



English in Multicultural Society of Asia

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ABSTRACT

As the majority of countries in Asia recognize English as an indispensable language for intranational or international communication, they are increasingly committed to strengthening and improving English language teaching (ELT). In parts of Asia where English serves as an official language and ELT expands and succeeds, people start speaking English among themselves. Wherever this happens, a set of indigenous patterns develop, the kind of patterns people find easier to handle. The same situation can develop in "English as an international language" countries, too. We need to fully understand these aspects of present-day English if we are to deal with their various ramifications. One important issue is diversity management. Based on the observation that a common language is not a uniform language but a diverse language, this paper argues that a plausible way of managing the multiculturalism of Asian English is not standardization but intercultural literacy.

Keywords : English, Multicultural Society, Diffusion, Adaptation

Introduction

The present world views English as a unique language, functionally and structurally quite different from other languages of the world (see figure 1 below). Functionally speaking, English has conspicuously spread among non-native speakers as a sizable number of Asian, African, Pacific, and other countries designate it as their official, associate official or working language. In view of the situation, millions of students are learning English as a language for wider communication. According to a survey conducted by Japan's National Institute of Language in 1999, people of the world unanimously consider English as the most useful language for world-wide communication.

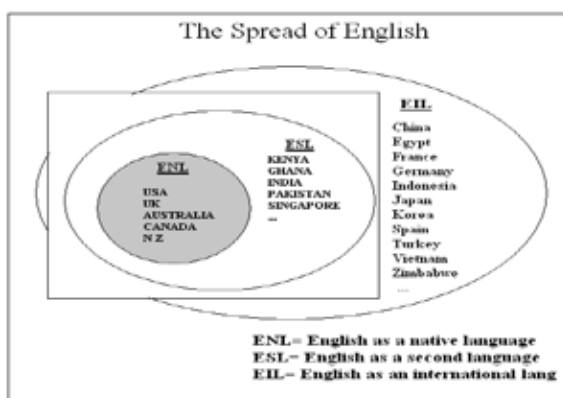


Figure 1

English is not the language for us to use only with Americans, the British, or any other native speakers of English. Rather, English is the language for us to use with Chinese, Koreans, Bruneians, Japanese, Thais, Malaysians, Singaporeans, and other Asians. It is the language for us to use with Europeans, Africans, Arabians, South Americans, and many others. That English has become an international language means that it has become a language for multinational communication.

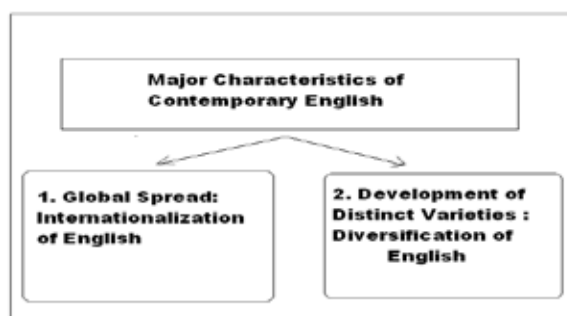


Figure 2

Structurally speaking, as the spread of English progresses, English is bound to reflect a diversity of disparate cultures. Importantly, non-native speakers are taking advantage of this additional language and are exploring new dimensions of English usage, phonetically, lexically, syntactically, semantically, and pragmatically. Since no language is used to its fullest extent by its native speakers, there is always much room left for non-native speakers to exploit it in their unique ways. As a matter of fact, they are using English in non-Anglo- American cultural contexts. Actually, when Indians speak English with Arabians, there is no room for American or British culture.

It would be clumsy if the Indians had to represent American ways of behavior and the Arabians the British version while speaking English to each other. The case is true with English conversations between Turks and Brazilians, French and Swedish people, or any other interactions there may occur on the global stage. What actually happens is that Indians behave like Indian and speak English in Indian ways, and so do Indonesians, Vietnamese, Italians, Danish, and many others respectively. This demonstrates that English now is a multicultural language having the regional varieties of its own. (see Figure 3 below).

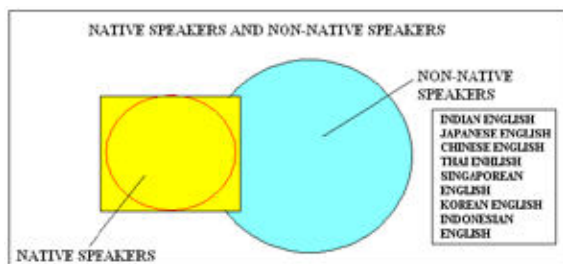


Figure 3

Diffusion and Adaptation

It is important that we should understand the correlation between diffusion and adaptation of English language. If things are to spread, they must most normally mutate. For example, if you wanted to start a MacDonald's store in India, what would you do? You could not serve beef hamburgers there because cows are holy and beef is taboo in Hinduism which is the religion of most people in India. MacDonald's stores in India now are popular spots because they serve chicken or mutton burgers, a great change needed to ensure the spread of this fast-food chain in a place whose cultural tradition is so different from the original country. We simply cannot internationalize things and ideas without having them accommodated to the customs and needs of people who are supposed to use them for their own purposes. This principle apparently applies to language, too. The fact is that the internationalization of English has prompted the diversification of English. The diversification is the cost we have to pay for the internationalization of English. Here, it is important to recognize that English has become an international common language simply because it is being enriched as a culturally diverse language.

In his *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (1996: 61), Samuel Huntington claims that English as a lingua franca is devoid of ethnicity, culture, or identity. In the same vein, people tend to believe that a common language is a uniform language. But this is not true. English can be a common language for multinational communication only when its cultural diversity is accepted. A common language has to be a multicultural language. A lot of allowances have to be made and differences accepted. If American English standards, for example, were imposed upon all users of English, English would never become an international common language. Study the following figure,

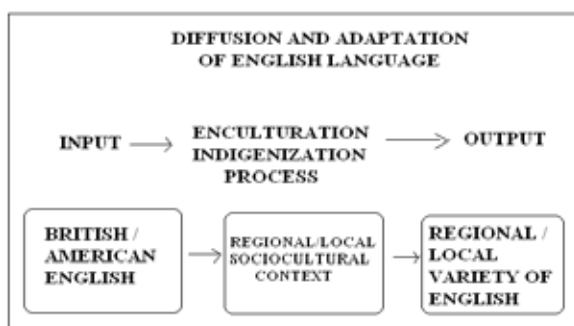


Figure 4

English in Asia

The spread of English as a language for multinational and multicultural communication utilized by an enormous number of non-native speakers shows that English is becoming more and more de-Anglo-Americanized in many regions of the world. This creates a new role that English can play in the contemporary world. As a matter of fact, English has become a very important language in Asia. It is a working language for intranational and international communication in many parts of the region. According to a report, 350 million people speak English for various purposes in Asia, a number that is close

to the combined populations of the United States and Great Britain, where English is a native tongue for most citizens.

Since we are all non-native speakers, we feel relaxed when we speak English with each other. Allowed to be less aware of the native-speaker standards, we find ourselves speaking English more flexibly and liberally. We should be more conscious of the significance of this fact in ELT. In much of Asia, English is no longer a colonial import. Throughout the region, English is the language of education, culture, business and, above all, regional cooperation. English-speaking Asians claim English as their own language. Filipino poet Gemino Abad once said,

"The English language is now ours. We have colonized it, too."

This is not a political statement. This is simply a descriptive remark concerning the current state of the English language in this part of the world. Thus, students are becoming more and more aware that English is an indispensable Asian language. The likelihood of using English with other Asians motivates an increasing number of students to learn the language better.

The subsequent story was narrated by an Australian person who was sitting in the office of a superintendent of the Hong Kong Police Force prior to the territory's return to China in 1997. The superintendent was British. In those colonial days, almost all the police officers were expatriates and the sergeants and constables were all locals. The Australian guy found himself there because he worked for a company who had been asked to explain the English-language communication problems that were common in the police force at that time.

There was a quiet knock at the door and in came a young Chinese police constable. He was, of course wearing his uniform. He saluted the superintendent and stood smartly to attention in front of the large wooden desk.

"Yes?" enquired the superintendent.

"My mother is not very well, sir", started the constable.

"Yes?" repeated the superintendent, a frown appearing on his brow.

"She has to go into hospital, sir", continued the constable.

"So?"

"On Thursday, sir".

The superintendent's frown was replaced by a look of exasperation. "What is it that you want?" he asked sternly.

At this direct question, the constable's face fell and he simply mumbled, "Nothing, sir. It's all right", and turned and left the room.

As soon as the door had closed the superintendent turned to me and said:

"You see. A classic case. They can't get to the point."

"So, what would you want him to say?" I asked.

"Well, instead of beating around the bush, he should come straight to the point. He obviously wants some leave so he can look after his mother. He should ask for leave and not waste my time going on about his poor mother."

"You want him to say something like, 'Can I have some leave please, sir?'"

"Yes, exactly", replied the superintendent.

When I presented this story to my students in the class, most students expressed sympathy with the Chinese constable transferring a common Chinese way of making a request into English. They judged that the British superintendent, not the Chinese constable, was responsible for the communication breakdown because he was not able to accept the Chinese style even though he perfectly understood what his interlocutor said and meant.

In this regard, I have the result to share with you. After narrating this incident, I conducted few lectures on "World Englishes" and then, I asked my students about their reactions to a story on a failure in communication between a British superintendent and a Chinese constable that had occurred in the police department in Hong Kong.

In this regard, the students' reactions were a remarkable departure from the traditional assumption that normative speakers should conform to native speakers' communication styles by all means. This was a prominent change in attitude that was made possible by recognizing English as a multicultural language.

Now a day, the College students in Asian countries are being informed of English as a multinational and multicultural

language. High school teachers of English are showing positive attitudes toward the concept of English as such. Business people know that that is what English is all about, widely confronted with different varieties of English that are used in Asia and other parts of the world.

What is important in intercultural communication is one's capability and willingness to understand what the other has to say, not the disposition to impose one's values and norms upon the other. Actually, with some degree of intercultural awareness, one is capable of understanding the other even if the two persons' communication styles are different.

Conclusion

The concept of English as a multicultural language is based on the fact that English is here to stay as an indispensable language for intranational and/or international communication in Asia and other parts of the world. In this paper, I have discussed a number of issues involved in recognizing and promoting teaching of English as an Asian language with all its cultural diversities. As a diversity management approach, matters of intercultural literacy and language awareness have also been highlighted.

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