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English is used as an international language

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Abstract

The English language finds itself at the centre of the paradoxes which arise from globalization. It provides the lingua franca essential to the deepening integration of global service-based economies. It facilitates transnational encounters and allows nations, institutions, and individuals in any part of the world, to communicate their world view and identities. Yet it is also the national language of some of the most free-market economies driving economic globalization, and is often seen as representing particular cultural, economic, and even religious values.

Moreover, one of the consequences of globalization has been the blurring of the distinction between “local” and “global”. The widespread use of international technology for communication, for example the use of Internet, has made it increasingly difficult to distinguish between local and international interaction for people using their computer sat home. With the outsourcing of business, such as call centers, it is now becoming more and more difficult to identify whether one is speaking to a local representative or someone situated overseas.

Keywords: globalization, national language, technology, communication, internet, computer

Introduction

Putting aside the above-mentioned complexities, it seems that McKay’s characterization of English as an international language is framed in terms of its use for communication and the expression of culture. She maintains that in a global sense, one of the primary functions of English “is to enable speakers to share with others their ideas and culture”^[1]. She adds that “in a local sense, English becomes embedded in the culture of the country in which it is used”. This view of an international language is an advanced one, in that it acknowledges the dynamics of the “enculturation” of the international language in local contexts, as it is used for the expression of local cultures. However, what appears to be missing from this characterization is the link between language and identity in the context of the global/local divide. The “Expanding Circle” (EC), is reserved for counties in which English is learned as a foreign language (EFL), such as in China, Japan, Korea, and Egypt. However, with the rapid globalization of the language, world English’s have not remained comfortably within their traditional circles but have travelled worldwide and have in many cases found new homes in other circles. As McKay and Bokhorst-Heng^[2] put it, “due to the changes in the use of English around the globe, the lines separating these circles have become more permeable”. For example, many speakers from OC and EC countries now live in IC countries, such as the US and Australia. Canagarajah^[3] observes that “Diaspora communities have brought their English physically to the neighborhoods and doorsteps of American families”. Also many speakers from IC countries now live in OC and EC countries. In addition, there is an emerging shift in circles in some countries. For example, in some OC countries, such as Singapore and India, English is becoming a first language for a sizable number of speakers. On the other hand, some EC countries are turning into OC countries where English is gaining an official and ESL, rather than EFL, status. These include countries such as Belgium, Costa Rica, and Sudan. English is employed in local domains in approximately 75 polities^[4]. The entry of English into internal domains raises the question of whether English is “killing off” other languages-large European and Asian ones-as-well-as endangered indigenous ones? Or is it simply that people of other language backgrounds defer to English and English speakers? These questions have opened up a debate on colonial discourses and linguistic imperialism. The classic authorities in this area have regarded the spread of English around the globe as a major cause for the decline and the death of other languages and also for the continual reconstruction of power asymmetries. But as we will discuss later, some non-English- speaking countries have contributed to the belief in

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The sufficiency of English for inter-national and inter-cultural communication and to its consequences. At the other end of the spectrum, some have argued English as an international language can be empowering in some contexts and countries. Perhaps, depending upon context, there is a bit of truth in every one of these arguments and they are not necessarily incompatible.

One of the central debates about the role of English as a language of international communication has revolved around the notion of “norms”. It should be noted that the much less debated issue of the non-acceptance of pragmatic and discourse variation is far more significant. Here we are referring, for instance, to the differing rules and conventions of politeness accepted by people from different cultural backgrounds. This issue has been explored extensively in contrastive pragmatics studies which have focused on “levels of directness” in speech acts such as requests, complaints and apologies (e.g. Blum-Kulka, House and Kasper, 1989; Kasper and Blum-Kulka, 1994 and a large number of subsequent investigations). In 2001 the Melbourne newspaper *The Age* reported that a Serbian migrant was sued and fined for expressing anger when the flight attendant insisted he add “please” to his request “Give me a coke”, a form which is perfectly polite in Serbian. Recently, contrastive studies of address have drawn attention to differences in the way in which human relations are expressed (“first” names, “last” names, titles, pronoun use) between English and some European languages (Clyne, Norrby and Warren, in press) and dilemmas and problems in address mode choice in inter-cultural settings where communication is conducted in English (Clyne, in press). Particular values such as solidarity versus aloofness and personality traits such as rudeness are sometimes stereotypically assigned to non-“core” English users who do not conform to “core” English pragmatic rules.

In the use of English as a lingua franca in inter-cultural communication, variation in turn-lengths often stems from politeness conventions. For example, in some cases the clustering of speech acts (explanations and/or apologies) that accompany directives or complaints will result in a longer turn than is common in Anglo contexts. There are also different culturally determined ways of turn-taking, such as the use of increased or de-creased volume or speed necessary to maintain or appropriate a turn. These are all cultural norms that are acquired through socialization. The very use of English may entail an obligation to employ it according to the norms of a culture other than one’s own. In this way, people may be forced to adapt to other cultural values without themselves migrating, values that may clash with aspects of their own personality that are culturally constructed.

Now if English is to serve as the medium of truly international communication, empowering all rather than just a particular group of speakers, it should be adapted to accommodate the expression of multiple systems of norms, whether these norms already exist or are still emerging. Already, speakers of different World Englishes employ features of English to express their cultural conceptualizations and worldviews^[5], often through the process of what Brutt-Griffler^[6], refers to as “macro acquisition” of English, or, in other words, the acquisition and changing of English by speech communities.

Historically English owes much of its position as an international language to the demographic, economic and political power of the English-speaking countries, especially

the U.S., and also their “moral” advantage over Russia, Germany and France because of either atrocities or nationalist conceit. On the other hand, the dual function of English as both a (pluricentric) national language and an international language is likely ultimately to weaken its status as the latter. As has been discussed, the use of English in some inter-national functions of the language, such as academic discourse, forces users to assume features of Anglo culture. Though English is becoming an “Asian” language^[7] and an “African” one as well as a “European one”, its discourse patterns in most academic contexts are largely based on Anglo cultural norms, which are very distinctive. And there seems to be a widespread view that the notion of “internationalization” of tertiary education is equivalent to the delivery of university teaching in English. In this context, “tertiary education in English” is still predominantly associated with Anglo academic norms. If education is truly to become international, the norms of academic discourse should be negotiated internationally, rather than demanding submission to a particular set of norms. The rise of English was foreseen in the 19th century. Indeed, wild speculations began to circulate about the growth of the number of English speakers in the coming century, based upon projections of current trends. Bailey⁸ reviews some of these accounts: “In England it doubles in fifty years therefore in a century (in 1970) it will be 124,000,000. In the United States, in Canada, in Australia, it doubles in twenty-five; therefore it 736,000,000. Probable total of the English speaking race in 1970, 860,000,000. Projections say that English speakers for the year 2020 will exceed a billion. The reality is that there are only about 375 million native speakers of English. The 19th century commentators imagined that the growth in the number of native speakers would follow a straight-line progression. But most social changes don’t follow a linear pattern. Rather, a change begins slowly, gathers speed and then soon slows down.

Another significant factor in determining the relative position of world languages in this century has been called language shift-where individuals and whole families change their linguistic allegiances. Although such shifts are relatively slow, they are surprising difficult to predict. In the next 50 years or so, we can expect substantial language shift to occur as the effects of economic development and globalization are felt in more countries.

It is clear that sheer numbers of native speakers do not, in themselves, explain the privileged position of some languages. Crystal⁹ suggests that a language becomes an international language for one chief reason: “the political power of it’s people-especially its military power.” Historically, that might been true: in the future, it will be less clearly military power that provides the international backing for languages, because of changes in the nature of national power, in the way that cultural values are projected and in the way markets are opened for the circulation of goods and services. Some authors have focused on economic and demographic factors to explain this privilege.

Up to now, there is a growing concern about endangered languages but very little debate about the management of large languages, of which English is the largest. A more sensitive approach will be needed in the future, recognizing that English is not a universal “panacea” for social, economic and political ills and that methods and materials, and educational policies, need to be adapted for local

contexts. The world is becoming aware of the fact of endangered languages and more anxious over the long-term impact of English on world cultures, national institutions and local ways of life. Perhaps a combination of circumstances-such as shifting public values, changed economic priorities and regional political expediency-could bring about a serious reversal for ELT providers at some point in the future.

The languages people speak show two main influences: first, the speech community they are born, which for an increasing number of the world's population is a multilingual one; and second, the languages people learn through life as a consequence of education, employment, migration or increased social mobility. The languages that people use in their everyday interactions do not change rapidly, unless a speaker's social circumstances quickly change. Multilingual speakers may add languages during their lifetime and they may find that another becomes less used. But major language shift, from one first language to another, is usually slow, taking place across generations. Hence, if we take into account current patterns of language used amongst the young, including infants and teenagers, we can make a fair prediction about patterns of language use in 50 years' time. The ultimate drivers of language are the people who use it. People move extensively: for business or education, as tourists and pilgrims, as migrant workers and immigrants, as refugees and exiles, taking with them language and culture. Tourism is one well-documented form of people flow, which has a significant impact on the use of English. International travel has a globalizing effect. People are brought together, business and institutions form relationships and interdependency and closer communication. And, more directly than many other kinds of flow, international travel brings people from different background together, promoting the need to learn a language in common. We can assume that international traffic within a single region will encourage the use of a regional language. In many parts of the world, English is regarded as a language of power, success and prestige. English education is a sensitive matter. It has generally been assumed that the ultimate goal of English language learners is to achieve native-like competence. Yet, as more and more users of English come to use the language alongside one or more others, their use will significantly differ from that of monolingual speakers and because bilingual speakers of English have different needs in using the language than do monolingual speakers, any comparison is unwarranted.

For much of the researchers, the ideal motivation for learning English is integrative, which might entail admiration for the native speakers of the target language and a desire to be a real member of such culture. However, in many countries, the acquisition of English is driven by what is typically called instrumental motivation, in what we can include the desire to pass an English examination, to read books in English, or to access information in the internet. Clearly, teaching English as an international language requires that researchers and educators thoroughly examine individual learners specific uses of English within their particular speech community as a basis for determining learning goals and even more important is that it requires that they set aside the fallacy where by multilingual speakers of English, both in research and pedagogy, are constantly compared with native speaker models.

The issue of standards exists in all languages. Whereas no comparable body exists to regulate the use of English, the desire to uphold standards is clearly present. With the spread of English and the resulting variation in the language, some people believe that the need to uphold common standards has increased in importance. It is puzzling that whereas differences in the use of English between Inner Circle countries are generally accepted with no one suggesting that this will lead to incomprehensibility, language variation outside Inner Circle countries is often seen as a treat.

Despite of the fact the term intelligibility is used to cover all three types of meaning, it is worth nothing that, in many ways, it is what is referred to as interpretability that causes the greatest problems in the use of EIL for cross-cultural communication since interpretability entails questions of culture and context. It is important to note that when English is used cross culturally, it is possible that the speakers will work together to achieve interpretability.

The widespread use of English as a language of wider communication will continue to exert pressure towards global uniformity. But as English shifts from foreign language to second-language status for an increasing number of people, we can also expect to see English to develop a larger number of local varieties. These contradictory tensions arise because English has two main functions in the world: it provides a vehicular language for international communication and its form the basis for constructing cultural identities. The former function requires mutual intelligibility and common standards. The latter encourages the development of local forms and hybrid varieties. There is no need to fear, however, that trends towards fragmentation will necessary threaten the role of English as a "lingua franca". There have been since the first records of the language, major differences between varieties of English.

The history of English as an International language (EIL) is usually described as if one method followed another. In Brown's description (1994), all of these methods were superseded by the present -day emphasis on Communicative Language Approach (CLT). Such a view of teaching methodology, especially in relation to the teaching of EIL, has several problems. First, such historical accounts of language teaching, to the extent that, they are accurate, primarily reflect the history of language teaching in Inner Circle countries. Second. If one looks at EIL in a global context, it is clear that many methods now described in methodology texts are no longer being used, for example, grammar translation and audiolingualism are still used in countries outside the Inner Circle. Finally, in many cases, it would be difficult to characterize a particular classroom as using only one method or approach.

Conclusion

A final goal in the teaching of EIL should be to develop textual competence. One of the primary reasons for learning English today is to access and contribute to the large amount of information that is available nowadays. This availability of information suggests that the primary goal of many learners will be to develop reading and writing skills. When teaching reading in EIL, teachers should encourage a view of it, as an interactive process in which readers must take an active role in making sense of texts, particularly, when the texts exemplify different rhetorical patterns from their own.

Finally, EIL should be taught respecting the local culture and that culture should not be based on stereotypes. Assertions made about traditional roles of teachers and students should be avoided because they are often references of European cultures. Although, it is important to recognize that what happens in a specific classroom is influenced by political, social and cultural factors that exist in the larger community; each classroom is unique in the way the learners and teacher interact with one another in the learning of English.

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