

English as an International Language: Form and Function

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This short piece is an attempt to understand what we mean by English as an International Language (EIL) and the implications arising out of the concept for teaching English. I would also like to differentiate between EIL and world Englishes.

Kachru (1985) graphically describes the incidence of English use in the form of a set of concentric circles: the inner circle countries include Australia, UK, and USA, where English is the first language; the outer circle consists of those territories colonised by the British and, because of the multilingual nature of society, adopted English as a lingua franca (e.g. India, Nigeria); the expanding circle, where English is a foreign language in that society and has no particular status or history, includes countries like China, Brazil and Japan. It has been estimated that there are more Non-Native Speakers (NNS) or users of English in one form or other today than there are Native Speakers (NS).

How can we account for the number of users of English? Is it because more people speak English as a first language than any other language? The language spoken by the greatest number is Mandarin, followed by Hindi and Spanish, leaving English fourth in that grouping (see Flowerdew and Peacock, 2001:27). The key then is not number, but the economic power of those countries where English is a first language. Those who aspire to benefit from business contacts and scientific and technological research, the bulk of which tends to be in English, must learn English. But what is this English? Is IE, or Global English, a stable variety of the language, set aside, frozen in time, the function of which is to facilitate communication between business and scientific discourse groups worldwide? An English devoid of the richness associated with a living colloquial language?

Is IE the same as the concept of World Englishes?

World Englishes refers to the English used in those countries in the outer circle which adopted English as a lingua franca some time during the last two centuries and since then have developed a form of English which is living and evolving into a variety of English with its own syntax, lexis and pronunciation. One can exemplify this by reference to the Englishes of Singapore, Nigeria, India, and the West Indies. By and large, these Englishes tend to be restricted to spoken forms: the Nobel Laureates Wole Soyinka and V S Naipaul do not tend to write in a form which would present any difficulties to educated speakers of English, whether NS or NNS.

International English or Global English is a shorthand way of stating that English is a tool used for communication worldwide. Like the position of Latin in the medieval world, Global English's function is to provide a lingua franca in a world of many languages.

So what kind of English meets the needs of students in the 21st century? Do we adopt as the norm the English used in the UK?

Do we teach authentic, real English? But what is this? The English spoken in UK is not homogeneous; people from Liverpool might have problems understanding people from Tyneside. In schools, in certain areas, dialect is transferred to writing.

Questions of what constitutes real English have been addressed in previous issues of FORUM (issue 3, 2000). The question not only concerns the English of UK, but the Englishes referred in countries in the outer circle. Why should any one English be

'better' than any other variety? Why can't English be left to develop as it always has done in every country or linguistic community where it has taken root? Why can't teachers use their MT, if they are NS or their own variety of English if they are NNS? First, there is the question of pronunciation. Bobda (1991) citing the research findings of Tiffen (1974:227) points out that 'lexical and syntactic errors constitute only 8.8% of the causes of intelligibility failure in Nigerian English' while pronunciation accounts for as much as 91.2%. Honey (1989) reports that managers, lawyers, engineers and university lecturers from former British colonies are 'facing serious problems of intelligibility' in Britain. Announcements made by Anglophone Asians and Africans at times of crises in British subways have not been understood and medical staff from these countries have had similar problems communicating with patients and hospital staff.

Then there is the question of a norm to be adopted for international tests such as TOEFL and IELTS. A research project (see Flowerdew and Peacock, 2001:103) investigated how raters of student writings perceive rhetorical patterns in Chinese students' examinations in English. A clear distinction was noted between NS raters and NNS raters in assessing scripts, the NS reacting negatively to the paragraphing/structure of the texts, the reason for this being that NS expected 'standard' essay format: a clearly defined beginning, middle and concluding section, i.e. a linear progression. Specifically the NS noted Chinese students wrote one-line paragraphs and made no provision for signposts, or discourse markers, to indicate the direction the essay was taking.

Readers will know that the analysis of the rhetorical patterns of NNS student scripts is nothing new (see Kaplan, 1966, for example) but what is new is the question of a standard model to adopt in the very important field of international testing (TOEFL or IELTS). If there is no standard model, then how will raters know just what constitutes a mistake or error or what constitutes a perfectly acceptable English in a certain country? If norms or standards are in doubt, then what validity have these tests internationally?

Then there is the question of culture embodied in language, any language. Phillipson has designated the spread of English round the world as an example of imperialism, no doubt because English has British culture as an integral part of it. No doubt there are those who would rather that English were 'neutral' and had no cultural baggage. This would be in line with that lingua franca referred to above, a language stripped of all national affiliations, and used for the transaction of business, the media and science and technology. However, students and teachers inevitably use textbooks and the majority of textbooks are written by, and published in, those countries in Kachru's first circle. Courses in general English are designed to enable students to acquire the kind of proficiency in the language so they can interact with NS; courses have to have a content, a point of reference and areas of interest. The question of relevant and appropriate culture has often been raised; pictures or drawings of young people enjoying themselves in a certain way might not go down too well in certain countries; yet anecdotes about fishing, farming and village, though deemed culturally appropriate, might present nothing new or of interest to students. Furthermore, a fisherman and his son, having just spent the night fishing in Suri waters would be unlikely to take that as the best time to practise their English.

As for actually handling the question of culture in the classroom, it has been found that few teachers have been trained how to approach this aspect of teaching (see

Ibtesam Al Amri's article on the cultural dimension in language teaching in The Language Centre's *Conference Proceedings*, 2002, in press).

How far should teachers go in presenting culture in the classroom? What is appropriate in the EFL classroom? Tony Parsons asks in this issue whether we are merely 'purveyors of the passive, providers of grammatical paradigms, markers of mistakes' or whether we should concern ourselves with concepts such as 'collateral damage' and 'democracy' and how these words can bamboozle readers into their acceptance because they hide an unpalatable truth. He further asks whether 'outsiders' should concern themselves with current issues of social change within Omani society. Can we separate out the linguistic from the societal?

We must end where we came in with English as an International or Global Language, a lingua franca for access to business, the media, science and technology. Global English would continue to move away from the norms (UK, USA) and in so doing lose all connotations of imperialism because, as the language moves further from its roots, so the culture that goes with it would wither. World Englishes would continue to develop as living languages used by the people whether in UK or Singapore. From world Englishes would come the poetry and novels; from International English, Commerce and Technology.

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