

From Western English to Global English: Issues in Cultural and Pragmatic Instruction

Josiah Gabriel Hunt*

Adventist International Institute of Advanced Studies, Cavite, Philippines

*Corresponding author: huntj@aiaas.edu

Received September 12, 2014; Revised December 02, 2014; Accepted December 14, 2014

Abstract This paper examines the impact globalization has had on the English language. As English has arisen to become the de facto official language of over 90 nations, the question is asked: Whose culture should be taught in language classrooms? It is suggested that cultural instruction should not be limited to that of Western nations, but must be globally inclusive taking into account diverse perspectives. In doing so, language learners develop the communicative competence needed to effectively interact in cross-cultural exchanges.

Keywords: globalization, English, cultural competence, nativization, openness

Cite This Article: Josiah Gabriel Hunt, "From Western English to Global English: Issues in Cultural and Pragmatic Instruction." *American Journal of Educational Research*, vol. 2, no. 12C (2014): 4-7. doi: 10.12691/education-2-12C-2.

1. Introduction

Solomon, an ancient Israeli king known for his wisdom, ever so eloquently penned the following statement: "The thing that has been is that which shall be; and that which is done is that which shall be done—for there is no new thing under the sun" [Ecc. 1:9]. In many respects, the aforementioned statement has a degree of truth when considering the current state of the world. Although *globalization*—the movement of goods, ideas, values, practices, and people between cultures and nations—is viewed as a phenomenon unique to the 20th century, its origins can be traced to the Silk Road trade route, the age of European expansion, the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, and the Industrial Revolution of the 1800s. Modern globalization differs in that its focus centers not upon expansion or conquest, but rather profit. Lest one view this negatively, the consumerist-fueled global movement has presented a new view of the world; that is, one of compression and "intensified consciousness" of one's interconnectedness to others as goods, information, values, practices, and people that were once limited by geographic location readily flow between communities [[19], p. 29].

Historically, such occurrences were generally one-sided exchanges founded upon imperialistic ideologies. It was common for dominant nations—particularly from the West—to impose their cultural values, practices, lifestyle, and languages upon societies that were considered inferior. Occurrences where such impositions transpired have resulted in the nativization of Germanic and Romance languages in regions where they are historically non-native e.g. English in India, Portuguese in Brazil, French in the Caribbean. Although the colonial languages remain,

how natives and the cultures transcending them use them differs tremendously.

2. Descriptive Analysis

Nelson [[14], p. 327] poses the following question, "My language, *your* country: Whose communicative competence?" In recent years, educators and researchers [4,6,16,17] in the field of second language acquisition have written prolifically on language learning, intercultural competence, and pragmatics particularly in regards to English. In times past, English was seen as being native primarily to Western nations such as the United Kingdom, The United States of America, Canada, and Australia. Consequently, language instruction assumed the form of being an insider-outsider activity where native speakers of the target language taught foreign-language learners essential skills and cultural know-how that would assist them in becoming little westerners.

Within the last forty years, however, English language teaching has experienced decisive shifts in emphasis from Western English (American/British) to International English, and more recently to Global English. Though one may perceive this as a trivial play on words, the differences that exist between the three are vast. For example, classrooms that focus on American English are generally led by native speakers who provide instruction on the target language, social practices, and cultural values that may help language learners as they (a) integrate into the target society, or (b) interact with members of the target language society. Comparatively, the teaching of English as an international language is closely related to business, commerce, and governmental interests. As instruction in such classrooms focuses on enabling students to communicate effectively with individuals of

differing nationalities to achieve a specific aim, the implicit reliance upon native teachers, which once characterized English instruction, is generally not sought after. The Global approach to English language learning differs from that of Western and International in that it (a) focuses on developing cultural awareness and communicative competence, and (b) acknowledges the validity of nativized varieties. Students in such classrooms are trained to become “world citizens” who are fully aware of cultural elements that exist in the societies they are a part. From a global point of view, cultural awareness is a necessity not only for language learners and teachers [13], but for all living in this the epoch of increased diversity and interaction among the world’s nations.

2.1. Multiculturalism

The youth of today live in a world vastly different from their parents. Nations that were once considered ethnically homogenous have become increasingly diverse in their demographic composition—South Korea is a prime example. Though it has often been referred to as the “hermit kingdom,” South Korea is said to have a foreign resident population of over 1.5 million individuals [7,10] a figure that is not only more than twice that of a decade ago, but one that is also rising. In such environments where change is rapidly occurring, children need to be equipped with new skills and attitudes that enable them to function productively in an ever-changing world [2]; the foremost being a sense of openness, tolerance, and flexibility in cross-cultural exchanges.

2.2. Openness

In the sociocultural world, as in the business, openness to change is often a precursor to success. In a sense, openness is a mentality evinced in individuals who approach cross-cultural dialogic exchanges with a willingness to see, experience, and understand the *norm* from what would be considered a deviant or alternative perspective. The practice of integrating competency based pragmatic/cultural elements into language study courses suggests that openness is a skill that can be learned and acquired.

Developing an openness to change through *other*-perspective learning permits negotiation of meaning through interactive exchanges, strengthening of reasoning skills, and learning through trial and error. It is a holistic activity that requires interlocutors to actively use their intellect, senses, and emotions; ultimately resulting in a greater consciousness of one’s (a) self, (b) communicative successes/failures, and (c) ability to appropriately interpret and convey contextualized messages in the medium language. In essence, the mindset of openness acts as a bridge enabling learners to move from one state of cognitive awareness to a next. The result is a gradual shifting away from one-dimensional views of reality to multiple by encouraging discovery, new ways of thinking, creativity, reflection, interest, receptiveness, acceptance, understanding, tolerance, and learning.

2.3. Cultural Awareness

It has been said that humans are social beings “who are born and live out their lives in the company of other

human beings” [[2], p. 10]; yet, how that life is lived often varies greatly between cultures. Language instruction that includes varying global perspectives emphasizes and acknowledges commonalities among cultures while also recognizing differences and uniqueness. The examination of commonalities and differences implies reflection first upon one’s own culture and then upon the target society’s. In doing so, the learner is afforded the opportunity to assess his or her own cultural perspectives, which then serves as the lens through which they view the cultural realities of others. Students who develop *faulty* lenses may exhibit negative behaviors that are expressed through stereotypical tendencies, superiority complexes, or a lack of desire to communicate with those considered culturally or ethnically different. Bennet [as cited in 16] states that students who fail to understand the reality of others lack the intercultural communicative-competence needed to perform in our multicultural world. What this suggests is that culture instruction should not just be about strengthening pragmatic competence so that students conduct themselves in a manner that is culturally appropriate, but also concern itself with promoting a sense of understanding and acceptance among those of differing backgrounds.

2.4. Communicative Competence

In a time in which the majority of the world’s English language learners are taught by non-native speakers (NNS), in order to communicate with other NNS [18], one must consider the validity of teaching communicative competence from a predominantly Western perspective. In times past, the teaching of such skills centered upon American and British values, culture, and pragmatic elements, which were geared towards equipping language learners with communicative *know-how* when interacting *with* or *in* the target society. However, in recent years, there has been a shift in how communicative competence is viewed, in that it now refers to (a) the ability to appropriately use language in culturally diverse contexts [14]; (b) a heightened sense of awareness of one’s own culture and its relation to that of others [9]; (c) the capacity to understand and use contextualized language as a means of fulfilling a goal [1]; and (d) the “ability to ensure a shared understanding [among] people of different social [,]” national, ethnic, and cultural identities [[3], p. 10]. In essence, communicative competence refers to the access one has to shared knowledge i.e. culture that determines how to conduct oneself in a manner “that others can easily interpret and understand” [[12], p. 15]. This calls for a shift in focus from culture-specific to globally-inclusive language instruction, allowing learners to see geographical variations of culture where the primary elements technology, organizations, language, behavior, beliefs are used and perceived differently.

2.5. Nativized Englishes

Globalization has drastically altered the demographic composition of English language users. It is estimated [18] that there are approximately two billion speakers of English worldwide; yet, of that number, less than one-fifth are considered to be native speakers. Ethnologue [8], a nonprofit research-organization producing comprehensive reference-catalogs of the world’s known languages since

1951, provides additional insight into the aforementioned statement by providing data that shows of the 196 sovereign nations in the world, English has grown to become the de facto official language of 98 nations/territories. Though language was once a means of identifying one's origin, the English language has moved away from its colonial links, currently having minimal connection to its user's nationality.

As non-native English speakers often have few opportunities to interact with natives from the target language's society, the emergence of nativized varieties frequently occur. *Nativization* refers to the process whereby a foreign language becomes creolized by incorporating features that would be considered "deviant if used in countries where the 'native speaker' varieties of English predominate" ([11], p. 109). In many respects, when "English migrates to foreign countries, it diffuses and internationalizes, acculturates and indigenizes, and adapts and diversifies, resulting in localized or nativized lexical items" that have no English equivalent [Hona, as cited in 5, p. 1]. This does not imply that one can say whatever one pleases and still call it "English," but rather reveals that non-native varieties possess linguistic identities and cultural values that enrich language usage within the context of their society. Instead of expending energy upon trying to get students to sound, act, and think like Westerners, language instruction should focus on "intelligibility, comprehensibility, and interpretability" to best facilitate cross-cultural interactions ([15], p. 807).

3. Implications

In an era in which the majority of English speakers reside in nations other than America, England, and Australia, one must consider whether continuing to teach culture in language classrooms from a predominantly Western perspective is still plausible. The English language has come to embody a rich diversity of voices, accents, pragmatic elements, culture-specific words, and varieties all of which are heavily user dependent. For one community of *users* to claim complete "ownership" of a language, on the basis of "historical antecedence [,] is pragmatically unsound thinking" ([14], p. 337). Rather, the emergence of English as a global language requires both those considered "native" and "non-native" to view the language pluralistically in the sense of English belonging to any country that uses it.

3.1. The Need for Pluralistic Approaches

Though there is a need for language instruction grounded in a global perspective that recognizes human commonalities, differences, and uniqueness, English language teachers have often been slow to incorporate such activities into their daily practices. The majority of "U.S. schools have not changed their predominately monocultural approach to teaching and learning" ([16], p. 4). This can only be to the detriment of learners, for failure to take into account the views of others, particularly in language classrooms, may lead to the marginalization of minority cultures.

Language teachers must strive to engage their students in reflective activities—both internal and external—to expand students' cognitive awareness, receptive skills, and

productive abilities. This can be accomplished by examining (a) one's native culture, (b) the target society's culture, and (c) intercultural/intracultural phenomena. "By exploring these dimensions, teachers can help students connect to the target culture, raise their awareness of cultural differences, and improve their 'intercultural communicative competence'" ([9], p. 2). An education of this nature equips language learners with the skills and attitudes needed to convey and interpret messages in the target language context, where the meaning attached to that which is verbalized or enacted may be deviant to that found in the learners native culture.

4. Conclusion

In many respects, the teaching and learning of a second language that fails to include culture study is incomplete. Yet, in a time in which the English language is being used as the de facto and official language of over 90 nations, whose culture should one teach? In many respects, how one answers this question is dependent upon the context in which the language is being taught. Distinguishing between ESL and EFL contexts, respectively, determines whether the goal of cultural/pragmatic instruction is assimilation into the target society or communicative familiarity with it. Above all, global language instruction must focus on the discovery of self, and how one's *self* can hinder cross-cultural interactions.

Acknowledgement

This project has been made possible through the support of faculty members at the Adventist International Institute of Advanced Studies. Additionally, I would like to acknowledge my wife for her unwavering support, patience, love, and dedication to our family. Thank you.

References

- [1] Amaya, L, "Teaching culture: Is it possible to avoid pragmatic failure?" *Revista Alicantina de Estudios Ingleses*, 21. 11-24. 2008.
- [2] Anderson, C., Nicklas, S., and Crawford, A, *Global understandings: A framework for teaching and learning*, Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, Alexandria, 1994.
- [3] Byram, M., Gribkova, B., Starkeym, H, *Developing the intercultural dimension in language teaching: A practical introduction for teachers*, Council of Europe, Strasbourg, 2002.
- [4] Carrio-Pastor, M, *Content and language integrated learning: Cultural diversity*, Peter Lang AG International Academic Publishers, Bern, 2009, 31-46.
- [5] David, M, and Dumanig, F, "Nativization of English in Malaysia and the Philippines as Seen in English Dailies," *Research Gate*, April 30, 2013. [Online]. Available: http://www.researchgate.net/publication/228709538_Nativization_of_English_in_Malaysia_and_the_Philippines_as_Seen_in_English_Dailies. [Accessed Apr. 7, 2014].
- [6] DeCapua, A, and Wintergerst, A, *Crossing cultures in the language classroom*, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 2010.
- [7] "Era of 1.5 million foreigners." *The Korea Times*, June 18, 2013. [Online]. Available: http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/nation/2013/06/610_137670.html. [Accessed Apr. 3, 2014].

- [8] Ethnologue, "Languages of the world: English," 2014. [Online]. Available: <https://www.ethnologue.com/language/eng>. [Accessed Mar. 21, 2014].
- [9] Frank, J, "Raising cultural awareness in the English language classroom," *English teaching forum*, 51 (4). 2-11. 2013.
- [10] Kim, I, "Number of foreign nationals in Korea tops 1.5 million," *KBS News*, Jun. 10, 2013. [Online]. Available: http://english.kbs.co.kr/news/news_view.html?id=Dm&No=96462. [Accessed Apr. 3, 2014].
- [11] Lowenberg, P, "Testing English as a world language: Issues in assessing non-native proficiency," in B. Kachru (Ed), *The other tongue: English across cultures*, University of Illinois Press, Chicago, 1992, 108-121.
- [12] Mahler, S, *Culture as comfort*. Pearson Education Inc., Upper Saddle River, 2013.
- [13] Milambiling, J, "Bringing one language to another: multilingualism as a resource in the language classroom," *English teaching forum*, 49 (1). 18-25. 2011.
- [14] Nelson, C, "My language, your culture: Whose communicative competence?" In B. Kachru (Ed), *The other tongue: English across cultures*, University of Illinois Press, Chicago, 327-339.
- [15] Nuske, K, "Global Englishes in Asian contexts: Current and future debates [Review of the book *Global Englishes in Asian contexts: Current and future debates*, by K. Murata & J. Jenkins]," *Tesol quarterly*, 45 (4). 806-808. Dec. 2011.
- [16] Peters, L, *Global education: using technology to bring the world to your students*, International Society for Technology in Education, Washington DC, 2009.
- [17] Song, J. "Globalization, children's study abroad, and transnationalism as an emerging context for language learning: A new task for language teacher education," *Tesol quarterly*, 45 (4). 749-758. Dec. 2011.
- [18] Strevens, P, "English as an international language: Directions in the 1990s," In B. Kachru (Ed), *The other tongue: English across cultures*, University of Illinois Press, Chicago, 1992, 27-47.
- [19] Wise, J, *Cultural Globalization: A user's guide*, Blackwell Publishing, Malden, 2008.