

## World Englishes in Japan A Sociolinguistic Perspective

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### Abstract

Throughout the world today, English is now used by more non-native speakers than native speakers. This is an obvious indication that in diverse sociolinguistic contexts many varieties of English have emerged. The purpose of this paper is to discuss to what extent these varieties of World Englishes, as opposed to the notion of a standard British or American English, exist in Japan today and implications for their emergence in the future. The paper begins with a brief introduction of the historical background regarding two major dispersals of English, followed by an account of the global spread of the patterns of acquisition of English into three (Inner, Outer and Expanding) concentric circles. Following this, there will be a discussion on the perceptions of World Englishes in Japan. To end, there will be some suggestions regarding the pedagogical implications for teaching and raising awareness of World Englishes, from which it is hoped that learners will be able to make a choice regarding their ownership of English within their geographical and sociolinguistic context.

### Introduction

It is a truism that English dominates and continues to permeate all corners of the world through media, the Internet and language learning acquisition. The realization of the force of its spread is not a new revelation as John Adams predicted over two centuries ago: “English is destined to be in the next and succeeding centuries more generally the language of the world than Latin was in the last or French is in the present age” (1780). The fact that at both local and global contexts, many books, and digital information is becoming increasingly available in English, and is the preferred language of choice, can be “perceived as a mixed blessing” (Coulmas, 2005, p 220). Some are hailing English as the largest effective international communication tool in the world, whereas other critics are referring to it as Linguistic Imperialism, which eventually separates people from their cultural roots (Phillipson, 1992).

It is difficult for us to actually realize how many people know and use English. While it maybe true that based on present anecdotal statements there is a lack of empirical credibility

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regarding the actual global spread of English (Kachru & Nelson, 2009), nevertheless, it can also be argued that understanding the issues of English as an international language has practical social, cultural, economic and political relevance to teachers and the contexts in which English is used (Pennycook, 1994). This paper aims to review some of the important issues including past and present perspectives regarding the impact of World Englishes. The first part will briefly discuss some of the historical trends of the spread of English throughout the world. Following this, the various perspectives associated with different circles of English speakers will be articulated. The paper will then briefly comment on the perspective of teaching and English language learning in Japan. Lastly, the pedagogical implications of World Englishes will be discussed in the light of its relevance for teachers in the EFL classroom.

### **Historical background**

It is beyond the scope of this paper to comment on how the global diffusion of English influences sociolinguistics. However, in brief and as a starting point, it can be said that much of the literature describes two major dispersals or diasporas of English (Jenkins, 2006 ; Kachru & Nelson, 2009). The first was a great movement of migrators from the British Isles and Ireland to countries like Australia, New Zealand, America—and resulted in “new mother tongue varieties” (Jenkins, 2006). The second diaspora, encompassed the colonization of Asia and Africa, thus entering unchartered sociocultural contexts and creation of ‘New Englishes’. Despite independence from most British colonies, Jenkins also found that many former colonies, India and Africa for example, retained the English language to serve various internal functions, and maintain international business and trade. Indeed many so called ‘non-native’ speakers (NNS) many are born into an English and or multilingual environments and thus are equally as competent English speakers as any ‘native speaker’ (NS). English as a language has in the latter half of this century, become international property. According to Brumfit, (1995) “We are no longer a language community which is associated with a national community… we are an International community” (p. 16).

### **Circles of World Englishes**

Literature associated with World Englishes has become a prominent topic of debate since 1991. Today there are four main academic journals : Asian Englishes, English Today, English World-Wide and World Englishes, which are now adding to a growing library specializing in such studies (Kachru, 1996). To counteract the notion of a standard British or American English and as a result of the wide dispersion of English across the globe, Kachru, in the early 1980's, coined the term ‘World Englishes’. It represents the global spread of the patterns of acquisition of English into three concentric circles : Inner, Outer and Expanding. The ‘Inner Circle’ language traveled from Britain and Ireland, as mentioned, in the first diaspora, to other

countries where English is a native language, for example USA, Canada, and New Zealand. The second diaspora was brought to countries where English is acquired as a second language. These are referred to as the 'Outer Circle' countries, such as India, the Philippines, and Malaysia. These countries have a long history of institutionalized functions, and Kachru (1976, 1982, 1997) developed a considerable volume of work on World Englishes which for the most part focused on institutional varieties of English. Finally, the 'Expanding Circle' countries are those where English is being learned as a foreign language (EFL), for instance China, Israel, Japan, and Russia.

Notwithstanding that the boundaries surrounding these circles are not without problems, Kachru (1996) comments that they are merely illustrative. Additionally, the circles do not include countries like Ireland and South Africa where the sociolinguistic situation is more complex and there are lack reliable figures of the available English-using populations. Nevertheless they draw attention to a sociolinguistic reality of English use, the power of people's perceptions and assumptions, and the power of economics that have contributed to the dictation of English formed language policies within many of the countries listed (Jenkins, 2006). Essentially, the paradigm of World Englishes aim to paint a pluricentric picture of English as opposed to the one standard view of British or American English.

### Issues

It has been largely recognized that speakers of World Englishes vastly outnumber those speakers in the Inner Circle. Albeit liberal figures, Kachru (1996) reported four NNS for every NS of English in the world. Some scholars have criticized World Englishes and the concept of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) for promoting monocentric views of a Standard English (Jenkins, 2006). Furthermore, just as some linguists have issues with the classification of Inner and Outer Circle countries (Norton, 1997 ; Higgins, 2003), a similar dichotomy exist between NS and NNS as these terms can sometimes imply prejudices pertaining to skin colour and accents. It has been recognized that such categorizations are unfairly based on social rather than linguistic merit (Brutt-Griggler, 1999, 2001 ; Pennycook, 1994, 2001 ; Widdowson, 1994). This is further highlighted by Crystal (1985), who argues "all discussion of standards ceases very quickly to be a linguistic discussion, and becomes instead an issue of social identity". In an effort to move beyond the perceptual divide of NS and NNS, Norton (1997) argues that learners can take ownership of the language whether it is similar or of a different variety from the perceived standard, such as British or American English (Higgins, 2003). Canagarajah (2006) describes ownership as "appropriating the language by confidently using it to serve one's own interests according to one's own values, helps develop fluency in English". Canagarajah continues by stating that "valuing students' own languages—in this case, nonprestige varieties of English—helps in the acquisition of other dialects, including the socially valued dominant

varieties". Higgins, also adds that learners' can further claim ownership if access to the material and symbolic resources associated with knowing the language is acquired. Jenkins (2006), on the other hand asserts that most ELF researchers do not believe any such monolithic variety of English exist, arguing that

"anyone participating in international communication needs to be familiar with, and have linguistic repertoire... that are widely used and widely intelligible across groups of English speakers from different first language backgrounds. This is why accommodation is so highly valued in EFL research" (p. 161)

One of the most controversial debates that have been accumulating over the last fifteen years, include the publication of Phillipson's (1992) *Linguistic Imperialism*, who sees the spread of language, namely English, as a morally questionable occurrence (Coulmas, 2005). Canagarajah (1999) who takes a controversial stance through personal experience, strongly demonstrates how to resist linguistic imperialism from an Outer Circle context. Unlike Phillipson (1992), Kachru (1986), like Canagarajah (1999) and Pennycook (1998), are more concerned with non conformity to hegemony native speaker standards and language policies and more in line for appropriating English for their own local use (Jenkins, 2006). Despite these controversial issues and widespread distribution of research surrounding linguistic imperialism, Jenkins found that it has not made any notable changes in teaching and teacher education policy.

### **Perceptions of World Englishes in Japan**

According to Matsuda (2003) the international scope of learners' English learning agenda should be on a parallel with the pedagogical approaches that teach English as an international language (EIL). Unfortunately, this is not the case in Japan as, on inspection many of the textbooks and teaching practices reveal English is strongly gravitating towards 'Inner Circle' English (Matsuda, 2003, 2002 ; Kiryu, Shibata, Tagaya, & Wada, 1999). On personal inspection of textbooks in Japan, the listening sections accompanying the textbook tend to be predominantly American and also British English. Furthermore, Matsuda highlights how the JET Program, a Japanese government initiated English program, which assists English language instruction in schools, recruited all 848 assistant English teachers from Inner Circle countries. Matsuda found that curriculum developers, school administrators EFL teachers and learners revealed Inner Circle Englishes to be most favourable and perceived them to be "pure" and "authentic". This is problematic for a number of reasons, not least because of the unrealistic expectations that are placed on learners', which in turn are reflected in testing systems including entrance exams, but also because these native-like expectations fail to address the linguistic needs of the learners. Thus depriving them of the opportunity to empower them with the ownership of English (Matsuda, 2003).

Most English learners' in Japan find it difficult to have an opportunity to utilize the English

they have learned apart from the small window of opportunity to speak to a native speaker in the classroom, which is not an ideal hypothesis testing ground in order to develop one's language ability. Considering these factors, it appears unreasonable in an EFL context like Japan, that learners' are expected to produce language in especially written and also spoken forms accredited to native-like standards that are beyond most students immediate needs. While English teachers and Japanese teachers of English would benefit from encouraging their students to develop both critical awareness and communicative skills, it is also desirable to help students broaden their cultural/linguistic perspectives through recognizing 'multiple identities' of English (Kachru, 1997). Some beneficial ways to address curriculum and pedagogical issues concerning exposure to World Englishes and EIL, in Japan and English teaching classrooms in general, will be addressed in the next section.

### **Pedagogical Implications for Teaching World Englishes**

This last section will discuss the implications for teachers, researchers and professionals to teach or at the very least raise awareness that World Englishes exist. Brown (1991) was commended by Canagarajah (2006) for putting World Englishes on the pedagogical map. Quirk (1985) desires that countries that utilize English use "a form of English that is both understood and respected in every corner of the globe and where any knowledge of any variety exists" (p. 3). Again, as educators we must accommodate our learners' needs and expectations, whilst at the same time students' should also be encouraged to appropriate the system to serve their interests on their own terms (Canagarajah, 2006). Both teachers and learners can begin this process by exposure to different forms of intelligible, comprehensible and appropriate English from speakers in all circles and corners of the world. This could be achieved in many ways. One of the most accessible is through the use of technology (for example Skype, FaceTime, Youtube, and use of Podcasts and so forth). Also, emails, blogs or voice-recorded exchanges with other NNs are possible authentic means of communication which could be easily implemented. Many students today are already autonomously interacting with NNS and other language learners via the Internet and through social network systems which can potentially act as a tool in the development of one or more of the four skills (speaking, listening, reading and writing), not to mention the cultural and pragmatic lessons which can also be learned. Another suggestion for classroom exposure would be to use texts and materials that incorporate World Englishes into the text, listening or media sections. Additionally, face-to-face interaction could be facilitated by inviting various speakers of English into the classroom. Or, if there was an opportunity, students could go to some tourist areas to meet/interview the international community in a more authentic environment. In all, there are numerous pedagogical strategies that can be adapted to many teaching contexts. However, consideration must also be taken of the fact that students may need convincing that not sounding non-native-like is perfectly

acceptable, and that intelligibility is of more importance.

Lowenberg, (1993) states that “several items on tests and in-test preparation materials do not reflect usage norms in the non-native varieties and are therefore not entirely valid indicators of proficiency in English as a world language” (pp. 95-96). Still today, more often than not, assessment of Japanese learners’ English ability is usually measured against a perceived standard of British or American English. However, in addition to grammatical competence, assessment based on discourse, sociolinguistics and strategic competence could be basis for assessment on communicative effectiveness as opposed to assessment based on NS standards grammatical accuracy alone (Matsuda, 2003). This could also be reflected in the teaching materials which include a stronger presence of NNSs, more textbooks could include Outer and Expanding circle characters and references and some interesting global issues such as history, human rights, power inequality or indeed the globalization spread of English could be addressed in texts and teaching materials to, at the very least, raise awareness of these issues.

Education for teachers through teacher training on a World Englishes perspective is also essential, although merely a brief introduction is not suffice. Pre-service teachers, and current teachers who are both NS or NNS should be encouraged to reflect on their teaching knowledge and awareness of the issues concerning World Englishes that will have relevance on a local and global scale. In addition, mass media, as suggested by Matusda (2003) could be another way to reach the general public in Japan, and indeed the rest of the world, so that people are made more conscious of the role of English in a global society.

### Conclusion

Undoubtedly there are more sociolinguistic studies about English than any other language, to the extent that English, as a pluricentric language, has created the term ‘World Englishes’ which has been used in many research studies, books, journals and conferences. However one orientates towards the spread of English as a medium of inter and intranational communication and as a language in itself, one cannot deny the scope of the obvious and hidden channels that it permeates. The forces that dominate people to pursue interest and acquisition in English are bound by economic, political, cultural and psychosociological factors that continue to grow with an insatiable force.

The limitations of this paper could merely provide a glimpse into the issues and realities of the global spread of English and some of the influences determining a language learner’s choice (or lack of) in their ownership of English. The language teacher has the means through which pedagogical tools, such as textbooks and materials, technology, and cross-cultural resources concerning the spread of English, can be brought to the classroom. We must endeavour to accommodate the sociolinguistic realities of the country and context we teach in. It will be a challenge for the sociolinguistics of global English to determine the conditions under which the

benefits of an international language can be maximized, while minimizing the adverse effects on other languages (Coulmas, 2005). Coulmas also believes that “in language choice, as in other domains of linguistic performance, speakers are not always aware of what they are doing”. Therefore, it is the responsibility as educators to raise awareness so that our students can make informed choices and take ownership of their language learning and broaden their perceptions in a continuously changing English speaking world.

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