

## **Summary of Current Perspective on English as an International Language**

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In 1970 I was hired by the East-West Center in Hawaii to develop programs for English language experts from Asia, the Pacific and the United States. We created two training courses; one was titled “ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) Teacher Trainers” and the other “ESOL Administrators.” The people who came were very skilled, with years of valuable experience in teacher training, curriculum design, and materials development. Most of them were fluent in English. With almost no effort I was able to understand each of them when they spoke and they were able to understand me if I was careful not to use slang or particular Americanisms. The problem was they frequently couldn’t understand each other! The Filipinos, Singaporeans, and Indians—the people who were the most fluent in English—were the ones least likely to be understood. The other participants said these people talked “funny”—spoke too fast, used strange pronunciation and unusual intonation. Sometimes they could understand all the words being used, but still they didn’t understand the overall meaning of what was said. When we discussed why this was the case, we recognized that each of them had been trained to interact with a person like me but not like the other participants. They had worked under the assumption that if they studied a variety of native speaker English (e.g. British or American) and became more and more like that native speaking variety, they would be able to understand those from all other countries and be understood by them. It was a great shock for them to learn that assumption was false. I was able to understand each of them because I had had more experience communicating with people from each

of the countries represented. Very quickly we realized that if we wanted people to be able to understand the English of people from another country, we needed to give them opportunities to hear speakers from those countries using English. Today it sounds like “common sense” to say that students who will be interacting with Singaporeans in English should have experiences in class listening to Singaporeans speaking English. These students will also need to learn something about the history and culture of Singapore, the major ethnic groups that live there as well as the current economic and political conditions of the island state. We now realize that understanding other people involves a lot more than recognizing the words they use and their pronunciation of those words. Communication is a negotiation of meaning that we must help our students prepare for.

A lot has happened in the last 30 years in this area of English as an International Language. For some the title “English as an International Language” sounds promotional and I don’t want to be a part of any campaign to encourage people to study, learn, or use English if they don’t want to. There is some legitimate criticism by Phillipson, Pennycook, and Tsuda that one can use the term English as an International Language in a hegemonic way for neo-colonialism and linguistic imperialism. I believe that is true and I want to be careful that I don’t do that myself. To some the title EIL also implies that there is one variety of English that is “International” and I certainly do not believe that. I don’t believe there is a *world English* and I don’t support the development of one.

A major development in EIL is that Kachru’s three Circles have begun to replace the terms English as a Native Language, English as a Second Language, and English as a

Foreign Language. The **Inner Circle** represents the countries/regions where English is used as a mother tongue (e.g. the United States, Great Britain, and Australia); the **Outer Circle** represents the regions of the world where English has been adopted as an additional language (e.g. India, Nigeria, and the Philippines); and the **Expanding Circle** includes the areas in which English is used mainly as a medium for international communication (Japan, China, and Germany). Countries within the Inner Circle use English to represent themselves at all levels of education and government, nationally and internationally. Even though they may have significant numbers in their population who are bilingual, English remains the primary language for the entire society. All the countries in the Outer Circle are multilingual and multicultural with English having some official status in their language policies. In the Expanding Circle English has no official status, but it is the preferred medium of international trade, commerce, and scientific, technological and academic discourse.

Another change that is continuing is the decrease in the use of the dichotomy between the terms native vs. nonnative speakers of English. Instead there is greater recognition that there are many different types of native speakers. I am a native speaker of American English of a particular region of the United States. Henry Widdowson is a native speaker of British English of a particular region of Great Britain. We now recognize that Maria Lourdes Bautista is a native speaker of Filipino English of a particular region of the Philippines. The same is true for Anne Pakir as a native speaker of Singaporean English and Braj Kachru as a native speaker of Indian English. I'm willing to state the Yasukata Yano is a native speaker of Japanese English but perhaps he isn't yet willing to say that. I believe he, as well as other fluent Japanese speakers of

English, will be willing to do that in the not too distant future. I expect fluent speakers of English from different countries (including China, Germany, France, Korea, Indonesia, and Thailand) to very soon identify themselves as native speakers of Chinese English, German English, French English, Korean English, Indonesian English and Thai English. It hasn't happened yet but I am convinced it will and when they say that, they will mean that when they use English to communicate in speech or writing, they do so using their own conventions of communication in forms of address, to agree or disagree, to show politeness, to make suggestions, offer refusals or recommendations.

There continues to be disagreement about the total number of fluent users of English. There is also disagreement about the definition of "fluent" user of English. There is no disagreement however that the percentage of Inner Circle variety users in the world is decreasing (between 8-10% today) while the percentage of Outer/Expanding Circle variety users is increasing (between 10-15% currently). It is also clear from these percentages that English is not a *universal* language for the world. Most people do not use it in any way and seem quite happy not to use it. But those who do use it are most often the leaders in whatever domain they belong to.

The best way I know to learn more about different varieties of English is to read the creative writing in English by talented authors from around the world. Outstanding literary works in world Englishes include those by Chinua Achebe, Anita Desai, Wimal Dissanayake, Jin Ha, F. Sionil Jose, Raja Rao, Arundhati Roy, B. N. Santos, Wole Soyenka, and Edwin Thumboo.

No matter how much knowledge and information we have, it is important to remember that miscommunication is common among all people who attempt to

communicate with each other. It happens within close families and among very good friends. Certainly it is going to continue to happen across cultures with many people using multiple varieties of English. It is going to happen to us and we must not be afraid of being misunderstood or misunderstanding someone else. We need to increase our skills in recognizing and repairing miscommunication when it happens.

Before I close, let me say a word about the future of English as an International Language. I believe history is very clear in that languages come and languages go. Therefore I think English at some point in the future will be replaced by another language. I don't know when it will happen or what it will be replaced with but I'm confident it will happen.