

Language, Culture and International Communication

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Abstract

We start by reviewing the relevant literature on World Englishes which proposed any form of English for international/global communication, considering it as the contact language with the broader level of meaning of all speakers irrespective of their English language acquisition history. Based on that input we first bring evidence of the cultural aspect of language acquisition. To this respect we define culture as language dependent and therefore mirroring the specialized, individual aspect of communication. This means that students need English for special purposes and they use the language as the cultural environment requires. In this context we try to see what would be the “getting through” strategies to meet native speaker acceptance and international communication. The second aspect we need to deal with is teacher’s approach to teaching language. This kind of approach has to be two folded as the teacher has his own history of language acquisition which he/she has to double by developing language insight which should help in choosing the most efficient and adequate teaching strategies. Culturally and linguistically the teacher is a mediator and he is also an evaluator of what is to be expected as (International) Standard English (ISE). We still consider debatable the issue of ISE as it is difficult to decide what the standard should be and how to make it globally acknowledged; even so the teacher has to define, based on purpose and the expected cultural environment, what is the standard to be achieved, the paper presenting such an attempt.

Keywords: international communication, interculturality, teaching strategies, standard English

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English for International Communication (EIC)

A paradigm of thinking

English as an International Language (EIL) refers to a paradigm for thinking, research and practice. It marks a paradigm shift in TESOL, SLA and the applied linguistics of English, partly in response to the complexities that are associated with the tremendously rapid spread of English around the globe in recent decades.

EIL – methodological perspectives

In order to understand the impact and range of English for International Communication we have to document the state of the art of both theoretical and applied approaches considering EIL

The Sociolinguistic approach

The EIL paradigm is based on research approaches specific for sociolinguistics and applied linguistics with fresh inputs from qualitative new approaches in social sciences such as narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) and ethno-methodologically-oriented interviews (Seidman, 2006) including auto-ethnography (Ellis, 2004) or cyber-ethnography (Hine, 2000). Such methods best capture peoples' complex relationship with the language which reveals significant links between language, culture and identity. Even if such methods are currently under-utilized, such methodologies which build on speakers'/learners'/teachers' lived experiences and the meanings that they make out of these in relation to English are used on an larger scale.

World Englishes

The role and use of English around the world has been described by Kachru (1986, 1992) or Bolton (2004) using a model that has three concentric circles: Inner-Circle, Outer-Circle and Expanding-Circle countries. In the Inner-Circle countries (the United Kingdom, the United States, Australia and Canada) English is used as the primary language, in the Outer Circle, countries (e.g. India and Singapore) are multilingual and use English as a second language. In the Expanding-Circle, the largest circle including countries like China, Argentina, Italy or Egypt, English is learned as a foreign language.

World Englishes make a significant contribution to the EIL paradigm through established sociolinguistic approaches as well as more recent approaches such as those from cultural linguistics and cognitive linguistics (Polzenhagen & Wolf, 2007; Sharifian, 2006). These approaches can provide deeper insights not only into the nature of World Englishes but also about communication *across* Englishes, an issue which is bias to EIL.

Intercultural communication - critical cultural awareness

EIL has started to develop a close affinity with research in the area of intercultural communication acknowledging that the language widely used for intercultural communication at the global level today is English. Taking that into consideration,

‘proficiency’ in English, when used for international communication, is increasingly based on ‘intercultural competence’ also known as *meta-cultural competence*.

As shown by Byram (1997) intercultural communication is based on critical cultural awareness/political education and it has impacted upon very recent European policy expressed in the Council of Europe’s White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue (2008).

“Complementary tools should be developed to encourage students to exercise independent critical faculties including to reflect critically on their own responses and attitudes to experiences of other cultures.” (Byram et al, 2009: 25).

Moreover, the use of English as a lingua franca can allow speakers from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds to express themselves directly, without using translating or interpreting. Still, there is an expressed need to protect linguistic diversity in recognition of the fact that language carries culture-specific meanings that have roots in specific cultural life (Byram et al, 2009).

To conclude on the close interaction of cultural awareness and intercultural communication, we would like to emphasize that many theoreticians as well as practitioners have reached the conclusion that considerable overlap exists between the fields of World Englishes and Intercultural Communicative Competence as, basically, both reject the native-speaker, building on a strong cultural knowledge base from which the intercultural speaker can draw in communication, helping him solve prejudice and misunderstandings based on sound, reasonable critical cultural awareness.

Native Speaker (NS) – Non-Native Speaker (NNS)

The NS-NNS dichotomy has a specific link to identity and is important for choosing the adequate pedagogy. The acceptance of one model or other mainly springs from the way accent is considered important for defining language variety, ignoring the diversity that characterizes the so-called NS varieties of English. The assumption in this kind of approach is that all NSs have no difficulty in understanding each other. Still, there is ELF research, such as Roberts and Canagarajah’s, which attempts to understand how English is used as a contact language, regardless of whether or not it is an L1 or L2.

By drawing on data from Roberts (2005), Roberts and Canagarajah (2009) attempt to clear away some of the stereotypes that have often been held about communication between native and non-native speakers. In general, they observe that ‘grammatical forms are negotiated by individuals within ELF processes and are not shared by all interacting users’ (p. 225). They maintain that success in the international use of English does not so much hinge upon a particular variety or lexico-grammar, but is instead tied to the nature of the negotiation skills and strategies interlocutors adopt.

Cultural conceptualizations

English as an International Language can be explored using the approach of *cultural conceptualizations* (Sharifian, 2003, 2008) which views conceptual units such as schemas, categories and metaphors as existing both at the level of individual minds and cultural groups and emerging from the interactions between the members of the

group across time and space. Successful communication in EIL settings is achieved by acquiring *meta-cultural competence* which is represented by the speakers'/learners' familiarity with a variety of systems of cultural conceptualizations which are communicated by language and its components, significantly enhancing their intercultural communication skills.

Dissemination of knowledge

One of the themes that has received some but as yet insufficient attention, in the context of English as an International Language, is the impact on the language by the dissemination of knowledge and scholarship through English. Disseminating scientific knowledge in English means that that kind of knowledge comes into contact with Western knowledge traditions suffering thus a sort of 'reshaping'. Further research in this area could provide interesting insights into varieties of English and their interaction with various knowledge systems. (Kirkpatrick, 2007)

Pluricentricity vs standard

If EIL is to be understood as a variety of English then its definition should consider as its most important characteristics 'pluricentricity' rather than an 'international monochrome standard'

“if English as an international language has to maintain its currency and vitality then it will have to be spoken by different voices yet understood by different ears.” (Anchimbe , 2009 : 284).

Anchimbe (2009) also shows that the notion of 'standard' tends to be considered as established by the rules observed by native speakers. He argues that 'standards' naturally develop according to the needs of communities of speakers. They should not be imposed upon them by speakers of other varieties. These observations may have important implications for the teaching of English as an International Language.

EIC – a working definition

This overview of some of the most important theoretical approaches on EIL has brought forward some important ideas to shape the domain of research but what we think should be considered is a terminological shift from EIL to EIC.

Starting from the recognition of World Englishes, EIL emphasizes that English is a language of international and therefore intercultural communication (Bolton, 2004; Kachru, 1986, 1992). It is our opinion that within this maize of concepts and approaches there must be established a standard to be the reference of *adequate* and *intelligible* communication in English that takes place in international context. To cover this aspect we use the concept of English for International Communication (EIC) as any variety of language exists to fulfill a communicational purpose.

Therefore, we provide the following ***working definition of EIC – English used for communication in a multicultural setting for various purposes, aiming at achieving intercultural communication.***

Overemphasizing the diversity of varieties might create a Babel of Englishes which could not help the purpose of communication in international context. On the other

hand, language outside culture is a nonsense and it has no viability as proved by the invented international languages such as Esperanto which could not impose itself as a feasible means of communication. There are differences and varieties in the Englishes used in the world but what can bridge the miscommunication gaps is an increased attempt to keep as reference the native speaker's language, as described by grammar and the lexicon, and improve the intercultural perspective. These are aspects that influence the teaching and learning approaches nowadays and should be taken seriously into consideration by the teachers, the students and researchers of EFL, ESL, SLA, or applied linguistics of English.

Culture/s and Language Acquisition

Language - culture – pedagogy

To capture the very complex relations between language and culture entailed by a language used for international communication, we need to think more about practice models of both language and culture.

For this, we need Bourdieu's (1991) characterization of practice as a kind of embodied convergence between action, the social conventions by which an action is conditioned, and the individual use that is made of the same. Such practices create communities from how they share skills and discourses. A language to be used for international communication is like any other, in that it will be used by these communities in ways that advance their activities. What is different is the range of communities involved, how they exist in a new concept of space and time.

The pedagogical challenge is to understand such a language as emerging from a local culture and to rework our concept of what a culture can be. The goal should be to produce learners who do not learn to live in one monolithic target language culture so much as to negotiate their way through numerous communities of practice that international communication create. Such a goal requires pedagogies that turn the minds of their learners into areas of convergence between custom, gesture, meaning, and form.

Second Language Acquisition/Applied Linguistics – the basis of teacher's culture in teaching foreign languages

The acquisition of various aspects of language is subject to various debates touching aspects such as the notion of critical age and the relationship between accent and social and emotional identity in language learning, the production of grammatical and lexical structures according to the rules of learner's interlanguage vs. 'emergent grammars', focus on form and meaning within communicative tasks vs. maintaining the dichotomy between acquisition and learning. Other issues with immediate relevance to foreign language study include: motivation to learn and attitude toward the foreign language and its speakers (Spolsky, 2000); cross-cultural misunderstandings experienced during study abroad (Freed, 1995) or issues of contextual variability when testing language performance (McNamara, 1996; Spolsky, 1995).

SLA/Applied Linguistics research is characterized by diversity, interdisciplinarity, and complexity. The purpose and utility of this theoretical support in foreign language teachers' culture is not to find the ultimate theory that will explain and predict the acquisition of any nonnative language at any age, in any context of use, but to illuminate, in all its complexity, the multiple dimensions of the study of one particular language as an alternative to one's own mode of expression, communication, and thought.

The intercultural perspective

Intercultural communication education is not a new field. It has a history which dates back to the 1950s. The field as such is complex as it is represented by "multiple strands of research" and practice worldwide being found in such contexts as general education, applied linguistics, language education, business, health education and also the field of intercultural communication itself.

The intercultural perspective is currently sustained by the four directions presented below.

1. The urge to put an end to a *strong differentialist bias* based mostly on the use of a worn out empty and uncritical concept of culture. The risk in continuing using the concept of culture in a loose way is that it leads "easily and sometimes innocently to the reduction of the foreign Other as culturally deficient" (Holliday, 2010: ix).

2. Another aspect, which is increasingly debated, is the *individualist bias*. Researchers and practitioners working in interculturality often ignore the fact that interculturality is a construct of people, researchers and practitioners included, who have stereotypes, representations and ideologies which inform their work and of which they need to be aware (Holliday 2010: 2).

3. Cultural truths and identities are the realities of interculturality. For A. Holliday (2010: 27), this leads to "a change in the way we research and teach the intercultural". He lists the following alternative aims: to put aside established descriptions, to seek a broader picture, to look for the hidden and the unexpressed.

4. *Intersectionality*, "the interaction of multiple identities and experiences of exclusion and subordination" (Davis, 2008) is also interesting for intercultural communication education. It is not "culture" that guides interactions but the co-construction of various identities such as gender, age, profession, social class but also moods, emotions and power.

Conceptualization

Cognitive linguistics is centered on two concepts: conceptualization, i.e. the process of fashioning meanings, and the assumption that language, culture and meaning are bound up with each other. If culture and language relate closely, then linguistic meaning will not only be culturally shaped, but will also have a role in shaping culture. Language learning success entails a degree of integration into the target language culture, and language learning failure could also presuppose a failure to acquire that culture's modes of conceptualization.

Of course, we are all endowed with the same cognitive architecture and therefore perceive the physical world in a similar way. However, meaning builds quickly towards abstraction, establishing grammars to represent abstract relationships in space and time. Abstraction posits modes of conceptualization that are less well secured by a world of objects and therefore it affords room for greater differences among the meanings that we use. The entailment is that cultures, as the archives of these shared modes of grasping the world, could operate with different abstract worlds, conventionalizing these into different grammatical and lexical meanings.

Therefore, there is a sense in which learning a language involves acquiring new modes of common conceptualization. When teaching or learning a foreign language there is the need to understand the respective culture along with the culture of the specific context of communication. The intercultural approach must be sustained by the adequate pedagogy based on findings and experience provided by SLA and applied linguistics mixed with the philosophy provided by cognitive linguistics.

“Getting Through Strategies” to Achieve International Communication

The goal of learning or teaching a language for international communication is daunting in the sense that interculturality is a construct and a matter to be conceived by the teacher and the students based on rather subjective needs analysis, theories and philosophies that are gaining practical experience only now. Nevertheless, one thing is certain, i.e. teaching or learning a language needs strategizing, and international communication needs specific strategies. We are reviewing below some strategies that are of help in this undertaking.

To learn new meanings, sometimes we have to conceptualize the world differently

It is well known that second language learners will generally operate with the meanings of their first language. Based on the basic hypothesis that first language meanings will affect our conceptualization of a given phenomenon, we have grounds to speculate that the successful acquisition of another language entails acquiring a somewhat different conceptual system, and that the difficulty of this task is very much dependent on the degree of similarity between the modes of conceptualization implicit in the meanings of the languages concerned.

There must be a shift from teacher centered approaches to learner’s active role in language learning

With pedagogic focus shifting from teacher-centered approaches in foreign language instruction to the learner’s active role in language learning, a significant amount of research on language learning strategies has been done contributing to or stemming from the development of strategy taxonomies (O’Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1990; Wenden & Rubin, 1987) based on the theory of cognition.

O’Malley and Chamot (1990) view language learning strategies as skills that are acquired as declarative knowledge, which would subsequently become procedural as a result of extensive practice. Strategies would then lead to actions aiming to retrieve and store new information until this information is automatized. Because they are

automatic and declarative such strategies contribute to a lesser degree to language learning in a dynamic setting.

Oxford (1990) seems more interested in the 'mental action' aspect of strategies rather than their knowledge basis when she defines them as 'specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferable to new situations' (Oxford, 1990: 8).

Oxford's Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) divides strategies into two major categories: direct and indirect. Each category comprises three subcategories. Direct strategies consist of memory, cognitive, and compensation strategies. Their common denominator lies in their involving the target language. Indirect strategies, on the other hand, are those that support and manage language learning without necessarily involving the target language directly. They consist of metacognitive, affective, and social strategies. SILL has undergone significant revisions and has been translated into numerous languages, with multiple reliability and validity checks performed thus becoming a suitable instrument to measure the strategy preferences of all language learners, whether the target language is learned as a second or foreign language, or acquired in a naturalistic or instructed context.

The student is an L2 user

The logical consequence of the arguments raised above is that language teaching should place more emphasis on the student as a potential and actual L2 user and be less concerned with the monolingual native speaker. Abandoning the native speaker totally may be unrealistic because this model is quite entrenched in teachers and students' minds, yet some steps in the right direction can be taken as presented below.

Set Goals Appropriate to L2 Users

A practical way of moving towards an L2 user model is to present students with examples of the language of L2 users and of the language addressed to L2.

Include L2 User Situations and Roles

The basic need is to present situations in which L2 users take part. Teaching and learning materials simply need to demonstrate that L2 users exist in the world as role models for students to emulate. Making some parts of language teaching reflect an L2 user target would at least show the students that successful L2 users exist in their own right and are not just pale shadows of native speakers

Use Teaching Methods That Acknowledge the Students' L1

Grammar translation should continue to be used together with other methods like reciprocal language teaching or controlled code switching. "These activities above all see the student as an *intercultural speaker* (Byram & Zarate, 1994), not an imitation L1 user. The use of such activities in teaching may go some way towards developing the student as a multicompetent speaker rather than an imitation native speaker."

Base Teaching on Descriptions of L2 Users

Syllabuses and teaching materials could suggest intermediate goals for the students on their way to becoming successful L2 users. For example, the European Science Foundation project (Klein & Perdue, 1997) discovered that L2 learners of European languages acquired a basic grammar consisting of three rules: A sentence may be (a)

subject-verb-object (e.g., *Jane drinks beer*), (b) subject-copula-adjective (e.g., *Beer is good*), or (c) verb-object (e.g., *Drinking beer*). This L2 grammar is valid not just for L2 English but also for L2 German, Dutch, French, and Spanish, almost regardless of the learner's L1. Although these rules represent an interim stage of L2 learning, they nevertheless provide a useful description of an L2 target for the beginner stage. An additional claim made in SLA, concerning syntax stipulates that the initial stages of language acquisition depend upon word order rather than inflection (Klein & Perdue, 1997; Pienemann, 1985), a finding of major importance for the teaching of English, which traditionally spends considerable effort on the plural -s, past tense -ed, and so on at early stages.

A systemic functional perspective should be adopted

The systemic functional model developed by M.A.K. Halliday (1985a, 1985b, 1985c) allows us to relate the context in which language is used to the text which operates in the context. The SFM interprets functional variation not just in *register* - variation in the use of language - but also in *lexicogrammar* - the coding of language.

Here are some strategic actions stemming from this model and its implications:

- stimulate the encoding and decoding of text with an emphasis on the communication of meaning in context;
- identify which methods of development, which choices of thematic, mood, ideational, information structures and cohesive devices warrant our students' attention.
- ensure the text-context relation so that students can learn spoken and written language more effectively.
- devise ESP syllabuses based on the fact that vocabulary is field restricted, and grammatical structures are chosen to reflect those most frequently encountered in the profession or area of study.
- Devise EAP task oriented syllabuses making sure that the students are encouraged to work on tasks similar to those of the disciplines they will encounter outside their language classes

International Standard English

Coming a long way through various theoretical and strategic approaches of the issues raised by language learning and teaching and the international context of language use, we need to establish some reference points. The older literature deals with two concepts referring to the context of communication: *English as an International Language* and *English as an Intranational Language*. English as an *International Language* is English "which is used by people of different nations to communicate with one another," while English as an *Intranational Language* is English used by nationals of the same country for communication" (Smith 1978: 5).

Taking into account the two definitions, EIL has the following distinctive features: (1) the purpose of learning is international communication, (2) the medium of communication is in spoken and written form, (3) the student population consists of both native and non-native speakers, (4) language interactions take place between (a) native speakers of different nations', (b) native speakers and non-native speakers, and (c) non-native speakers of different nations, (5) the cultural emphasis is on cultures of

specified countries, (6) the language model is any "educated English," native or non-native, and (7) the performance target is "intelligible English" and "appropriate English." (Smith,1978). All these features shape the concept of EIL correctly.

Nevertheless, we would like to emphasize one empiric fact that was mentioned at the beginning of the present paper: communication in the international context should not become a modern Babel. Variety and differences should be carefully assessed and used only as far as they do not impede intelligibility, adequacy and correct understanding. To achieve that language learning formally needs a standard that, in our opinion, is to be established by the educated norms of native speakers. This should be the reference point in any attempt to learn and use language in international communication. Official language norms are the most adequate inputs for language standards. We need them as reference point not to get chaotic in one of the most important human powers: communication.

Conclusion

The English language is now used most frequently as a medium of international communication, and advocates that native speakers as well as non-native speakers should be taught to interact effectively with one another.

Noting that English is used for the following interactions: between (1) native speakers of different nations, (2) native speakers and non-native speakers, and (3) non-native speakers of different nations, the cultural emphasis should be placed on the cultures of specified countries in which the students are interested, or about which they have developed specific needs.

The language model, the spoken and written text which is used in the classroom, is "educated English," and the ultimate performance target should be intelligible, appropriate, correct English.

Varieties of English exist but they seem to matter very little to native speakers of English, and the best grammars and dictionaries are based on that Standard English that is freely current throughout the world. Native speakers all over the world respect the standard and non-native speakers should respect and recognize that as well, to make the international context the locus of true, correct, intelligible and adequate communication.

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