

# ENGLISH AS A LINGUA FRANCA AND SOME IMPLICATIONS FOR ENGLISH TEACHERS

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2009

## **Initial Concepts and Assumptions**

Probably between two and three billion people speak English.

These may be defined according to Kachru's three circles: inner, outer, expanding (Kachru, 1985).

But today the majority of English speakers are located in the outer or expanding circles, using English as a lingua franca (ELF).

It is used for: academic purposes; political negotiation; tourism; entertainment; business and finance; information; interpersonal relationships ...

Most educated speakers of other languages are at least bilingual.

Both centrifugal and centripetal trends are developing: a proliferation of local 'Englishes', side by side with a generally comprehensible ELF.

## **Some general implications**

### **The user of English as a lingua franca**

May be either 'native' or 'non-native'

Is typically bi- (or multi-)lingual, or bi-dialectal

An 'English-using bilingual' (Alptekin, 2005)

Is likely to be skilled in communicative and comprehension strategies.

### **The fully competent speaker of English as a lingua franca**

A speaker with a wide vocabulary, accurate grammar, easily understood accent. .

May or may not be originally a native speaker.

Perhaps it is more useful, therefore, to define the three circles of users of English internationally simply in terms of their level of competence in the language rather than in terms of where they live and whether or not they are 'native speakers'. (Rajadurai, 2005). In the centre would be the fully competent speakers, next the fairly competent, and on the outside the limited.

## Some implications for English teachers worldwide

### 1. The language to be taught

Various options:

1. One of the mainstream native varieties
2. A 'common core' syllabus; communication is more important than accuracy
3. Varied models: diversity
4. A world standard model

#### **A native model**

Advantages:

- Accepted by many teachers and learners (Timmis, 2002; Kuo, 2006)
- Prestigious
- Defined and codified
- Clear basis for materials and tests

Disadvantages:

- Not used by fully competent speakers
- Not appropriate for ELF contexts
- Difficulty of deciding which native variety to choose
- Full competence not normally achievable

(Cook, 1999)

#### **A 'common core' syllabus**

The argument: we need to teach for communication, and a lot of users of English as a lingua franca are communicating perfectly effectively with limited grammar and without standard grammatical usages.

So maybe we shouldn't worry too much about such points of accuracy in our teaching (Jenkins, 2006).

What are our priorities?

Some applied linguists claim that many so-called errors are in fact 'variant' forms commonly used by many users of English as a lingua franca and therefore do not need to be corrected.

Examples:

*She go*

*The people which...*

**Advantages:**

- includes common ‘unproblematic’ variants
- relatively easily achievable
- universally comprehensible
- at present being researched

**Disadvantages:**

- fully competent ELF speakers don’t accept or use it.
- no evidence that it represents the most common / acceptable forms worldwide.
- unacceptable to most teachers, learners, materials writers and test designers.

**Diverse, flexible models****Advantages:**

- ideologically acceptable
- allows for local variation
- sidesteps need for codification and definition

**Disadvantages**

- no clear model or set of priorities
- very difficult to teach
- very difficult to assess
- very difficult to design syllabus and materials

**A standard variety**

Based probably on one of the main native varieties, or a combination

But eliminating specific local idiom, vocabulary, pronunciation, spelling, grammar

And allowing variants that are acceptable worldwide.

Examples of clear preferences: *fortnight*, ‘*cheers!*’, *aluminum* (Gupta, 2006)

Further trends: *fall* / *autumn*; *mad* / *angry*; *schedule* (/sk/, /f/); *program* / *programme*; *zed* / *zee*; rhotic/non-rhotic pronunciation; *she just finished* / *she has just finished*; *do you have* / *have you got*;

**A standard variety;****Advantages:**

- comprises a range of acceptable forms
- based on usages of fully competent speakers
- comprehensible / acceptable worldwide

- achievable

#### Disadvantages

- its existence is questionable
- ideologically unacceptable to many: externally imposed standards
- not (yet) defined or codified

Does it exist? Probably. Evidence:

- Similarity of formal written texts from all over the world: vary according to genre, not place of origin.
- The fact that fully competent speakers can intuitively usually identify which features of their own speech are and are not internationally standard

Its ideological unacceptability may be based on a post-modernist reluctance to accept 'imposed' standards and frameworks.

But standards are likely to be based on a consensus rather than imposed by a minority.

Agreed standards are not incompatible with diversity: on the contrary, they are arguably necessary for it. You cannot diverge if you have nothing to diverge *from*.

As to codification: The present American and British English grammars and dictionaries can continue to be used, provided teachers and materials writers are aware of their limitations described earlier. But sooner or later, someone has to write reference books dealing with internationally acceptable usages.

Possible solution: A wiki, which is based on consensus, has a large number of contributors, implies built-in change and updating, is constantly and readily available to teachers, learners, materials writers and testers

## 2. Learner goals

Previously: to be as near as possible to a native speaker: the native speaker is the role model.

Hence:

Let's try to learn British or American English.

We assume that European English or SEA English usages are inferior.

Let's try to try to 'think in English', eliminate L1 from the classroom, banish translation or comparison with L1, → implied inferiority of the mother tongue.

Let's read 'native-speaker' literature, learn about 'inner-circle' culture and try to imitate it.

But today, arguably, the goal is to be an 'English-knowing bilingual': a French or Greek or Brazilian or German national, who can also function competently in English.

Hence:

Let's try to learn internationally acceptable English rather than a particular native variety.

Let's accept the equal rights and worth of different varieties of English worldwide.

Let's not try to think in English: accept that we are native speakers of our own language, and use it, where appropriate, to help us learn English better (compare, translate etc.)

Let's read any literature written in English (including, in some cases, translations); let's learn about all sorts of different cultures that can find expression through English.

### **3. The model English teacher**

The native-speaker or the fully competent non-native?

Many teachers and learners today still prefer a 'native speaker' model.

But native speakers are often limited to their own local dialect, may not be aware of international usages; and many English speakers who were originally non-native are today 'fully competent'.

Non-native fully competent speakers have the advantage of being an appropriate role model; and the language proficiency level of the non-native fully proficient speaker is, by definition, achievable.

The bottom line is that the argument about whether native or non-native teachers are better is rapidly becoming irrelevant.

What is important is the level of competence of the teacher in English, regardless of where they were brought up, their teaching ability, and their intercultural competence.

### **4. Culture and intercultural competence**

Is English as a lingua franca a culture-free language? (Alptekin, 2005)

To a large extent yes, in that it naturally expresses the culture of its speakers, and is therefore may function as a vehicle for a wide variety of cultures.

Able to represent and communicate a diversity of identities and cultures rather than imposing the identity or culture of an 'inner circle' community.

It is arguable that in certain areas of behavior, an 'international culture' is developing, parallel with the development of ELF (hotels, dress, greetings, thanks and apologies, business letters, email formats, internet conventions ...)

#### **Implications**

English needs to be used as a vehicle to raise awareness of three types of culture:

1. The 'home' culture
2. International culture(s)
3. The culture of the (native) English speaking peoples?

As part of their program of study learners of English need also to be helped to develop *intercultural competence*: the sensitivity to other cultural norms and the ability to adapt and function appropriately when interacting with people from other cultures (Alptekin, 2002).

### 5. Materials

Content: culture, situations, texts, characters ...

Culture: 'source' and 'international', not just that of the English-speaking peoples

Situations: more international in character

Characters: more likely to be 'international' or 'home'.

Texts: more adaptations of international or local sources, fewer 'inner-circle' 'authentic' texts or literature.

Language: based on international usages rather than any particular native dialect; more acknowledgement and use of the learners' L1

### To Summarize

The advent of English as a lingua franca implies ...

- A change in the concept of what 'English' is: an internationally comprehensible variety of the language rather than a single 'native' model.
- A change in the goal of English teaching: to produce fully competent English-knowing bilinguals rather than imitation native speakers.
- A change in the image of the English teacher: 'native-speaker-ness' less important than linguistic competence, teaching competence, intercultural competence.
- A change in the cultural background to English courses: 'home' and 'international' culture predominate.
- A change in materials and test design, relating to both content and language.

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