

Cross-cultural Communication and English as an International Language

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Introduction

With the development of transportation means and communication media, people have moved worldwide and communicated globally. The interaction and coexistence of people from many different backgrounds and ethnicities have turned our societies into multicultural ones. Our daily life, especially that in urban metropolitan areas, has increasingly become multinational and multicultural, producing multicultural individuals who belong to various discourse communities and affiliating and identifying with many different cultures and ways of communication. Those people play various social roles in various interacting contexts and gain multiple social identities.

In our time of globalization, we have more to be exposed to and share with than ever before in terms of culture—beliefs, worldviews, values, attitudes, and ideologies—but at the same time much of them remains different and unshared, which is enhanced by raising people’s awareness of cultural, ethnic, and religious identities. It would be interesting to rethink what cross-cultural communication is at such a time (In this paper, I use the terms ‘cross-cultural communication’ and ‘intercultural communication’ interchangeably) in relation to the function of the English language as a means of cross-cultural communication.

Cross-cultural communication

At the time when communication across the world increases in scale, scope and speed, what communicative competence is required to avoid misunderstanding arising from differing expectations in language use and diverging beliefs, worldviews, values, attitudes and ideologies? In other words, what is cross-cultural communicative competence? Byram, Nichols & Stevens (2001, 5) define it as “the ability to interact with ‘others’, to accept other perspectives, to be conscious of their evaluations of difference” in the context of the European Union. It is taken for granted that if one observes dispassionately, analyzes critically, interprets, and discusses cultural differences, one would be led to mutual understanding and respect, and becomes more tolerant of cultural differences.

I have some reservations, however, about including ‘to accept other perspectives’ in cross-cultural communicative competence. Of course we need to make every effort to understand other perspectives, but is it cross-cultural communication to accept and share his/her perspectives in entirety, which might lead you to the total self-denial and assimilation to other perspectives? It is desirable to harmonize socially by stressing commonalities with people of different cultures in the globalized societies for the sake of symbiosis, but I believe we should do so on an equal footing and without losing our own identity, critical judgment, and independent thinking. At times we should agree to disagree in that disagreement is the essence of democracy. Having linguist-friends in Israel and Palestine, the United States and Iran, China

and Taiwan, I face the reality that how complicated and difficult cross-cultural communication is and accepting other perspectives even though we can understand what 'others' think, feel, say and behave.

Observing English language teaching from the cross-cultural communication viewpoint, even if we teach English 'for international communication,' not for use in the English-speaking countries as immigrants, many ELT professionals emphasize Anglo-American culture in discourse, believing that we should make our learners recognize and adopt the discursive behavior of the native English speakers so that they will learn how the native English speakers think, what their values are, and how they see the world. That is not relevant to cross-cultural communication between people who do not share the same tradition, values, ideologies but live in different symbolic and cultural universes.

Today, we communicate beyond the national borders by e-mailing, chatting, blogging, web browsing besides speaking and writing. In these days of global networking, we are thrown into the society of deterritorialized, hybrid, changing and conflicting cultures, where we are expected to become pluricultural individuals.

In the light of cross-cultural communication, the language policy and planning of the Council of Europe is a grand experiment based on plurilingualism and pluriculturalism. The Committee of Ministers of the Council sets down the following three basic principles as its aim of language policy:

- Ⓔ that the rich heritage of diverse languages and cultures in Europe is a valuable common resource to be protected and developed, and that a major educational effort is needed to convert that diversity from a barrier to communication into a source of mutual enrichment and understanding;
- Ⓔ that it is only through a better knowledge of European modern languages that it will be possible to facilitate communication and interaction among Europeans of different mother tongues in order to promote European mobility, mutual understanding and co-operation, and overcome prejudice and discrimination;
- Ⓔ that member states, when adopting or developing national policies in the field of modern language learning and teaching, may achieve greater convergence at the European level by means of appropriate arrangements for ongoing co-operation and co-ordination of policies.

Council of Europe (2001, 2)

As is seen above, the Council of Europe aims at improving the quality of communication among Europeans of different language and cultural backgrounds so that freer mobility and more direct contact are accelerated, which in turn will lead to better understanding and closer co-operation (Council of Europe, 2001, xi-xii).

It remains to be seen if Europeans can achieve greater unity among its members by adopting common action in the cultural field to the extent that they acquire new identity as European rather than French or German. Yet it is certain that this ambitious experiment will improve cross-cultural communication skills—a set of cognitive and social skills in expressing, interpreting, and negotiating meaning.

The Council of Europe, which was founded by ten member countries in 1949, is quite influential today with over 40 member countries including Russia and Turkey and representing over 800 million people. The Council is composed of foreign ministers of member countries

who make recommendations to their countries on the economic, social, cultural and educational unification in Europe. Following the Council's recommendation, many European countries adopt the language education policy of the 'mother tongue + two foreign languages,' and those foreign languages are English, French, and German in the order of popularity.

English as an International Language

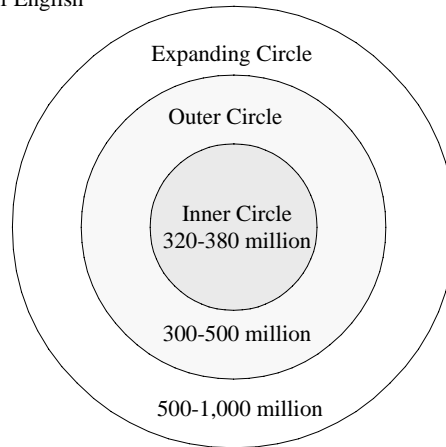
The English language has become an international language from that of a tiny island off the European continent since it was brought from the Continent 1,500 years ago. As language changes in time and space, English has changed in Britain and has transformed into North American English, Australian English, and further into Nigerian, Indian, Philippine, Singaporean Englishes as the language spread globally. In its destinations, English has developed into local varieties by adopting and adapting to local languages and cultures in its process of inevitable localization and internalization. English, or should I say 'Englishes,' has adopted concepts and forms of indigenous languages and incorporating local cultures and traditions in order to accommodate local needs and for the sake of identities.

In North America, 'potato chips,' 'lift,' 'underground,' and 'lorry' have become 'French fries,' 'elevator,' 'subway,' and 'truck'; the spelling of 'programme' and 'centre' have changed to 'program' and 'center'; the pronunciation of the first consonant sound in 'schedule' has changed from that of the first consonant sound in 'shot' to that of the first consonant combination in 'skirt'. 'Have you any valuables in it?' has become 'Do you have any valuables in it?' and even the meaning of the aphorism, 'A rolling stone gathers no moss' has been reversed in the mobility-oriented society.

In the former British colonies in Asia and Africa which have adopted English as the official language, the transformation is more drastic than North America or Australia due to the non-Judeo-Christian cultural climates. In many African and Asian Englishes, 'discuss about' is the standard usage; the tags of tag questions are invariable 'isn't it'; telephone operators say 'Come again' instead of 'Please repeat it again.' There are cases of nonnative speaker's creativity such as 'infanticipating' coined from 'infant' and 'anticipating' and 'prepone' coined on the analogy of 'postpone'.

Kachru (1985) describes the use of English in the world by way of three concentric circles—the Inner Circle, the Outer Circle, and the Expanding Circle, to which Crystal (2003) adds the number of speakers in each circle as follows:

The Use of English



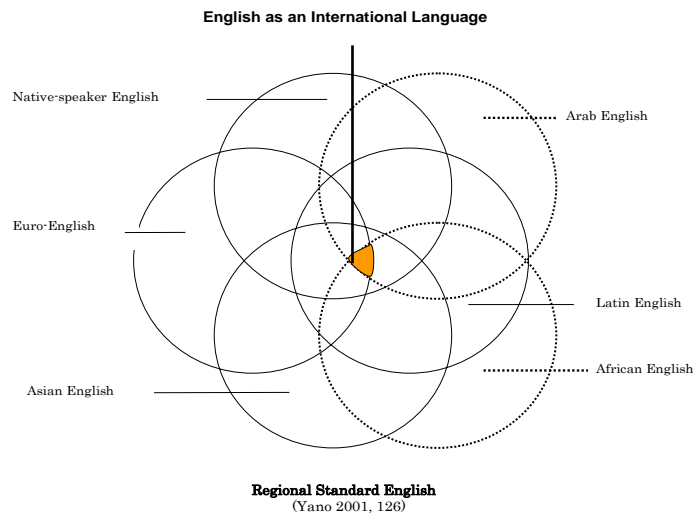
Crystal (2003, 61)

As is shown above, the number of speakers in the Outer Circle, which includes India, the Philippines, Singapore, Malawi, Nigeria where English is used daily as an official language by nonnative speakers, exceeds those of the Inner Circle, where the language is a mother tongue as in Britain, North America and Australia. Not only exceeds in the number of speakers, the Outer Circle people are gradually shifting their norm of usage from Anglo-American (exonormative) standards to their own (endonormative) standards. Kachru (2005, 12) refers to them as 'functional native speakers' and many of my colleagues in Hong Kong, India, Malaysia, Nigeria, the Philippines, and Singapore have native speaker's intuition and say that they feel English is one of their native languages. If English in the Outer Circle continues to be used according to their endonormative standards and develops into distinct varieties, will English follow the trace of Latin which diversified into Italian, Spanish, French, and other separate languages? The answer is NO.

The U.S.-led economic, technological, and cultural globalization has made English the most widely used language in the world, but at the same time its worldwide spread has brought de-Anglo-Americanization of the language. Today 80 percent of English use is among nonnative speakers who use it as a lingua franca and this tendency will continue because the number of English speakers in the Expanding Circle far exceeds that of the Inner and Outer Circles. It means that English is required to keep its international intelligibility despite its localization and resulting diversification. Here arises the conflict between the force to diverge the English language in the Outer Circle into more distinct local varieties for intranational use and that to converge the language into one that has more linguistic and cultural commonalities for use as a means of international and cross-cultural communication. The issue is left to

language and language education policy makers to solve.

Although English is a global lingua franca in politics, business, science and technology, and academia, the frequency, density, and significance of its use is increasing more within what I call 'wider region' such as Europe, Asian, and Latin America than in the global scale. In each region, standardization of 'regional English' is taking place, which has enough locality to function as a means of identity and expression of local culture and yet has enough international intelligibility to function as a global lingua franca. I classified those regional standard Englishes into six—Native Speaker English, Euro-English, Asian English, Latin English, African English, and Arab English as follows (Yano 2001, 126):



Euro-English among them is most advanced standardizing regional variety as you hear in radio and TV news, in business interactions, and conferences in Europe. It is clearly not British nor American native speaker's English which has slurs and blurs at times. It is 'school English-like,' sounding a little artificial and bookish, yet precise, clear and highly intelligible. For example, [t] of [nt] in 'twenty' and 'international' is not dropped, neither is [t] of 'water' changed to a 'flapped t' as in American English. The rhotic 'r' in 'car' and 'park' is clearly pronounced unlike the practice in British English. Further, vowels in the unstressed syllables are not necessarily turned to schwa (ʌ). These are welcoming phenomena since the spelling and pronunciation need to agree for English to develop as English as an International Language (EIL). Its irregularity should be de-irregularized for higher learnability and usability. Words such as 'Worcester,' 'thorough' and 'through' are bad examples (See the highway sign THRU TRAFFIC). At the word level, hybrid expressions such as 'Telefon junkie' and 'Drogenfreak' are increasingly heard and seen as a sign of Europeanization of English (Jenkins 2003, 42). At the syntactic level, fewer two-word verbs and idiomatic, metaphoric or proverbial expressions are used.

The survey done by a Eurobarometer study (1998) indicates that German native speakers

are top of the European Union (EU) population (24%) and followed by French, English, Italian native speakers (16% each). However, 31% of Europeans speak English as an added language while French is only 12%, showing almost half of them (47%) speak English for cross-cultural communication in EU.

Foreign language skills in the European Union

Language	Proportion of population of the EU speaking it as a mother tongue	Proportion of population of the EU speaking it NOT as a mother tongue	Total proportion speaking this language
Deutsch	24%	8%	32%
Français	16%	12%	28%
English	16%	31%	47%
Italiano	16%	2%	18%
Español	11%	4%	15%
Nederlands	6%	1%	7%
Elinika	3%	0	3%
Português	3%	0	3%
Svenska	2%	1%	3%
Dansk	1%	1%	2%
Suomi	1%	0	1%

The table shows the total proportion of European citizens speaking each language in the EU (as mother tongue or as foreign language). Survey no. 50.0 – Fieldwork Oct.-Nov. 1998 Standard Eurobarometer 50 – Fig. 6.11. EU Education & Training

http://europa.eu.int/comm/education/policies/lang/languages/index_en.html

Ten more countries from east Europe joined EU in 2004 and the percentage of English speakers must have further increased by now. How English functions as a means of cross-cultural communication within and outside EU will be interesting to see.

In Asia, more than 600 million Asians use English and every Asian city issues English language newspapers and offers radio and TV programs in English. English is used intensively and extensively, making English an important pan-Asian lingua franca in business and academic world. ASEAN countries use English in their meetings. SEAMEO RELC in Singapore trains and re-trains English teachers in Southeast Asia and dispatches trained Asian teachers of English to those countries. Asianization of English is going on to establish Asian English as regional standard English.

These regional standard Englishes are the first step toward EIL, which is the core of these Englishes, sharing basic grammar and vocabulary, pragmatic strategies, and intelligibility. My concept of EIL is ‘a loose league of regional standard Englishes with high mutual intelligibility which are spoken and understood by the educated speakers of any varieties’ (Yano, 2001, 124). EIL is not a single standard international English which has the higher prestige and

function than the existing British and American standard Englishes. Such a single EIL is not possible to establish nor necessary to do so. Educated speakers of any regional standard Englishes can communicate cross-culturally and cross-regionally with any educated English speakers, native or not, with no difficulty of understanding.

Cook (2003, 29) points out that being a native speaker does not presuppose that he or she has proficiency in writing, a large size of vocabulary, a wide range of styles, and ability to communicate across diverse communities. In all of these aspects of proficiency, he continues, the expertise of the non-native speaker often exceeds that of many native speakers. When English language teaching becomes increasingly efficient, it no longer matters where you are educated—the Inner Circle, the Outer Circle, or the Expanding Circle, but how you are educated. In the not so distant future, the issue of being a native speaker or not will be replaced by that of being educated or not. It is more so at the professional level since gaining areas of knowledge and expertise has much less to do with being a native English speaker or not. Proficiency in English is shifting from the communal factor—whether you are brought up to be a native speaker to the educational factor—whether you receive education and training. Medical doctors can participate in an international conference wherever he or she received medical training—Brazil, Russia, Japan, or Poland, but not untrained native speakers of English.

When language education raises the generation who turns Euro-English as a communication means of pan-European culture, Asian English as that of pan-Asian culture, and so on, they are speakers of EIL, a communication means of general human culture, which overarch or underlie specific cultures.

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