



ENGLISH AS AN INTERNATIONAL LANGUAGE

CHALLENGES AND POSSIBILITIES

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In recent years, there has been a rapid evolution in the demographics of English speaking communities and individuals around the world, with an unprecedented growth in the number of users and learners of English. In the majority of cases, these learners and users are those who would traditionally have been classified as “non-native” speakers. This trend towards non-native speakers far outweighing native speakers in number is projected to pick up speed. The evolving nature of English in this context of its globalisation has called for a reassessment of a number of key dimensions in applied linguistic studies of English. Scholarly debates have surfaced about various political issues including the validity of the old distinction between “native” and “non-native” speakers, what form English should – or is likely to – take as a language of international/intercultural communication (or lingua franca), and which groups are empowered and which ones disadvantaged by the accelerating prominence of English. Collectively, the essays in this issue of the journal engage with these issues in order to take the debate up to the next level. This article is a position paper which offers to open up the forum and to expand on some of some of these fundamental questions.

INTRODUCTION

According to Crystal (1997), more people use English today than have used any other language in the history of the world. English is the international language *par excellence*. Estimates of the number of speakers are debatable. Perhaps 380 million have English as a first language but more than a billion people use it as a second (or additional) language, largely to communicate with other second language users with whom they do not share a cultural and linguistic background. Thus people from the so-called “core” English-speaking countries are now in the minority among English users and “native speakers” of the language no longer determine how the language is being used internationally. In a report commissioned by the British Council, Graddol (2006, p. 11) observes that English now is “a new phenomenon, and if it represents any kind of triumph it is probably not a cause for celebration by native speakers”.

Today, English is very much tied to globalisation and is profoundly affected by all of its associated processes. As Graddol (2006, p. 66) puts it:

The English language finds itself at the centre of the paradoxes which arise from globalisation. 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 globalisation, and is often seen as representing particular cultural, economic, and even religious values.

Paradoxes such as the above-mentioned have now given rise to a set of debates about the role of English in today’s globalised world (e.g. Graddol, 2006; Rubdy and Saraceni, 2006; Sharifian, 2009a). These include questions such as: What does it mean for a language to be an international language? Do its users from different cultures all identify with it equally? Is it the same language everywhere? Is an international language a good or a bad thing? Who benefits from it? Who is disadvantaged by it? Does English really lend itself to being an international language? What should the linguistic response be to “globalisation” – English as an international language in a pluricentric sense? Should one particular variety be chosen for international communication? Should we be searching for a “core” code? Should we encourage bi- and multilingualism? Or should we have a multiple response? What are the implications for language teaching and testing?

To move this debate forward, the essays in this issue of the journal address these questions. This introductory piece acts as a springboard for launching some fundamental issues about the role of English as an international language. The authors emphasise that this article is not able in the space allowed to (adequately) summarise the field but only to raise issues that would give the contributing colleagues the opportunity to present their positions.

WHAT MAKES ENGLISH AN INTERNATIONAL LANGUAGE?

McKay (2002, p. 12) distinguishes between “English as an international language” in a global and a local sense. She observes that “as an international language, English is used both in a global sense for international communication between countries and in a local sense as a language of wider communication within multilingual societies”. However, we would contend that these two senses of the word “international” need not signify two separate categories when it comes to their application to “English”. In fact, in a process that Sharifian has named *glocalisation of English* (Sharifian, forthcoming), it is argued that the very global spread of English entails the localisation of the language.

Moreover, one of the consequences of globalisation 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 computers at home. With the outsourcing of business, such as call centres, it is now becoming more and more difficult to identify whether one is speaking to a local representative or someone situated overseas.

Putting aside the above-mentioned complexities, it seems that McKay’s characterisation 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” (McKay, 2002, p. 12). 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 characterisation is the link between language and identity in the context of the global/local divide.

Any language fulfils two main functions: It is the main medium of human communication, but it is also a symbol of identity (Clyne, 1994, p. 1; Kirkpatrick, 2007). Through

language, group boundaries are marked between “us” and “them” and group relations are expressed. A national language defines a nation, hence the formation and differentiation of national languages among aspiring or newly independent nations, for example Bosnian, Montenegrin. For a large number of countries all over the world English is not only an international language but a national language as well. Through an international language we try to communicate across cultures within and across national boundaries. A national language has, of course, important communicative functions but also carries symbolic ones; these may not be relevant for second language users, unless they learn the second language in order to project a particular identity. For example, English may be learned and used because it is associated with certain identities such as a “modern” or a “social elite” identity.

English is not only a national language but also a pluricentric one, with different norms – phonological, morphosyntactic, lexical, pragmatic (Clyne, 1992, p. 1) – applying to different national varieties. Most pluricentric languages are characterised by asymmetric relations between one or two dominant national varieties and the rest; English is no exception. Among the manifestations of this are (Clyne, 1992, pp. 459–60):

1. The dominant nations underestimate the identity functions of one small language variation.
2. They tend to believe that variation between national varieties is mainly restricted to the spoken language.
3. They often confuse national and regional variation (for instance identifying Australian English as “really Cockney”).
4. The dominant nations believe themselves to be the norm-setters and view the other national varieties as deviations from their norm.
5. They consider their own norms to be more rigid than those of the non-dominant nations.
6. They have better means of codification and are better able to export their national varieties through publishing houses and language institutes.
7. The elites in the non-dominant nations tend to defer to the language norms of the dominant ones.

Pluricentricity of English has often been discussed in terms of “circles” (e.g. Kachru, 1986; Modiano, 1999), in particular the ones proposed by Kachru, which are discussed in the following section.

THREE CIRCLES

Kachru, (1986) identified three circles of English using nations. He used the term “Inner-Circle” (IC from now on) to refer to countries where English is used as the primary language, such as in the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, and Canada. He used “Outer Circle” (OC) to refer to countries where English is used as a second language (ESL), such as India and Singapore. 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 globalisation of the language, world Englishes 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 (2008, p. 29) put it, “[d]ue 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 (2006a, p. 590) observes that “diaspora communities have brought their Englishes physically to the neighbourhoods 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 (Graddol, 1997).

English is employed in local domains in approximately 75 polities (Crystal, 1997). 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 (Pennycook, 1998) and linguistic imperialism (Phillipson, 1992). 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 the sufficiency of English for inter-national and inter-cultural communication and to its consequences. At the other end of the spectrum, some (such as House, 2002) 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.

What seems to be boosting the decline of other languages is not so much the widespread use of an international language as the monolingual mindset. The use of the polemic term “English only” in Europe invokes the bitter struggle forced upon bilinguals in the United States as they have tried to keep some rights for their minority languages in the face of an anti-Hispanic monolingual political campaign. What is widely considered to be a threat to the national language by replacement or partial replacement in domains such as academic research, big business, information technology, entertainment, etc. has also resulted in a policy debate backlash. Sweden, for instance, has developed a language policy which ensures that Swedish remains a language of formal domains (Boyd, 2007). The Royal Netherlands Academy of Sciences has also published a paper (Academy, 2003) aimed at protecting Dutch as an academic language. So the question of whether or not it is English (as a language of international communication) itself which “kills” other languages, or whether it is the destructive, monolingual policy instead, still remains unresolved.

It should also be noted that what seems to be the very rapid predominance of English around the globe may not represent the whole truth. In fact, Graddol (2006) reports that Mandarin and Spanish are challenging English in terms of their proliferation in the world. He observes that these languages are “booming”, in terms not only of their numbers of speakers but also their presence on the Internet, their economic importance and their competition with English in resources. Graddol further notes that the rise of Asian countries such as India and China will have a significant impact on the place of English as the only global language.

ISSUES OF NORMS

One of the central debates about the role of English as a language of international communication has revolved around the notion of “norms”. The diffusion of English has resulted in three norm-related issues:

1. Can non-native varieties be accepted as “standard”? Non-native lexical examples sometimes associated with “Euro-English” include sympathetic (in the meaning “likeable”), thematise and problematise (cf. Seidlhofer, Breiteneder and Pitzl, 2006).
2. How much grammatical variation is possible (e.g. present for perfect in “Euro-English”, as in “He is living here for 25 years”) (cf. Seidlhofer, Breiteneder and Pitzl, 2006).

3. Can non-native but intelligible pronunciation be accepted as standard? How intelligible would it need to be? (Jenkins, 2000).

However, such questions about norms and standards mainly focus on the limited areas of grammatical and phonological variation resulting from the spread of English worldwide. This seems to emerge from a view of language which is reminiscent of inter-language studies of the 1970s and in which language was treated as if it only consisted of the formal features of syntax and phonology.

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.

A similar clash of values may be found in cultural variation in the structure of discourse, including academic texts, school essays, medical protocols, meetings and letters. An example would be the much stronger focus on content in (non-Anglo) European discourse than in Anglo discourse, where managing texts in terms of conventions of linearity (each proposition directly following another directly) and symmetry (each text segment being more or less the same size) is a priority (e.g. Clyne, 1987; Cmejrková, 1997; Golebiowski, 1998; Mauranen, 1983). The avoidance of repetition and the very focused direction of the reader to the author’s argument right from the start of a text in Anglo discourse tend to clash with the norm of “polite” deference which is a feature of communication in some non-Anglo cultures (e.g. Eggington, 1987; Hinds, 1980; Hinds, 1983a; Hinds, 1983b; Kirkpatrick, 1993). On the other hand, the application of this

norm gives Anglo readers the impression of circularity (e.g. Kaplan, 1972). Cultural variation sometimes interacts with sub-cultural variation according to discipline (Liddicoat, 1997). Small-scale surveys of editors, analysis of reviews, and personal experiences of English users from non-“core” backgrounds (e.g. Clyne, 1987; Skutnabb-Kangas, 1981; Ammon, 2001; Flowerdew, 2001; Flowerdew, 2007; Guardiano, Favilla, and Calaresu, 2007) all confirm discrimination against texts that do not conform to Anglo norms. This is expressed through the criticism that they are not only unreadable but illogical, with the implication that their non-conformity to accepted norms detracts from their academic value (Clyne, 1987). Within Australian upper secondary school examination assessments, too, there is an imputed link between linearity and relevance which is absent in German/Central European education systems (Clyne, 1980). Further cultural variation in texts occurs in the degree of hedging (which is found more in texts by continental Europeans) and of the degree of concreteness or abstraction (with greater concreteness in some non-Anglo cultures, and greater abstraction in others, particularly continental European ones) (Clyne, 1994).

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 decreased volume or speed necessary to maintain or appropriate a turn (Clyne, 1994, pp. 90–110, 157). These are all cultural norms that are acquired through socialisation. 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 conceptualisations and worldviews (e.g. Sharifian, 2009b), often through the process of what Brutt-Griffler, (2002) refers to as “macro-acquisition” of English, or, in other words, the acquisition and changing of English by speech communities.

We anticipate that new systems of norms will continue to develop as a result of interactions in English between speakers from different cultural backgrounds. It should be

noted here that the development of English as an/the international language entails a massive education program for “core” English speakers to encourage them to see that they are now sharing “their” language (cf. also Ammon, 2007). But is this possible, and if not, what would be the obstacle? Two major attitudinal obstacles in non-English-speaking countries can be named here. One is economic rationalism (neo-liberalism), for which efficiency in spending is the sacred goal. Influential policy makers believe that employing too many languages is financially wasteful. This issue received much public airing at the time of the expansion of the European Union, an expansion which threatened to bring the total number of its official languages to 23. This would have required 506 interpreters at a general session, including “difficult to find” combinations such as Estonian to Maltese or Finnish to Slovenian. Some countries such as the Netherlands, Sweden and Norway had strategically chosen to specialise in English in school education to give their country an economic advantage in international business over countries such as Germany and France which were spending more resources protecting their national language than in investing in English.

In academia and business, pragmatic attitudes have led to a concentration on English to the exclusion of other foreign languages. Many European countries, including France, Germany and Eastern European countries, have introduced English-medium courses at their universities (Ammon and McConnell, 2002; Clyne, 2007). It is easiest to cope with the influx of students from the rest of Europe under mobility programs such as Erasmus this way. Similarly, using English to non-native speakers of German helps German business and industry communicate with a multilingual workforce, with investors from other language backgrounds, and cope with the communicative demands resulting from amalgamations. However, this simple solution ignores the fact that in their subsidiaries in eastern and central European, as well as among their local multilingual workforce, there are those from countries with a longstanding tradition of using German as a second language who have a high level of proficiency in that language. By adopting English so freely as the language to communicate with non-native speakers, they are in fact demotivating the use of German as an international (or at least regional) language (Ehlich, 2005; Földes, 2002). It would seem that the confidence of English speakers in the sufficiency of English and the underlying monolingual mindset (Clyne, 2005) have infected many people in the world. Many who are settling for their first language and English would, a few decades ago, have learnt several other languages as well. This needs to be seen in the context of a widespread fear of diversity, including linguistic and cultural diversity.

The importance of English as a *lingua franca* is now undisputed. It is currently indispensable, and will continue to be such in the foreseeable future, for both initial and survival communication across many nations and cultures. The increasing certainty that one can fall back on English has reduced the motivation to acquire basic “phrase book” skills in a foreign language for travel or other minimal functions, and has in turn led to greater reliance on English. This brings us to the question as to whether English speakers are going to benefit from English as an international language in the long term? The answer lies in their above-mentioned belief in the self-sufficiency of English speakers in English. Based on many data sets Graddol, (2006) forecasts “a bleak economic future” for English speakers as, with educated people all over the world having proficiency in it as a basic skill, they will no longer have an advantage in English. However those who have learnt English as a second language will be able to draw on their first language(s) and at least a third language, at a time when English (and English only speakers) will be feeling the pressure of competition from Chinese, Arabic and Spanish. The alternative options probably include multilingualism, “polyglot dialogue” (Posner, 1991, “receptive multilingualism”) where each speaker uses their L1 and understands those of the interlocutors, and multilateral competence in related languages (cf. the Eurocom Project, Hufeisen and Marx, 2007), where a secondary competence in several languages of one family is acquired based on one language. Already, some cases of international communication take place bilingually and trilingually. For example, there are cases of on-line communication where the interlocutors use each others’ first language. This seems to provide a chance for language learning as well as forming solidarity between the speakers as they show respect for their interlocutor’s first language.

THE POSITION OF ENGLISH

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 international functions of the language, such as academic discourse, forces users to assume features of Anglo culture (e.g. Clyne, 1987; Coulmas, 2007; Flowerdew, 2007). Though English is becoming an “Asian” language (Newbrook, 1996) and an “African” one (Bamgbose, 2003) as well as a “European one” (Jenkins, Modiano and Seidlhofer, 2001),

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 “internationalisation” 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.

RESPONSE TO GLOBALISATION

So far we have argued that the process of globalisation has directly affected English and continues to do so. The question of the most desirable linguistic response to the globalisation of English as a vehicle for international communication *vis-à-vis* other languages remains. Some favour the adoption of a particular variety as the medium of international communication, while others search for a “common core English” with features characteristic of the actual use of English internationally. The first proposal would obviously defeat the whole purpose of “international” communication, in an equitable sense, by favouring only the speakers of a single, particular variety and by deferring to the norms of that speech community. However, currently, American English appears to some to be a good candidate for the variety of English to serve in this role. This is due to its disproportionately dominant economic power and its predominance in pop culture. It is to be noted that at least the first of these two factors seems to be fast diminishing with the rise of China and India as future economic giants.

The search for a “common core” and proposals such as “Globish” and “Basic Global English”, are flawed on many grounds, not the least of which is the shallow understanding of language. Proponents of “core” English mainly look for phonological and grammatical features that characterise communication between non-native speakers of English. First of all, there is no word in the phrase “international communication” that would exclude the so-called “native” speakers of the language. Native speakers of English are part of the international community and they do communicate internationally amongst themselves and with non-native speakers. Second, language is more than just sounds and grammar. As discussed above, pragmatics and pragmatic norms, which are very much subject to cross-cultural differences, are central to language. Language is also used to express cultural conceptualisations, such as cultural schemas, that have developed among the members of a speech community across time and space (e.g. Sharifian, 2003; Sharifian, 2008). When English is used as an international language speakers draw on

their cultural conceptualisations to make and negotiate meaning. Although some patterns of international communication are likely to lead to the development of certain intercultural conceptualisations, such as the blending of cultural schemas, it would be naive to look for “core” cultural conceptualisations that would characterise all instances of international communication in English. We maintain that the sociolinguistic complexity of English in the context of globalisation requires a multiple response as follows:

- a. a more symmetrical understanding of the pluricentricity of English,
- b. instruction in both English as a Second Language and English as a First Language which focuses on cross-cultural/intercultural communication, especially on pragmatic, discourse, and conceptual variation,
- c. a policy of bilingualism/multilingualism to accompany the acquisition and use of English, including that by speakers from “inner circle” nations.

These suggestions may sound straightforward and simple, but their actual realisation would require a revolutionary change in language policies and practices. Although the financial difficulties would be significant, the main obstacles would, as we discussed earlier in this paper, be attitudinal. To start with, the proposed changes require a mindset appreciative rather than fearful of diversity and multiplicity in communicative norms. The degree to which this ambition is utopian or achievable is subject to the test of time, and human effort. Added to this is the fact that simply describing the sociolinguistic reality of English around the world is not enough to promote intercultural and multicultural understanding or diversity in international communication. Gatekeepers, such as English Language Teaching and Testing industries, also need to explore and implement, in fundamental ways, the implications of the current and future situations of the complexity of English as an international language. The expanding pluricentricity of English needs to be reflected in ELT materials, which currently lean towards either American or British English (and to a much lesser extent Australian English), under-representing other varieties. Language testing needs also to be informed by the unprecedented growth of variation in the norms of international communication (e.g. Canagarajah, 2006b; Elder and Davies, 2006). Furthermore, the contents of language tests ought to correspond with the functions for which the testees will employ the language (see Zafar Khan, 2009). In many contexts, people who take language tests such as IELTS and TOEFL use English for intercultural communication, often in the absence of “native” speakers. In such cases, we believe the test should try to evaluate intercultural communicative skills instead of obsessively testing the “inner circle” Englishes.

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Cite this article as: Clyne, Michael; Sharifian, Farzad. 2008. 'English as an international language: Challenges and possibilities'. *Australian Review of Applied Linguistics*, International Forum on English as an International Language, special forum issue edited by Sharifian, Farzad; Clyne, Michael. 31 (3): pp. 28.1–28.16. DOI: 10.2104/ara10828.