

International English: An American Perspective

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In talking about the role of the US and the spread of the use of English as an international language, I am reminded of a quote from Shakespeare about greatness: "Some men are born great, some men achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrust upon them." I am going to use this quote as a point of departure for a discussion of the role of the US in English becoming an international language. Most Americans were not "born" speaking English; one or more of their ancestors learned it as a second language. According to the *Statistical Abstract of the United States*, quoted in D.K. Stevenson's *American Life and Institutions*, less than twenty percent of Americans claim to English (Anglo-Saxon) backgrounds. The other eighty per cent originally came from somewhere other than England and spoke something other than English. The American Founding Fathers considered adopting Latin, Greek, or Hebrew as the official languages of the US, but in the end they chose not to designate any language as official. Eventually, English became the dominant language in the US, more through social custom than from legal authority. And most Americans adopted English as their language.

English has achieved international status, but not because of any explicit American effort. Americans really have not done much to promote the use of English outside the US. American publishers estimate that 80% of their English as a foreign/second language markets are in the US itself. The US government promotes the English language usage through the English Language Programs Office in the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs of USIS. But to do so, it has only 15 Foreign Service Specialist Officers (USIS English Teaching Officers) posted abroad: France, Italy, Poland, Eastern Europe (Budapest), Turkey, Pakistan, North Africa (Rabat), Thailand, South East Asia (Jakarta), Western Africa (Lome), Central and Eastern Africa (Kinshasa), Southern Africa (Pretoria), Central America and the Caribbean (San Jose), Mexico and Brazil — not a massive effort. Peace Corps volunteers and Fulbright scholars have been teaching EFL abroad for the last thirty years, but again, the number of these professionals is very small. So, if America as a multi-ethnic, multi-racial country speaks English, it is a serendipitous

accident (who knows, we might switch to Spanish). And if the world speaks English, it is not because of the modest effort the US government has made to promote English outside the US. How then did English achieve the dominance it now has, enjoys, has had thrust upon it?

The easy answer is to blame the British. After all, it is their language and their empire. The US never had an empire per se. It gained the Philippines, Cuba, Puerto Rico as a result of the Spanish-American War. But these islands have continued to speak their own languages. The American influence in Africa is limited to Liberia, originally established as a country for freed American slaves. American missionaries, especially in Belgiophone Africa, set up English-language schools throughout the regions which have educated a number of prominent Africans. But this is nothing compared to the British and the Commonwealth.

Until 1914, Americans were following George Washington's advice to avoid foreign entangling alliances. Americans looked and went west, not east. Immigrants came to the New World to start a new life and to forget the Old World and the lives they left behind. Previous to World War I, the military might of the US was estimated to be similar to that of Portugal's. America went reluctantly to war in 1914. The US senate's failure to approve the Versailles Treaty that President Wilson worked so hard on, is sometimes attributed to their desire to return to the period of no foreign entanglements. Of course, World War II changed all of that and thirty years later the US discovered it was the number one military and economic power in the world. Greatness had been thrust upon it.

Military and economic power are not enough to make people learn a language; otherwise certainly more people would be studying Russian, Japanese, or Chinese. American music, film, fashion, lifestyles, are the real international promoters of English. In English language teaching methodology it is often assumed the instrumental motivation — using English to do a job — is a stronger force than integrative motivation, the desire to be associated with the culture and people of a country. However, I and many of my American TEFL colleagues have often been taken aback when students tell us the opposite. They want to learn English to understand the lyrics to rock (punk, soul, jazz, etc) music, talk to American tourists, or go to movies in VO. Many people want to learn English to do business with the Americans. However, they often find out that this means more than cutthroat negotiating sessions and put-up or shut-up board meetings. Americans invented the business lunch, the power breakfast, the gold weekend and the coffee break. To do business with Americans, you need to know how to work with them and the past

conditional. To play with them, you have to be part of the group. Integrative motivation once again.

This casual American approach is reflected in the way we use English. Americans tend to be very tolerant of foreign accents in English. It may be that we can remember our grand-parents or great-grandparents or even our own parents speaking "broken" English or it may be that we find English-spoken with a foreign accent charming, exotic, or sexy. In any case, no one variety of English is preferred. Since coining new words, inventing jingles, company trademarks, and advertising slogans seems to be a national past-time, Americans tend to have a relaxed attitude to vocabulary and grammar. Examples range from 'Winston tastes good like...' to 'bodily go', 'Le car' to the Frito Bandito and Fantasy Island. Americans are wary of the 'pristine' accent: is it affectation, snobbery? The too casual "American" accent, a European trying to speak in a Texas accent may seem patronizing.

This casual attitude may also be reflected in the way we teach English. We expect students to use an English that is comprehensible [Full stop, period]. The variety of English the student uses is the one he or she feels most comfortable using, no one imposed by a curriculum or the teacher. Care must be taken not to confuse an attitude to a variety of English or its speakers (a sociological question), to comprehensibility (a linguistic question). This explanation, which reflects Braj Kachru's viewpoints on world Englishes and Wayne Dickerson's explanation of variability in English phonology, both are professors of English as an International Language at the University of Illinois — Champaign-Urbana, is not an excuse to tolerate sloppy or lazy English, but an honest attempt to treat all speakers of English as equals. Even though we Americans speak English — not American, we realize that English is not ours. We got it from the British, used it, and now the whole world is using it. English no longer belongs to the native speakers. So as teachers we need to make certain that:

1. Students develop the skills necessary to understand several varieties of English. The variability of English is one of the difficulties in learning it.
2. Students develop positive attitudes towards all users of English, including themselves. Dialectcentric, sexist, racist, and ethnic attitudes should be overcome.
3. Students learn that the proper register, mode, and style of English is as important as the correct vocabulary, pronunciation, and grammar.

4. Students learn English to communicate. Students need to identify their reasons for learning English and work together with the teacher to achieve their goals.
5. Students learn authentic English, not a prototype or idealized or glamorized version.

In France it is easy to see and hear examples of variability. My favorite one is to listen to the variety of accents on the longwave broadcasts of BBC4. The same is true of broadcasts of BBC1 TV, CNN, MTV, TV Sports which are available on cable. Tourists, music on the radio, movies in VO, the list goes on. Want some practice, talk to an American, we're easy-going and casual, and we'll talk back. Start with the weather.