will be able to make recommendations that can be piloted in the future so as to test their feasibility and effectiveness.

### **Best practices in blended approaches to EFL instruction**

The following represents a brief summary of research conducted in HE at the UWI STA and in the US as reported on by Enightoola *et. al.* (2014), Keengwe & Kidd (2010) and Thurab-Nkhosi (2013). Based on their findings, I propose the application of the following best practices in blended-approaches to EFL instruction at the CLL:

*Determine guiding policies.* Boisselle (2014, p. 1) opines that:

A situational analysis of regional higher education indicates a major need to smooth out and expand access and enrolment (that is the increased democratization of higher education services); to make ICTs a more prolific and user-friendly mode of educational delivery.

However, in order to do so effectively, blended-learning approaches must be founded on existing or new policies. This is especially true since models of blended modalities can vary from a simple collection of lecture notes in an online folder to synchronous, interactive online sessions (Anderson, 2011). Carefully determining the guiding policy then should result in the creation of courses that will stand up to the scrutiny of quality assurance exercises, which are instrumental in maintaining a high quality level of education. As a unit of the UWI STA, proposals for blended modalities in the CLL's EFL/ESL courses should be designed in harmony with the UWIs blended learning policy (Boisselle, 2014; The UWI, 2012; Thurab-Nkhosi, 2013). Furthermore, given that the Open Campus was mandated to spearhead the development and delivery of online programmes, it will also be necessary to collaborate with them in creating a high quality EFL/ESL short course (The UWI, 2012; Thurab-Nkhosi, 2013).

*Identify a conceptual framework.* Equally important, is the matter of defining a suitable conceptual framework in which blended teaching and learning will occur. This conceptual framework should identify the key factors involved in the process of implementing a blended pedagogy at the CLL. Thurab-Nkhosi (2013) summarises several frameworks that are relevant to blended approaches in our regional context. For example, she cites Khan's (2001) eight dimension framework, in which, elements such as the institution, technology, pedagogy, resource support, evaluation, interface design, management and ethical considerations are considered. Next, she discusses Gunn's (1998) LASO model in which an overarching sense of ownership by all stakeholders is cultivated since each individual contributes to the approach adopted. Finally, she cites De Vires's (2005) Framework of Success model in which "technology, content, administration and support, communication and financial analysis" (p. 87) are emphasised. In the context of the CLL, it seems that a framework that incorporates each of the aforementioned dimensions would be most appropriate. The matter of communication and financial analysis are especially important because of the fact that our EFL/ESL tutors are contractual employees, for whom time spent generating online content or providing online instruction is synonymous with increased remuneration. Therefore, a conceptual framework that considers the institution, management, communication, financial analysis, technology, interface design, pedagogy, content, resource support, evaluation and ethical considerations, should result in the successful implementation of blended teaching and learning in an EFL/ESL short course.

*Identify a suitable model.* Successfully implementing blended approaches at the CLL is also dependent on identifying a model that satisfies our learners' needs while not creating a heavy burden on our financial and/or human resources. Twigg (2013) proposes five models for online learning: supplemental, replacement, emporium, fully online and the buffet model. Of the five models proposed, UWI STA has piloted the replacement model. This model uses technology, specifically the learning management system, Moodle, to provide learners with access to online content and tasks that replace time spent in face-to-face classroom interactions (Thurab-Nkhosi, 2013). This model's objective is to free up classroom space and provide learners with a measure of "time-place flexibility" (Boisselle, 2014, p. 2). In the context of the CLL's EFL/ESL courses, the replacement model seems to be suitable since it responds to the client's request for online-learning and face-to-face instruction. Additionally, its implementation does not incur any additional financial cost since it is the existing vehicle used by the UWI. Interestingly though, the use of Moodle has been discredited due to its inherent high demands on "development time and cost" (Krake, 2013, p. 215). Whichever model is selected, steps must be taken to ensure that the online environment facilitates learner, community, knowledge and assessment-centeredness (Brandsford, Brown, Cocking & National Research Council, 2004).

*Provide continuous training and support for instructors.* Researchers agree that successfully transitioning from traditional to blended modalities of instruction requires instructors to receive significant amounts of training, especially if they are initially apprehensive and/or inexperienced with the technology (Enightoola *et. al.*, 2014; Keengwe & Kidd, 2010). Sufficient training in web-teaching using blended approaches combined with the ability to demonstrate expert knowledge, should imbue instructors with the confidence necessary to effectively engage with learners in the online environment, thus generating increased learner buy-in. Furthermore, the training involved must do more than simply equip instructors with the mechanical skills required to navigate or manage the online platform. It must also aim to modify instructors' perceptions of blended-teaching and -learning, assist them in understanding how the online system differs from the traditional, as well as understand their new roles in the online environment. Instructors must be cognizant of the fact that generating content appropriate to an online interface is time-consuming, as is managing the online course and providing feedback on the online platform. Moreover, Salaberry (2001, p. 50) argues that "the most important challenge posed by technology-assisted language learning will be the identification of the pedagogical objective that technology-based teaching is intended to fulfil." Indeed, the training and support instructors receive should underscore the importance of sound pedagogical practices, helping them to understand that as in face-to-face sessions, their objective should be to create a learning community on the online platform that facilitates language learning.

*Provide learners with orientation and support.* Given that blended-teaching and -learning seems to be the current trend in education (Enightoola *et. al.*, 2014; Keengwe & Kidd, 2010; Thurab-Nkhosi, 2013), learners like other stakeholders, may fail initially to comprehend the rigors of blended-learning: increased autonomy, increased personal responsibility in learning, challenges with time and task management and difficulty accessing online resources. Boisselle (2014) therefore suggests assessing both the learners' learning and contextual (economic and educational profiles) needs prior to adopting blended approaches. In the CLL context, it is recommended that before piloting the blended EFL course, enrolling students, complete questionnaires regarding their readiness to engage in blended-learning, expected outcomes,

learning styles and preferences (Joseph, 2013). Providing that the cohort is small, pre-enrolment interviews can be conducted to further gauge students’ receptiveness to the online modality, ensuring that the autonomous, sometimes sterile nature of the online segment is underscored. Once students have enrolled, the first session should be dedicated to navigating the online platform, highlighting especially communication channels and the new methods for submitting assignments.

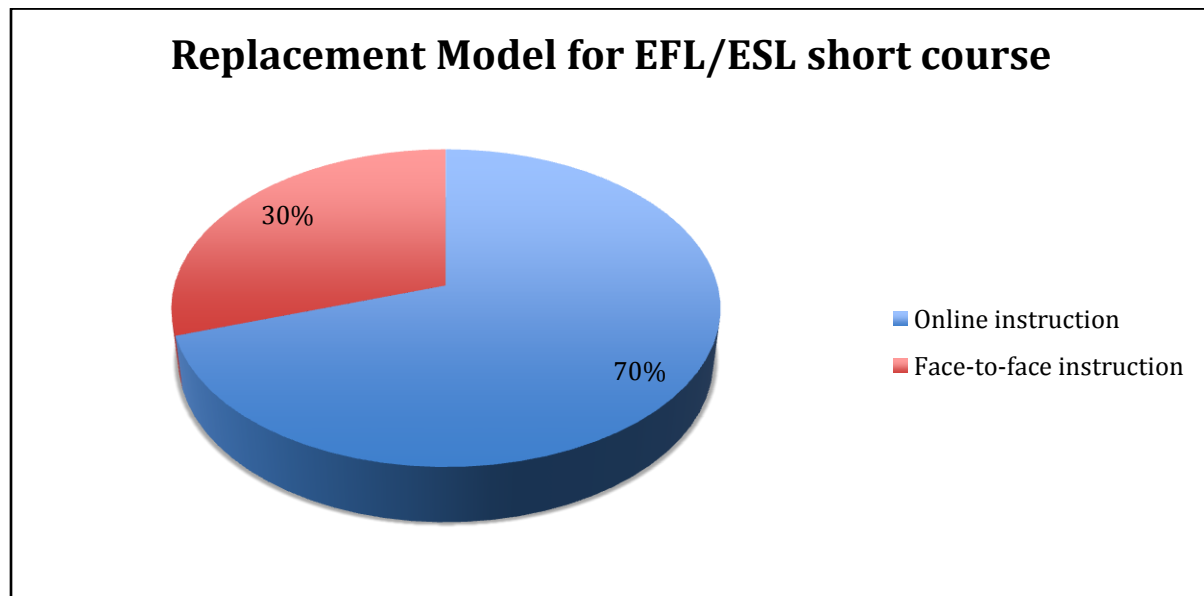
*Obtain feedback from stakeholders.* Blended approaches to teaching and learning can be described as an iterative process in which each cycle can be reviewed and evaluated so as to identify the strength and limitations of the various processes. Having piloted the blended EFL/ESL short course, it will then be necessary to obtain feedback from stakeholders (instructors and learners alike) in the form of qualitative and quantitative data concerning, especially but not exclusively, user-friendliness of the platform, time management, quality of course content, degree of interactivity, degree of satisfaction with the medium and factors that hindered or facilitated teaching and/or learning. This is of vital importance, since as Salaberry (2001) opines, too often research in foreign language teaching and learning has been susceptible to subpar data collection and analysis efforts, making it increasingly difficult to justify a given approach over another.

**Discussion**

*A proposed model*

Having reviewed the best practices in blended approaches and situated them in the context of the CLL’s EFL/ESL short course, this section will briefly describe a possible model for an EFL/ESL short course using blended modalities (See Fig. 2). I will then go on to discuss some of the affordances and limitations of the proposed model.

Fig. 2





As the figure above illustrates, I propose a replacement model blended approach, in which the ratio between online and face-to-face delivery is 70:30. It is noteworthy that this model will only truly be feasible if the client delivers on promises to fund the establishment of a remote-access location in the home territory, which will greatly facilitate access to technological resources that are otherwise difficult for learners to access independently. From this remote access point or at another location convenient to them (workstation, mobile device) learners access the Moodle platform. Instructional content will be delivered both synchronously or asynchronously. Synchronous sessions will be available through live streams with the instructor and fellow classmates, in which online learners can make written or verbal contributions (learners are working adults for whom extended study leave is not a possibility). Web based tools such as, Todaysmeet and/or Moodle's discussion tools will be used to facilitate written participation, while Zoom – computer software that allows for video recording and screen casting, will facilitate oral participation. Asynchronous sessions will be facilitated through online content available on the Moodle platform. Face-to-face interaction will occur among learners as they meet together at the remote-access location in their local context to collaborate on tasks and/or receive feedback from the instructor via videoconference. A learning community will be built using social media networks such as Facebook, Twitter, or more formal educational networks such as Edmodo.

#### *Affordances and limitations*

What are the affordances and limitations of the proposed model? Firstly, teaching and learning become “even more ecological and evolutionary” (Kelly, 1994:394 in Boisselle, 2014). While there are significant costs involved in establishing a remote-access location, this is a cost that will be absorbed by the sponsoring organization. The CLL, as the service provider, will not be faced with any major costs given that it will be utilising the existing technologies and infrastructure. Nevertheless, considerations will have to be given to preparing designated classrooms for video-conferencing. The learners, for their part, will not be faced with any additional costs in this regard. Secondly, learners benefit from an enhanced student-experience. They will be better able to customise their learning, not only choosing the time and place they engage in learning but also how they do so – synchronously or asynchronously. Instructors too can modify content based on the degree of student interaction with a given task or from student feedback, so as to improve content to better satisfy learner needs. Additionally, Moodle provides access to pedagogical tools that appear well suited to EFL/ESL teaching and learning, such as quizzes, videos and forums, thereby expanding the possibilities of the types of tasks designed. As Boisselle (2014, p. 4) posits “mixed or blended instruction permits the instructor to tailor a face-to-face: online blend ratio to suit students’ learning needs.” Thirdly, Meurant (2010) suggests that in the EFL/ESL context the use of learning management systems, such as Moodle, helps develop digital literacy skills in English, which may, undoubtedly, be useful to learners having to navigate the Internet in English for work or research-related purposes.

Conversely, there are also limitations that must be borne in mind. While many limitations could possibly be enumerated, I will focus on two that I believe greatly hinder the successful implementation of blended approaches. Firstly, because of the geographical distance instructors may fail to understand the learner's developmental interests, not engaging with learners on a personal level. Effective language teaching is much more than the transmission of information; it is a dynamic, human experience in which learners are actively engaged in the learning process.

Instructors and learners alike often receive invaluable cues from body language and other forms of non-verbal communication in face-to-face interactions. This is where the importance of video-conferencing and live streams becomes evident. Video-conferencing can make up for the perceived lack of human interaction. Learners can benefit from face-to-face interaction with their instructors (online) and/or classmates (face-to-face at remote-access location). Resorting to digital technologies then, should not result in a pedagogy that is void of the human element.

Secondly, this model, like its predecessors, may be subject to insufficient stakeholder buy-in. As was mentioned in a previous section, it is not uncommon for learners to ascribe lesser value to the online segment of a course, especially if online assignments, though relevant, may not be scored (Boisselle, 2014). In my personal experience delivering a Business Communication course, which contained an online element to two cohorts for the academic period 2014-2015, I found that while all students had access to the platform (after the usual hiccups in the initial weeks), the frequency with they accessed it outside of the classroom was low. Furthermore, when students were asked to contribute to discussion forums, in which I was present to give feedback and facilitate exchanges, participation was also minimal. The strongest engagement with the platform was usually the week prior to the session, when course materials were made available and during the face-to-face session when students were asked to complete a task accessible on the platform. While in theory, exchanges, whether they be teacher-student or student-student, student-content, should be the hallmark of quality online-learning environments, student perception of these varies according to their personalities and learning styles (Cantrell *et. al.*, 2008; Hill & Wouters, 2010). It is thus possible that despite the instructor's best efforts learners still demonstrate a preference for traditional face-to-face delivery over the blended option.

### *Recommendations*

In light of the preceding, it seems necessary to identify performance indicators by which the success of the proposed model is determined. A word of caution: we must guard against the misconception that enthusiasm for the blended course is equivalent to successful implementation. The driving factor remains sound pedagogy. Indeed, "pedagogy not technology is critical to the success of online courses" (Keengwe & Kidd, 2010, p. 537). The overarching key performance indicator in the CLL's EFL/ESL context therefore is the learner's ability to use the language for the purpose for which they initially identified. The aim is to make learners better communicators, improve their fluency and range in the four skills: speaking, writing, reading and listening, and help them realise their personal and professional goals as they pertain to English-language use. The following are some additional considerations:

1. Continuous training and support must be provided for instructors and learners.
2. Instructors should receive appropriate rewards for their investment of time and resources in preparing and delivering online content.
3. Measures should be taken to ensure instructor/learner-generated content is protected.
4. Facilities should be equipped with high-speed Internet connections that can support multiple users accessing the Moodle platform simultaneously.
5. Efforts should be made to maintain the human dimension of learning, e.g.: use of multimedia content to enhance traditionally text-based documents.

**Conclusion**

The decision to develop an EFL/ESL short course using blended approaches is not without its challenges, especially when the request is issued by a client with limited technological resources and insufficient infrastructure at their disposal. Best practices to blended approaches would suggest a six-step approach: determine guiding policies, identify a conceptual framework, identify a suitable model, provide instructors with continuous training and support, provide orientation and support for learners and obtain feedback from all stakeholders. Following these steps, in theory, should provide enough flexibility and scope to satisfy the various needs of all stakeholders. While it is vital to consider the costs involved, the guiding principle should centre on sound pedagogy, learner needs and providing a high quality learner-experience. Finally, having reviewed the literature, there is definitely a need for further research in the use of blended approaches to EFL instruction in HE in the Anglophone Caribbean.

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## Footnotes

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<sup>i</sup> Krachu (1985/2006) proposes a model of Three Concentric Circles (the inner, outer and expanding circles) to categorize varieties of World Englishes based on the following criteria: “types of spread, patterns of acquisition and the functional domains in which English is used across cultures and languages” (p. 242). He identifies the inner circle varieties as the US, UK, Canadian, Australian and New Zealand varieties, positing that these provide the traditional bases of English. The outer circle varieties include countries such as Malaysia, Ghana, Singapore, etc. that were previously colonized by users of the inner circle varieties and for whom English is, no mere second language, but also the primary language used in institutional and societal life. The expanding circle varieties categorize countries in which English is used as a foreign language or as the lingua franca for international communication, e.g.: China, Japan, etc. Regrettably, this well-known model has been used to justify the marginalization of certain varieties of English, deemed inferior to the inner circle varieties.

<sup>ii</sup> The CLL’s EFL/ESL programme has been run since 1990 and is in its 25 year of existence. There are three IELTS centres in the Caribbean region: Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago and Venezuela.