
Opinion and Perspective

Learner Preferences for Fluency in Inner Circle English Varieties

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Within EFL education, debates over language ownership and linguistic imperialism have grown in prominence as global influence gradually shifts away from native-speaking (NS) Western cultures towards new centers of political, economic and cultural power in non-native-speaking (NNS) contexts. This evolving dynamic has fostered a wider variety of opportunities for NNS users to interact in English among other NNS users. Indeed, now that English has been established as the lingua franca of business and diplomacy between disparate cultures and societies, its continued role in NNS contexts is questioned, giving rise to a debate about the concept of English as an international language (EIL).

As English has undoubtedly grown into an international language, scholars must also consider to what degree EFL education in NNS contexts should still focus on English as an Inner Circle (IC) language. A question still relevant to educators is whether the purpose of EFL education is simply to internationalize learners, or also to provide access to NS culture and interaction with native speakers. This article asserts that both purposes are valid in the context of language acquisition, and that neither necessarily conflicts with the goals of language learners, especially if both their needs and aspirations are taken into consideration. As a result, a language education policy that accommodates both EIL-oriented EFL education and EFL education for NS purposes has the greatest potential to serve all NNS learners.

After outlining the historical context of EFL education with regards to

IC and NNS norms, I will highlight the role IC English should still play in EFL education, as well as the need to balance traditional norms in language education to accommodate NNS English varieties. Such imperatives can only compel educators to examine how comprehensively the assumptions and aspirations that learners bring to the classroom should be reflected in decisions concerning classroom pedagogy and language policy with respect to appropriate representations of English varieties in curriculum planning, materials writing and teacher influence.

The varieties of English debate

Kachru (1992) was among the first academics to articulate the concept of World Englishes, in which NS dialects such as American English and British English are challenged by NNS varieties developing in the so-called Outer Circle and Expanding Circle countries for language ownership and prestige. These relatively new English varieties develop in NNS contexts, partially or completely independent of influence from NS countries (termed by Kachru as the Inner Circle), and differ from NS varieties in pronunciation, vocabulary, and even pragmatics, according to the norms in those contexts. As a result, NNS varieties (such as Indian English and Singaporean English) are increasingly considered as valid and acceptable as more established NS varieties. The proliferation of NNS varieties has prompted academics to question the appropriateness of conventional norms in EFL education, which has long focused on NS varieties as models of instruction, when it is predicted that NNS learners are less likely to encounter such varieties outside of the classroom.

Conventional EFL education in many NNS contexts is largely seen as a product of Cold War-era Western foreign policy, as countries like the United States (but the United States in particular) employed foreign aid as a means to spread Western culture and, by extension, ideology (Vlahos, 1991). This influence has since become apparent in language education as English became synonymous with globalization, or at least modernization. In the mid-twentieth century, for example, schools in Japan used textbooks whose aims, beyond the teaching of English, seemed to include reinforcing notions that equated the Western way

of life (fluency in English being an implied prerequisite) with prosperity and modernity (Horibe, 2008). Such materials place prestige on NS varieties, which Modiano (2001) and Matsuda (2003) assert foster a worldview among learners that suggests NNS varieties have less value than NS varieties, or that speakers who do not emulate NS fluency are less capable of international communication.

While globalization has provided NNS users with opportunities to interact with the rest of the world, it has also given Western powers greater opportunities to perpetuate their cultures beyond their borders. Pennycook (1994) makes note of the spread of English-speaking mass media in NNS countries, which in turn has influenced the spread of English in general and the continued proliferation of NS English in particular. This has been seen in EIL circles as a double-edged sword; the former has helped to promote a lingua franca in the modern era, while the latter is said to skew an ostensibly international community of English speakers toward Western-centric perspectives at the expense of belief systems held in NNS cultures.

As a result, scholars see the spread of NS English as also affecting NNS cultures in a potentially adverse manner. Modiano (2001) criticizes NS-oriented language education as inherently damaging to the cultural integrity of learners. Such teaching that emphasizes distinctions between cultures, Modiano argues, is bound to foster negative attitudes among language learners, either about the culture that is being examined or about their own culture, consequently encouraging stereotyping. The topic of culture in EFL education remains a delicate one, as treatment of a culture different to that of the NNS language classroom has been seen as an avenue through which English-speaking agents of Western indoctrination can impose their beliefs onto otherwise naive and unsuspecting learners. A number of scholars have framed the discussion of culture as a debate on how best to preserve linguistic diversity (Modiano, 2001) or expand learners' worldviews beyond Western-centric perspectives (Matsuda, 2003). While well-intentioned goals, these aims imply an environment where interest in IC culture is not a valid rationale for studying English, and where all learners are coerced or subverted into learning about cultures that they would otherwise not wish to study. Such a worldview may not necessarily fit all NNS contexts and ignores

possibilities of genuine curiosity about IC culture and language that learners may have.

Conversely, discussion of IC culture as a potentially positive force in the language classroom has been scant, when such research should be able to offer guidance on the relevance of IC culture in the face of such appeal. Making note of how using NS varieties of English can serve as beneficial and motivating models for language learning can provide educators with the means to best facilitate language acquisition in contexts where English is acknowledged as a *lingua franca*, but not necessarily studied for purposes relating to its status as a *lingua franca*. Self-serving as Western-centric language education in the mid- and late-twentieth century appears to be, language education policy in NNS contexts must shift from examining the motives of external policy makers to exploring the motivations of language learners. In doing so, educators can be made aware of the prospect that IC English may still prove appropriate for the language classroom, particularly in cases where IC culture arouses significant interest with learners and can prove useful in fostering language proficiency.

Japan as an NNS context

EFL education in Japan provides sufficient examples of learner preferences in a discussion of the roles of EIL and IC English. From junior high school (and, because of recent educational reforms, earlier in many cases), students are required to study English and are exposed to NS English varieties through textbooks (Matsuda, 2002) and instruction from both NS and NNS teachers. This is primarily due to government investment in recruiting NS users from Western countries through the Ministry of Education's JET Programme. English education also occurs outside of formal schooling through a sizable industry of language schools, cram schools and private tutoring, all of which also involve NS teachers interacting with learners of all ages. Moreover, Japanese culture is inundated with popular English-speaking culture from the West in the form of movies, television, music and written media.

Pennycook (1994) characterizes this sort of environment as conducive to facilitating colonialistic worldviews that foster among NNS users beliefs of

inferiority to NS users. Matsuda (2003) asserts that in such an environment learners are kept ignorant of EIL norms by EFL institutions in Japan, when they should be exposed to more interaction with other NNS users and made aware of the benefits of such interaction.

A number of scholars (Horibe, 2008; Miyagi, Sato, & Crump, 2009; Miyazato, 2009) all make similar recommendations that EFL education in Japan shift toward a greater focus on NNS English varieties. This proposed paradigm shift is supported by the perceived greater number of opportunities Japanese speakers have in communicating with other non-native speakers than they would with a relatively smaller number of native speakers, and the prospect that NNS-related cultural content will, in Horibe's words, "stimulate students to reconsider *raison d'être* of English education, and give them a new incentive to learn the language" (p. 246).

Motivations for studying English

Often neglected in literature focusing on EIL and NNS varieties is the importance of learner aspirations for studying English. The presence of IC culture in NNS language education attracts criticism for being superfluous to the needs of learners (Yuen, 2011), damaging to cultural integrity (Modiano, 2001), conducive to fostering learner anxiety (Alptekin, 1993), or otherwise irrelevant to educators (McKay, 2003). In this and in similar literature, English study in the EIL context is largely seen as instrumental; that is, the needs of learners as perceived by educators and policymakers should largely determine why learners should pursue English proficiency. This is why the need to raise learner awareness of EIL, so that learners are more cognizant of the various uses of English that do not include interaction with NS users, is a powerful narrative within academic discourse regarding EIL and language ownership.

This narrative, however, tends to overlook that at least some learners study English, if not merely to meet curricular requirements and to attain fluency, to also satisfy an appeal that they find in IC culture. Benson (1991) noted that university students in Japan expressed a greater preference toward learning English for *integrative* purposes, which he defined as uses that related to developing one's own

multiculturalism or multilingualism, as opposed to fulfilling a societal imperative for linguistic or cultural diversity. Such purposes for using English, in that study, included making friends from NS cultures and enjoying English-speaking culture such as movies or music, and may necessitate a learning environment where a focus on EIL may not be the most appropriate approach. In this case, rather than view the acquisition of English solely as a societal need, learners may tend to perceive English as a means to fulfill personal motivations, providing them access to NS culture as well as interaction with NS users. Benson notes that these motivations create tension in an educational system where learners are less likely to achieve English fluency when their motivations are not acknowledged.

It is not clear in the literature that learners would reconsider such preferences for studying English because of a greater awareness of EIL. Educators would do well to acknowledge that, for at least some learners, studying abroad in NS countries or enjoying NS culture is more appealing or even more relevant than travel to other NNS countries or communication with other non-native speakers. At the very least, even if learners are interested in endeavors that involve interaction within NNS contexts, they may tend not to perceive English proficiency as a means to achieve such ends, and thus may not aspire toward English proficiency because of such endeavors. A focus on IC English, in terms of how learners may perceive English-speaking culture, may prove to better accommodate their aspirations than would an appreciation of EIL.

In fact, research on learner perceptions has indicated that learners exposed to or made aware of both NS and NNS varieties of English still demonstrate a personal inclination toward NS English. Matsuda (2003) referred to her own doctoral research in which learners continued to express a preference for IC English even as awareness of NNS English was raised. Miyazato (2009) documented similar preferences in classrooms that were taught by Japanese English teachers and NS assistant language teachers. It is interesting to note that, despite these findings, these scholars still recommend raising awareness of EIL instead of focusing on such preferences to better foster language acquisition.

This is not to say that such research conclusively indicates that NS English should have hegemony in EFL education in NNS contexts, or that EFL educators

should feed into overgeneralizations suggesting that only NS English should be considered valid. However, in NNS contexts where learners do exhibit a preference toward NS English, such preferences should not be glossed over to suit a politically correct solution that may not accommodate the reasons why learners choose to study English. Educators should strive to achieve a balance between NS English and NNS English—rather than the dominance of one over the other—that best accommodates the motivations of language learners and the imperatives of language educators.

Educators have in the past challenged the relevance of personal motivations, given the historical underpinnings of NS influence in contexts such as Japan. Miyazato (2009) makes a valid point concerning a causative relationship between the presence of NS teachers in the classroom and student inclination toward NS English varieties. That is, students in Japan tend to favor NS English users over Japanese English users only because of constant and abundant exposure to the former. However, this finding can only demonstrate that IC English is seen as relevant to language learners, rather than serve as evidence that NS influence in the Japanese EFL context should be minimized or ignored altogether. If anything, such interest in IC culture should be utilized by educators if the goal of language education is to facilitate language acquisition.

Pseudofoms of cultural representations

No form of language education should ever be used to place value judgments on any variety of English as less valid or less useful than other varieties. Educators need to be sensitive of the unique circumstances of their learners, especially in NNS contexts. Imposition of values by one culture onto another, a prospect that an application of EIL principles seeks to avoid, should always be discouraged in EFL education.

To this end, great care must be taken in presenting representations of any culture to language learners. Matsuda (2002) and Yuen (2011) rightly assert that EFL textbooks justify scrutiny where overgeneralizations of or excessive focus on NS culture as a mainly white, Anglo-American enterprise is present. In contrast, Horibe (2008) expresses concern that EFL curricula that focus on NNS

English can tend to treat a multitude of cultures in a superficial manner. Both findings should not invalidate use of either approach in the classroom; rather, a more critical examination of both approaches is necessary to avoid intercultural misunderstanding perpetuated by inaccurate representations of any English-speaking culture.

It should also be stated that the debate between EIL and IC English does not necessarily produce a clear dichotomy between intercultural understanding and cultural stereotyping, and that an approach to EFL education that is oriented toward interaction with NS users is not necessarily a narrow-minded endeavor that fosters parochialism or implies a value judgment of NNS English (Dogancay-Aktuna, 2005). EFL education that is oriented toward IC norms, in this respect, should always be careful not to assign greater value onto NS norms than NNS norms, even as it takes into consideration the greater relevance of the former for its learners. Conversely, a focus on NNS cultures is not necessarily a panacea for intercultural understanding, as treatment of any culture different from a learner's own culture risks stereotyping and negative attitudes if done superficially.

Considerations for language education

Conventional paradigms in education necessitate curriculum planning supported by an analysis of learner needs. That is, curricular objectives should be defined by what learners need to be able to accomplish outside of the classroom. However, learner motivations must also be considered in determining language education policy as they affect decisions regarding classroom pedagogy. Cheung (2001), for example, makes note of EFL textbooks that use cultural content as a means to appeal to language learners and motivate them toward language study. That learners react positively to content that is familiar to them should be considered important to curriculum planning, regardless of which English variety is given focus.

This consideration has the potential to affect decisions that determine which varieties of English should serve as models inside the language classroom. These models are represented in both instruction (i.e., the variety of English that the teacher uses and promotes) and materials (i.e., the varieties of English that are

represented in listening and speaking activities, as well as in written materials). The conventional EIL paradigm advocates an instrumental approach, choosing models that best match primarily what learners should expect to encounter outside of the classroom. Horibe (2008), for example, recommends Asian English varieties for the Japanese EFL context solely on the basis that learners are more likely to experience interaction with other non-native speakers than native speakers. While this consideration is valid, a paradigm that considers learner aspirations in addition to societal expectations must also be acknowledged by educators, and such acknowledgement may affect whether NNS varieties of English are most appropriate in the face of preference toward NS English varieties.

Thematic content for materials is also a point of contention when choosing between EIL and IC English, and consideration of a balance between the two extremes should also be applied to this aspect of language learning. For instance, it is possible in a lesson that focuses on English-speaking movies to also elicit from students examples and discussion of movies from NNS countries where English is used, or English-speaking movies where NNS users have English-speaking roles. This sort of sequence may satisfy learner interests and, at the same time, foster awareness of NNS agency in English.

Regardless of whether a NS teacher or a NNS teacher delivers instruction, a more complete understanding of the assumptions, perceptions and aspirations learners bring to the classroom remains important to this discussion (Dogancay-Aktuna, 2005). Educators are likely to face frustrations when the given curriculum does not meet the goals of its learners, and when teaching approaches reflect such a disparity in expectations between teachers and students. Consequently, teacher education should consider not only the unique circumstances of each language classroom in each learning context, but also the varied and disparate aspirations of the learners that are in it.

Where possible, NS varieties of English should be encouraged to foster language ownership among NNS users. In the classroom, however, if the objective is to meet the goals that learners have for their own English usage, curriculum should as much as possible accommodate such preferences. Questions of language ownership and linguistic diversity are important issues in academic discourse, but

if such issues are not immediately relevant to the goals that learners have, then the prospect of whether those issues should have a profound effect on classroom pedagogy must be challenged.

Conclusion

In this article I have suggested that the academic discourse shift from a discussion of IC norms being imposed on learners to a discussion of learners who, informed by their own goals for attaining language proficiency, choose to satisfy their curiosity of IC English and culture. Where the former tends to frame IC English as potentially subversive and damaging to NNS cultures, the latter can better foster discussion of providing NNS users with opportunities for language ownership within the English-speaking international community. It is beneficial for educators to acknowledge the prospect that learners may pursue English study for purposes that may not be in line with goals that directly promote NNS varieties. In this case, EFL curricula should seek a balance between perceptions and motivations held by both student and teacher, particularly in the case of conflicting motivations, and accommodate NNS contexts where IC English would be considered more appropriate.

I have emphasized the Japanese EFL context as it appears indicative of NNS contexts where the teaching of IC English may prove beneficial over that of EIL. That is, in contexts such as India and Nigeria (countries with language histories that tend to favor NNS English), it is likely to be more appropriate to explore elements of EIL than those of IC English, while educators in contexts such as Japan should be free to further explore an IC-oriented approach. The central idea of this article is that a critical examination of language histories across NNS contexts should include discussion of why learners decide to study English, not merely why educators believe English should be studied.

If the main goal of language education is to bring learners to fluency in a foreign or second language, education policy should also search for language models that best facilitate such fluency, even if those models exist within the IC realm. For many learners, then, it is possible that a curricular focus on IC English may prove more beneficial than a focus on EIL. Such orientation should not be

perceived as a slight against international or NNS varieties of English, but as an approach to language teaching that provides the means to best allow learners to develop their own language identities and build the international community of English speakers.

Modiano (2001) asserts that where EFL education is not oriented toward EIL, language learning becomes a process of cultural indoctrination, when the endeavor should provide a means for learners to enter the international community by acquiring fluency in the lingua franca. However, it is presumptuous to assume that all learners of English should pursue English simply for its status as a lingua franca, and consequently dangerous for educators to perpetuate a potentially suspect overgeneralization, particularly in contexts where IC culture still holds influence in how the language is presented. Rather than view this influence as a threat to cultural integrity and internationalism, such an interest in IC culture, and by extension IC English, should be seen by educators as an opportunity to facilitate language learning required for international communication.

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