Chapter 14

English as a multicultural language for international communication in Asia [1]

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As most Asian countries recognise English as an indispensable language for intranational and/or international communication, they are increasingly committed to strengthening and improving English language teaching (ELT). In parts of Asia where English is an official language and ELT succeeds, people may speak English among themselves. Wherever this happens, a set of indigenous language patterns develops. Similar situations have also been witnessed in countries where English is taught and learned as an international language. We need to fully understand these aspects of present-day English if we are to take advantage of English as a language for communication. One important issue is mutual communicability among speakers of different varieties of English. Based on the observation that a common language is not a uniform language, but rather a diverse language, this chapter argues that a way of dealing with English as a multicultural language for worldwide communication is not restrictive conformism but diversity management.

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Introduction: English as a multicultural language

The complexity of globalisation has led us to recognise the importance of our increased competencies in various kinds of languages and the importance of our expanded knowledge about various aspects of language, culture, and communication. At the same time, the role of English as an intermediary language is continuously emphasised. Yet the important thing about English is that it is a pluricentric and multicultural language, rather than a unicentric and monocultural one.

Contemporary English has two functional and structural characteristics that few to no other languages have developed in the history of linguistic evolution. Functionally speaking, English has conspicuously spread among non-native speakers, as a sizable number of Asian, African, Pacific, and Caribbean countries have designated it as their official, associate official, or working language. As such, English is used in 70 countries (*i.e.* around 36%) of the 194-state world (Honna, 2003). Additionally, in more than a hundred countries students are learning English as a language for international communication.

At the same time, the spread of English does not assure the transplantation of American or British English throughout the world. Rather, English is becoming a conspicuously diverse language. Everyone speaks English (as any other language) with an accent and with their own cultural influences. As Americans speak American English and Britons British English, Asians, Europeans, Africans, and South Americans speak English with their own characteristics. The internationalisation of English has caused its diversification. Indeed, when Japanese speak English with Koreans, there is no room for American or British English and culture. It would be clumsy if the Japanese and the Koreans had to conform to American ways of behaviour while speaking English to each other. The same is true with English conversations between Turks and Brazilians, French and Swedish people, and any other interactions that occur on the global stage. What happens is that Japanese behave like Japanese and speak English in Japanese ways, as do Koreans, Chinese, Philippines, Russians, Italians, Danes, Arabs, and everybody else. This demonstrates that English is now a multiculturally variegated language. Tolerance toward varieties is a condition for using English as a global language. We need to be convinced of this logic and prepared to positively deal with its various ramifications.

Diffusion and adaptation

In order to understand these English language trends, it is important to fully comprehend the relation of diffusion and adaptation. If things are to spread, they must easily mutate. For example, there would be no McDonald's restaurants in India if they insisted on offering beef hamburgers. Cows are holy and beef is taboo in Hinduism, the religion of many people in India. Yet, McDonald's restaurants in Mumbai (Bombay) and other cities are popular, because they serve chicken or mutton burgers, an indispensible change to assure the spread of this fast-food chain in a place whose culture is so different from that of the country of origin.

This principle can apparently be applied to language, too. The internationalisation of English prompts the diversification of English. In other words, diversification is the "price" we have to pay for the internationalisation of English and it is important to recognise that English has become an international common language simply *because of* its development as a culturally diverse language.

The popular assumption might state that a common language should be a uniform language. But this is not true. A common language cannot be but a diverse language; a lot of allowances have to be made, and differences accepted. Conversely, if American standards of English pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, semantics, pragmatics, and sociolinguistics were imposed upon all users of English, it would never have become an international common language.

World Englishes

The diffusion and diversification of English is dynamically conceptualised as "world Englishes", as defined by the author (Honna 1999, 2003; 2008). Perhaps, it is the first language to be represented in a plural form in the history of linguistic dynamism (but this could happen with other languages too, on a smaller scale; moreover, and even if the wording might not have been used back then, similar realities existed, for instance, in Europe's Middle Ages, when Latin was the *lingua franca* of educated population groups). Behind the plural form of Englishes is an interesting idea about English as a world-wide language. The idea suggests that all varieties of English that have developed or are being developed in various parts of the world are equally valid and viable in linguistic and cultural terms – the philosophy of English is under constant examination, evaluation, and amendment.

Kachru (1992) classified these plural forms of English into three concentric groups: *a)* inner-circle varieties spoken by people in the United Kingdom, United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa, *b)* outer-circle varieties formed by Asian and African speakers whose countries were former colonies of Britain and the United States, and *c)* extended-circle varieties employed by learners in all other countries. Outer-circle varieties in Asia and Africa are often called "New Englishes" (Platt, Weber and Ho, 1984; Pride, 1982).

The idea was formalised by the publication of the *World Englishes* journal by Blackwell Publishers, Ltd. in 1982 and the organisation of the *International Association of World Englishes* (IAWE) that same year. Braj Kachru and Larry Smith were instrumental in materialising these two entities. A little earlier, Kachru (1976) succinctly depicted the contemporary situation of world Englishes based on his Indian English studies. Smith (1983) also covered most essential domains we should address to further substantiate the idea of world Englishes (or English as a multicultural language for international communication).

Using English in non-Anglo-Saxon cultural contexts is the result of a variety of sociolinguistic conditions. The most important prerequisite is the fact that English is spreading among non-native speakers. There are more non-native speakers using English with other non-native speakers than native speakers using English with other native speakers or non-native speakers. My former students report that they now tend to use English more frequently with Asian business people than with Americans or British people. This situation is illustrated in Figure 14.1. (Honna, 1999).

Figure 14.1. **Communication between speakers of English**
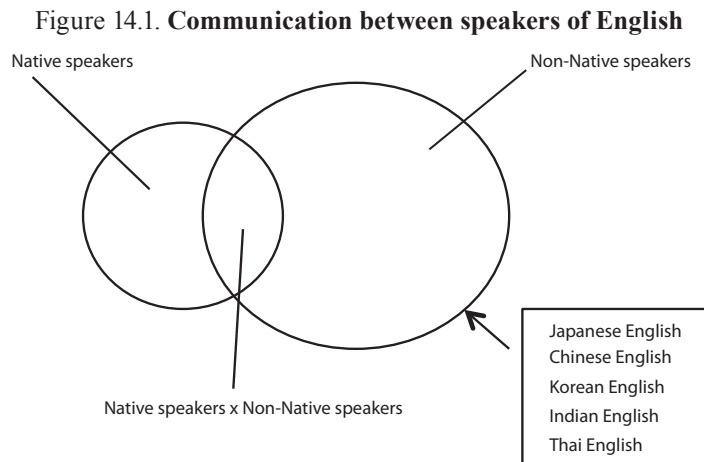
Source: Honna, 1999.

English as an Asian language

The spread of English as a language for multinational and multicultural communication employed by non-native speakers thus implies that English is becoming more and more de-Anglo-Saxonised throughout the world. This creates new structural, pragmatic, and functional dimensions in contemporary English.

As a matter of fact, English has become a very important language in Asia. It is a working language for intranational and international communication in many parts of the region. Bolton (2008) estimates that in Asia 800 million people speak English for various purposes, a number that is far larger than the combined populations of the United States and Britain – where English is the native language for most citizens**.**

Many Asian nationals use English more frequently with other Asians than with people from the UK, the United States or other "native speaker" countries. As we are expected to have increasing contact with people from other Asian countries in the fields of business, tourism, overseas studies, environmental protection or regional cooperation, it is about time for us to start exploring issues in English communication in Asia.

The multiculturalism of English as an Asian language

However, Asian varieties of English are tremendously diverse with different social roles attached to the adopted language. Each country has used the language within its traditional cultural and linguistic contexts, thereby producing a distinct variety characterised by unique structural and functional features. Proficiency levels also differ with countries where English is a non-native language producing more skilful speakers than their counterparts where English is designated as an international language (EIL).

As languages come into contact with each other, they get mingled in many interesting ways, leading to diversification. The notion of one language as an independent system is only an imaginary creation. This has become increasingly obvious in Asian English studies, where cross-linguistic analysis is a key to a better understanding of a wide range of new patterns.

As a matter of fact, the forms and uses of English in Asia are enormously influenced by the Asian languages. While the influence often gets blurred in syntactic superposition,

it is visible in lexical and idiomatic borrowing. Here are some examples of the use of the concept of "face" in Singapore and Malaysian English, where Chinese features are apparently reflected.

"Face" is extremely important in Asian societies. In the oriental value system, "face" refers to an individual's pride, dignity, honour, prestige, and even identity. From the Chinese origin, two expressions (namely losing and saving face) are used in English throughout Asia, such as:

1. I lost a lot of face by being unable to answer this question.

2. This saved me a great deal of face.

In Singapore and Malaysian English, however, there are a lot more expressions related to "face" such as:

1. You failed again… I don't know where to hide my face.

2. Why did you treat me like that the other night? I've really got no face now.

3. You must go to his son's wedding dinner. You must give him face.

4. Since I don't know where to put my face in this company, I might as well leave and save what little face I have left.

5. Just tell him what you really think. There is no need to give him any face.

6. Let's ask Datok Ali for help. He knows the right people and he's got a lot of face.

In this connection, it has to be stressed that although these phrases are not necessarily part of British or American English, they are not to be denigrated or stigmatised. If they are useful for certain purposes in Singapore and Malaysian societies, they tend to be deeply rooted there. Just because non-native speakers do not use English the way native speakers do, this does not mean they are using the language incorrectly. This principle applies to many other forms of English as an Asian language. Actually, many Asians seem to have little difficulty understanding these Singaporean and Malaysian expressions rendered into English, because they have similar phrases in their regional and national languages.

At this juncture, it is important to note that teachers do not teach local varieties of English at school. They teach "International Standard English," whatever that may refer to, in the classroom in Singapore and Malaysia. But if people are compelled or expected to speak English, it is natural that they should do so only in the way which fits them best. The same phenomenon can occur in countries where English is taught as an international language if we encourage our students to speak English, as we must for various obvious reasons.

Expanding the capacity of English as a multicultural language

As the spread of English progresses, it is bound to reflect a diversity of disparate cultures. Every language has an indefinite capacity for structural and functional modulation and expansion, and there is no language that has used up its inherent potentiality. The portion that the native speakers have yet explored is very limited (see Figure 14.2.; Honna, 2008), leaving a lot to be exploited by non-native speakers. On a global scale, non-native speakers explore those areas based on their own linguistic, cultural, and cognitive experiences.

Figure 14.2. **The capacity of English**
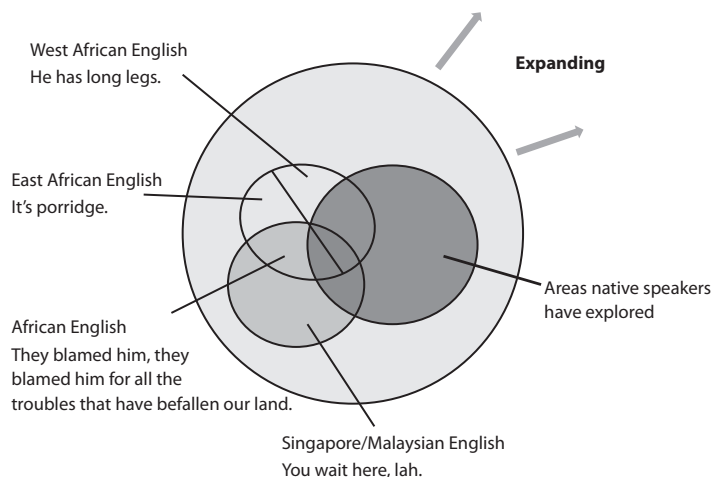
Source: African examples are from McArthur, ed., 1992: 22.

For instance, Singapore and Malaysian English, although sharing much with native speaker English, introduces the use of dozens of different sentence-final particles, like "Wait here, lah." The rationale for these expressions is that they express a wide range of delicate shades of meaning, in other words, the ethos of the speakers. African speakers also enrich the language with an array of lexical and syntactic creations. The African expressions here are representative of many metaphorical innovations New Englishes can contribute to the English language. As for any language, there is a myriad of new patterns being constantly added to English, and the capacity of English is invariably expanding.

English across cultures and diversity management: The need for a pedagogical response

The worldwide spread of English has thus not led to the global acceptance of American or British English as the norm of usage. Rather, the global spread of English has prompted its multicultural diversification. One of the implications, or rather complications, of these multicultural enrichments continuously added to the English language, concerns mutual communicability among speakers of world Englishes. This is an actual and immediate problem as well as a potential future concern. Cases of zero-/mis-communication in intervarietal interaction are abundant.

In fear of a new Babel, people often cry for a return to American English or British English as the standardised norm. However, it is important to recognise that standardisation or eventually re-standardisation of the de-standardised standards is not a plausible way of dealing with the current multiculturality and multiformalism of world Englishes. If we are to establish English as a multicultural language and use it as an international language, we have to address the issue of diversity management pedagogically.

I have explored issues of diversity management in terms of a pedagogical concept of intercultural literacy. According to my definition, intercultural literacy (Honna, 2003):

1. is the attitude, preparedness, and competence to express one's message and under-stand others' appropriately in a cross-cultural encounter;

2. involves an ability to adjust to intercultural differences in a mutually beneficial manner;

3. is the literacy of the fourth kind after basic literacy (reading and writing plus arithmetic), information literacy, and media literacy; and

4. is expected to be introduced to the school curriculums across disciplines from primary, through secondary, to tertiary education.

I have also placed teaching awareness of language as a fundamental component in intercultural literacy. The role of language awareness in intercultural literacy is based on the assumption that a major part of language awareness is to improve sensitivity to, and tolerance of linguistic diversity, as is witnessed in Hawkins (1987, 1992) and many others.

The key is the improved sensitivity to, and tolerance of linguistic diversity (that may occur intralingually and/or interlingually). An understanding of linguistic diversity can be developed most effectively through teaching how language is designed (cognitive linguistics) and how people use language (sociolinguistics). It is essential that these fundamental elements of language awareness should be incorporated into teaching English as an international language (TEIL).

Since I discussed the importance of cognitive linguistics in teaching awareness of language elsewhere (Honna, 2008), a mention will be made here of some of the sociolinguistic nature of language to show that diversity should not be such a cause of confusion and disorder as it is often believed to be. If English is to be taught as an international language as well as a multicultural language, pedagogical programmes should be developed to address these issues.

Human beings tend to be wary of differences. They suspect that differences can hinder and diminish order and harmony. But differences are everywhere. Every language is a variegated one. If we are made aware that we, users of our native or first language, need to have many different variables and that we are capable of managing them properly, we will hopefully be able to see intervarietal differences from an enlightened perspective (see della Chiesa, Chapter 25, this volume).

Thus, a first awareness issue in our TEIL is diversity in language: why we develop different ways of saying one and the same thing in our language. Studies of language in social contexts indicate that linguistic diversity is a reflection of the social reality in which language is used. People use language to express their social position, their relationship to addressees, and their perception and understanding of the social context in which the discourse is conducted. Linguistic diversity increases with the complexity of social organisation and relationship.

Yet, human beings choose the most appropriate unit out of their repertory of a huge number of different forms meant for one semantic denotation. Every person has chains of these bundles that constitute a wide range of linguistic units characterised by phonological, through morphological and syntactic, to (dia)lectal and linguistic features. The speech act is represented as a consecutive series of constant choices of linguistic formatives. The choice is governed by the sociolinguistic variable rules: Who Says What to Whom When/ Where (How). Socialisation is the process in which young children learn these rules, which are incorporated into the socio-cultural norm of behaviour in a given society.

In regards to Japanese students of English, Suzuki (1973) provides a good example. Unlike English and many other languages, there are several terms for first person singular and second person singular in Japanese. Japanese speakers always have to choose one of them in accordance with the social relation they maintain with their addressee, with the relationship built on the social concepts of family structure, power, seniority (age, position), familiarity, and formality.

A simple pair of *watashi* (I) and *anata* (you) is often taught to foreign students of Japanese as the first person singular and the second person singular, respectively, but it is unlikely that Japanese can get by with them in their daily lives. The Japanese system of personal terms is a symbolisation of the social organisation with reference to human relationships like kinship, friendship, and others. We need these different words because we are expected to express delicate shades of socio-psychological meaning appropriately. On a daily basis, we are capable of dealing with these differences. We live in diversity. We cannot live without it.

This ability to accommodate intralingual differences can be extended to the interlingual situation. Linguistic conformism is not wanted. It is important for students of English to understand, based on their mother tongue experience, that differences are valued, and, absolutely cannot be discarded. This concept of linguistic diversity should be extensively explored in TEIL.

For instance, there are hundreds of differences between American English and British English. These differences can often be a cause of serious communication problems. A NATO military exercise is a case in point. An American soldier declaring "We've cleared the wood," meaning "the wood is safe," could be interpreted by a British counterpart as "We've come out of the wood" (Reeves and Wright, 1996, p. 1). However, differences across the Atlantic Ocean are normally taken for granted. Thus, flat/apartment, lift/ elevator, ground floor/first floor coexist in the lexicon of English. Idioms are no exception, for example: a storm (tempest) in a teacup, blow one's own trumpet (horn). Grammar varies, too: I demanded that he should leave/I demanded he leave. The saying "A rolling stone gathers no moss" is interpreted positively in the United Kingdom and negatively in the United States, and from one speaker to another.

Differences are conspicuous in many semantic domains. Take automobile terms for example (Table 14.1). To my knowledge, there has been no serious talk between Americans and Brits about eliminating differences in an effort to unify them. They get along with the differences, simply accepting them as part of each other's linguistic idiosyncrasies.

Table 14.1. **Automobile terms**

American	British
hood	bonnet
trunk	boot
fender	bumper
dimmer	dip switch
stick shift	gear lever
dashboard	fascia
blinker	indicator
muffler	silencer
windshield	windscreen

These attitudes could hopefully be applied to the pedagogy of English as a multicultural language for intercultural communication so that intervarietal differences are accepted as a fact of life as well as a resource of mutual self-enrichment. A useful pedagogical approach seems to be "intercultural accommodator," not "cultural assimilator" (Honna, 2010). In a

larger sense, the issues involved in diversity management in world Englishes are parallel to those in symbiotic societies being created in many parts of the world. In view of these trends, our efforts to establish English as a multicultural language are expected to identify and analyse actual and potential issues of our changing society and propose ways to solve its urgent problems based on the spirit of mutual benefit and cooperation.

Conclusions

The concept of English as a multicultural language is based on the fact that English is bound to stay an indispensable language for intranational and/or international communication in Asia and other parts of the world. This paper dealt with issues in intervarietal communicability among speakers of different varieties of English. As a pedagogical response to these actual and potential inconveniences caused and to be caused by the diffusion of English as a multicultural language, teaching diversity management by means of educated awareness of language was explored as an indispensable component in intercultural literacy/ awareness.

While English has a centrifugal tendency for intracultural and intranational purposes, it also has a centripetal force for intercultural and international engagements. When speakers of English converge for information exchange and mutual understanding, they are strongly motivated to adjust their respective speech manners. They are eager to learn how to do this. This is where diversity management training comes in, to help them help themselves in this endeavour. These pedagogical efforts are needed to improve our competence in using English across cultures.

Note

1. This is a slightly revised version of a paper presented at the OECD-Japan Seminar held at Aoyama Gakuin University, 24 October 2008.

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