
Reflection Article

Gaining Confidence in English through World Englishes

Eric Hirata

Nagoya University of Foreign Studies

On the last day of the 2015 CUE Conference, I had the pleasure of attending Tadashi Shiozawa's plenary presentation, "What does the diversity of learning and teaching environments entail? A non-native speaker's view." It was the culmination of the conference theme, Diversity: Communication and Education, as it focused on the diversity found within World Englishes. Dr. Shiozawa noted how World Englishes can change the entire English language teaching climate by better aligning the goals and attitudes of Japanese learners. In order to accomplish this, however, it is necessary to first disconnect students from the notion of what Dr. Shiozawa termed "the spell" or the need to speak English like a native. As students become enlightened and exposed to World Englishes, they can develop confidence and become comfortable in their own English to understand that everyone is entitled to speak their own kind of English.

As Dr. Shiozawa pointed out, World Englishes are slowly gaining acceptance in academia despite the fact that English only from Inner Circle countries, such as the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, is considered to be acceptable for classrooms. Dr. Shiozawa explained World Englishes with the analogy of seeing an international judo competition for the first time and noticing that one of the competitors was wearing a blue judo uniform rather than the traditional white. Though it is not the image of a standard judo uniform, it is still an accepted form. Such is the case with World Englishes, as they are slowly gaining recognition in English curricula across Japan. In order to better educate our students, he emphasized that we as teachers

must continue to expand the diversity of input that we provide to our students. As globalization increases, the evolution of English teaching can progress through the use of World Englishes.

Due to globalization, the Outer Circle (India, Philippines, Singapore) and Expanding Circle (China, Japan, South Africa) of English are becoming more relevant. Dr. Shiozawa brought up an excellent point of “global intelligibility” being a key point when considering English instruction. From pre-tertiary education, most students in Japan are under “the spell” that speaking English means sounding like someone from the Inner Circle. As a result, the goals that students typically set regarding their English ability are not compatible with how they will use English in the future. For many, their use of English will be limited to travel or business situations where they are speaking English to someone from the Outer or Expanding Circle. I believe that as Japan continues to send workers overseas to countries such as China and India, rather than countries that represent the Inner Circle, it is important to modify our curricula to accommodate student needs. By emphasizing “global intelligibility” over the traditional belief of speaking English like a native speaker, students can adjust their language goals to meet more realistic expectations. The goals and needs of our students are the foundation of our instruction, and if we truly want to give our students the English that they will use in the future, we must assist them in debunking “the spell” and encourage them to become comfortable in their own English.

As a native English speaker, I have found that my English continues to expand as my work environment, colleagues, and social circles change, and in my opinion we should give our students the same opportunities with their own English. My own English, for example, is no longer strictly American English but is now largely American English with Australian English, British English, and even some Japanese English mixed in. While initially I wasn't comfortable with this alteration in the way I spoke, I realized that how I speak is a reflection of my own experiences and background, which are constantly evolving. Dr. Shiozawa termed this growth of our own English changing from “My English” to “My Better English.” He explained this as our “language right” to speak our

own variety of English with our own accent. This is applicable to teachers as well as students since we all speak our own English. Almost every time that I go back to America and talk about my work at the “uni”, the inevitable question arises, “When did you start saying that instead of university?” My English is not the same as it was a few years ago, but it is my English, and we as teachers need to help our students become comfortable with the concept of accepting “My Better English” being their “language right.” This is not always easy, as university students have been pre-conditioned that to learn English is to learn and speak English within the Inner Circle.

In their textbooks, students rarely come across English that is not from the Inner Circle, so it is essential to familiarize them with World Englishes. With regard to English as an International Language (EIL), Dr. Shiozawa pointed out that we are largely referring to accent and pronunciation as a means of expressing what type of English is being spoken. The dearth of materials within the textbook industry that incorporates World Englishes can exacerbate this problem because teachers, as well as students, do not have the opportunity to experience the accents involved in World Englishes within their classrooms.

To help fill this need, the textbook *Global Activator* (Tadashi Shiozawa and Gregory King, Kinseido, 2015) includes recordings from Japanese, Indian, Mexican, Korean, Chinese, and French speakers, among others. Some of the listening activities involve three passages where students must decide how intelligible the English is. Activities such as these not only allow students to hear and experience a variety of Englishes but ideally will also remind them that the purpose of studying English is communication, regardless of accent and pronunciation. For most of the students, these exercises will likely be their introduction to English from a non-native speaker. I feel that this exposure is essential, and I hope it will encourage students to develop confidence in their own English and get away from the native speakerism mentality that many students in Japan have developed. They need to understand that it is not just acceptable but common for people to communicate with their own English. Before students can accept being comfortable in their own English and open to World Englishes, I believe it is imperative that they gain an understanding of

what it is and why it is important.

Most of the courses that I teach are four-skills based courses, so the inclusion of World Englishes can play an important role for students. We can tell our students to be comfortable in their own English and to focus less on form, but in order to do these things, students need to be given examples of how people can successfully communicate with their own English. By listening to two people communicating in English that is outside of the Inner Circle, I can point out that, although they will not perfectly produce native level accents, pronunciation, and grammar, the two people are able to understand each other and have a conversation. While all of my classes involve Japanese students, I believe that this point can still be made by having students assess their own conversations. In one of my classes, we do a six-minute recording on an assigned topic four times a semester. After doing the recording, the students analyze the content of their conversation. They do not look at grammar or form but examine some of the questions they asked their partner, whether they understood their partner, if their partner understood them, and some of the main topics of their conversation. Dr. Shiozawa said that being comfortable in your own English is a key element in World Englishes, and by listening to and analyzing conversations by non-native speakers it is easy to point out to students that the overall goal of successful communication is understanding, regardless of the kind of English that you speak.

Dr. Shiozawa conducted a study to see whether students who went abroad increased their tolerance towards varieties of English. He found that students, particularly ones who went to Australia, became more tolerant towards a variety of Englishes while realizing that the purpose of learning English is not to sound like a native speaker. This allowed them to become more confident in their own English while understanding that speaking with an accent is fine. Due to encountering varieties of English, the students became comfortable with their own English and reexamined their purpose for studying it. The more students experienced different varieties of English, the greater their acceptance of speaking their own English became.

While we would like all of our students to spend time overseas, we are

well aware that it is not feasible. So how can we both expose our students to World Englishes and get them to feel comfortable with their own English if they don't study abroad? Dr. Shiozawa mentioned what he termed pseudo study abroad programs in Japan, including English lounges, English hours, and hanging around native speakers, which provide opportunities for students to engage in English conversations outside of the rigid and more formal classroom environment, much like they would if they studied abroad. Where I work, the language lounge is often filled with Japanese students and exchange students communicating in English, and the students that I have talked to have often said that it is their favorite place on campus. The language lounge where I currently teach is a place where teachers are not allowed to enter, and the students focus on communicating with their peers rather than feeling that they need to focus on form when speaking to a teacher. The students often gain confidence by realizing they are being understood when they are using "My Better English." In my experience, students are always asking for ways in which they can improve their English outside of the classroom, and I have found that they are more willing to do these things as a result of a teacher's recommendation. Some students may either not be aware of such opportunities or misunderstand what these English lounges and hours actually are designed for. As a teacher, I have been involved in both an English hour and an English lounge that included teachers, where students come in voluntarily, and, in most cases, the students have enjoyed themselves so much that it becomes part of their weekly schedule. These programs set up outside of the classroom are effective ways for students to be part of a pseudo study abroad program and gain comfort in speaking their own English.

I believe that it is effective in terms of students who have attended these lounges often cite more confidence in their English, the chance to listen to and speak English outside the classroom, and being able to be understood by non-teachers. Many students say that the language lounge on campus is their favorite place to hang out. If students are finding ways to use English outside of the classroom and enjoy doing so, then it is an effective way for them to learn. They are speaking, and they are focusing on communicating rather than overtly

focusing on form, which is one major step in being comfortable in your own English.

Teaching courses that use English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) or Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) are additionally effective ways to have the pseudo study abroad experience in Japan. Furthermore, Kanda University is continuing to develop World English modules which allow students to select the type of English to listen to through a series of videos and variety of English situations. These modules are open to anyone through the Internet and can be used in any teacher's classrooms. I believe that this is the future of English instruction, and I am continuing to modify my own courses to include exposure to World Englishes. For example, with the help of *Global Activator* and Kanda University's modules, I have started to do listening activities from non-Inner Circle English speakers, some of which are from *Global Activator* and some that I've been able to record with the international students on campus.

I have also sought other ways to include listening activities from English that falls outside the Inner Circle. One example of this is that I have gotten some of the international students on campus to do audio and video recordings to share with my classes. These recordings involve the speakers having a short conversation about one of the topics in the textbook. In addition to providing comprehension questions about the conversation, I also ask the students about the difficulty of understanding the speakers and what some of the reasons may be for those difficulties. While they typically say accent or pronunciation, they usually find that it did not really inhibit their understanding as much as they had thought, since they did answer the comprehension questions correctly. As the field of World Englishes continues to expand, it is important that we as teachers utilize these types of resources to cultivate students' awareness of being comfortable with their own English. As Dr. Shiozawa said, students have the "language right" to speak and be comfortable with their own English, and I feel that if teachers can include World Englishes in their classrooms, students will begin to feel this comfort.

As teachers in Japan, we are fortunate to have learners with diverse goals for studying English, and we strive to help them develop confidence in their language

skills. Dr. Shiozawa's presentation on World Englishes provided strategies to develop how teachers can build confidence by getting students comfortable with "My Better English." I believe that the spell of needing to sound like a native speaker is an ever-present roadblock that prevents many of my students from global intelligibility. One way for me to start chipping away at this roadblock is to continue emphasizing the importance of World Englishes in my classroom.

Author bio

*Eric Hirata is a full-time EFL lecturer at Nagoya University of Foreign Studies. He has taught at vocational colleges, universities, and technological institutes in the Nagoya area for the last 11 years. His fields of research include group dynamics, collaborative learning, and Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL).
eric@nufs.ac.jp*

Received: January 18, 2016

Accepted: April 30, 2016