A Second Look at the Question of the Ownership of English

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A response to a previous Teacher’s Edition article asserting the growing international character and neutrality of English.

In the article “A Vietnamese Perspective on World Englishes” in Teacher’s Edition 4, December 2000, pages 26-32, author Tran Thi Lan comments: “It is reasonable to claim that when a language [the English language] becomes international in character, it cannot be bound to any one culture.” Lan seems to agree with Larry Smith that English has now become neutral or culture-free, and that it belongs to all those who use it.

While Lan’s article offers many facts about the global use of English, I am afraid that her assumption about English as a neutral medium of international communication is limited in many ways. In this article, I will address this issue with a different perspective, in the process answering the following questions: Has English truly become an international language or a lingua franca, given the global spread of English and the varieties of English used in the world today? What kind of English has become international? Who actually “owns” the English language—native speakers or all those who use English? What does it imply for English language educators if this question about the “ownership” of English is answered?

Which Variety of English Is Used in International Settings?

Assumptions About International English

When the term “international language” is attributed to English, it usually suggests the concept of neutrality, universality, or culture-freeness. If we believe that English is an international language or lingua franca, we accept the fact that English is now common property. That is, everyone in the world, regardless of their cultural and linguistic differences, can use English as a neutral and transparent medium of communication. English has become a pragmatic language, a medium that everyone can use globally to gain access to business, science and technology.

This assumption about the global characteristics of English and its neutral benefits to the world is revealed in some scholars’ writings. As Lan notes in her article, L. Smith, for example, believes that English has become a universal language and that the reason it currently appeals to many speakers of other languages is primarily because it is a tool to access technology and civilization rather than that it is a connection to the cultural values of native English-speaking countries. Smith comments (p. 32):

Although the dominance of English in commercial, technical, scientific, and political spheres has led many countries to adopt the language as the means of wider communication with the world, its use in these contexts does not indicate a desire to imitate the culture, philosophy, or lifestyle of native-speaking countries. It is [thus] argued that the use of English in these spheres should not be governed by the phonological, linguistic, or cultural “chauvinism” of native speakers.

Platt, Weber, and Lian think that the widespread use of English is because many of the nations which were once British colonies have realized the importance of English “not only as a language of commerce, science and technology but also as an international language of communication” (p. 1). They introduce the issue of “new Englishes” currently used in the former colonies or territories of Great Britain and the United States, such as India, Singapore, the Philippines, Nigeria, and Ghana. Well-known examples of “new Englishes” include Indian English, Philippine English, Singaporean English, and African Englishes. “New Englishes,” they argue, often have a high status in these nations because they are used regularly for everyday communication.

Kachru recognizes the existence of varieties of English and believes that there is a repertoire of models of English and that localized innovations in English have pragmatic bases because native speakers of English...
“seem to have lost the exclusive prerogative to control its standardization” (p. 30). English, according to Kachru, “has acquired a neutrality in a linguistic context” and “true, English is associated with a small and elite group: but it is in their role that the neutrality of a language becomes vital” (p. 9).

**Critical Perspective on International English**

For these scholars, the issue of the ownership of English is clear: English belongs to all those who use it. However, a critical examination of the linguistic, sociocultural, and political uses of English in an international context shows that there is another side to the picture.

Despite the fact that English has been used as an official or secondary language in many regions other than the BANA countries (Britain, Australia, North America), and that localized norms of English in many regions of the world should be recognized and accepted in their national contexts, reality shows there is only one dialect of English—Standard English. This dominates the international context. Furthermore, the norms of Standard English are set up by its native speakers.

Before I clarify my argument, let me make clear my definition of Standard English. According to Quirk, “standard” is the natural language that educated English native speakers use. It is “an endemic feature of our [the native speakers of English] mortal condition...people feel alienated and disoriented if a standard seems to be missing” (p. 30).

Strevens has a more flexible definition. He points out the difference between “dialect” and “accent.” For him, speaking Standard English does not mean speaking English with an RP (Received Pronunciation) or GA (General American) accent. He argues that Standard English is not a priori a description of English as used by a group of native speakers. It may not be the most commonly-occurring form of English and should not be imposed upon those who use it. He suggests that Standard English be defined as (p. 80):

> A particular dialect of English, being the only non-localized dialect, of global currency without significant variation, universally accepted as the appropriate educational target in teaching English, which may be spoken with an unrestricted choice of accent.

Given that there are many varieties of English, is every variety of English spoken around the world easily or mutually intelligible? I would agree with Peter that the answer is “no.” In international communication, notes Pakir, any user of English must be responsible for intelligibility if she wants to convey her message. Although the issue of intelligibility in cross-cultural and cross-linguistic contexts deserves more research, as Kachru points out, I assume that intelligibility means to use a norm of English that can help its user make her meaning understood and avoid communication breakdowns.

**Norms for International English in Speaking**

In international settings, non-native users of English usually adopt a standard norm of English, as defined by Strevens, though they may use other non-standard norms within their own community. This phenomenon has been noted by Strevens in the example of an Indian doctor who communicates with professional colleagues at an international medical conference. He uses a type of “Indian English” in which a Standard English dialect is spoken with a regional accent (Strevens, cited in Kachru, pp. 140-141). This situation differs from one in which an Indian clerk uses non-standard English to communicate daily with his local clients.

The same phenomenon happens with Singaporean English. For example, a Chinese-born Singaporean businessman can use “Singlish” to communicate effectively with his Malaysian-born friend. But does he use the dialect of English he uses at home to speak at an international conference where the participants are from other countries? Or must he switch to a more universal type of English? It is very likely that he would maintain his own accent, but at the same time use vocabulary and grammar that are familiar to and accepted by his international counterparts.

In an international context, the need to standardize one’s speech can happen even to native English speakers. Peter recalls an experience in Leningrad where he was approached by a Scottish lady who started speaking to him in a language he did not immediately recognize. She realized he did not understand her, slowed down, and was then able to communicate with him (an American) quite successfully (pp. 38-39).

For another example, an Australian colleague in our class told me that when she spoke with an American tourist she had recently met, she had to “slightly change” her usual use of grammar and vocabulary, making sure that the language she used was understood by her American friend. In such situations, English speakers switch to a standardized form of English.
Norms for International English in Writing

Standard English is even more obvious in written texts. There is really only one variety of English written in the Times of London, the New York Times, the Age, the South China Morning Post, and the Vietnam News. Except for trivial difference in word usage, the same kind of English is found in all 3,000 English-language newspapers in India. It is also found in newspapers in Singapore and the Philippines. If an author from Nigeria, Japan, or Cambodia wants to write a book in English and wants her work to be read by an international audience, she must to a certain extent adopt the linguistic style and norms set by native English speakers.

International English and Sociocultural Norms

Furthermore, language or communication is inextricably linked with culture (Halliday, Brick, Tomalin). Effective communication in English requires non-native speakers not only to use grammar, vocabulary, and other linguistic features appropriately, but also to behave by an appropriate sociocultural norm. Gumperz observed that linguistic competence is only “the speaker’s ability to produce grammatically correct sentences.” Linguistic competence is not sufficient for a speaker to achieve communication. In addition, he must have communicative competence: the ability to “select from the totality of grammatically correct expressions available to him, forms which appropriately reflect the social norms governing behavior in specific encounters” (p. 205). Halliday also argues that one knows a language not only in knowing the syntax, but also in knowing how to exploit various functions of social semiotics via choices regarding language used (p. 389).

Given that social norms vary across cultures, if one participant in cross-cultural communication is not aware of sociocultural differences, a communication breakdown may occur. Brick, for example, reports that the English spoken by Vietnamese immigrants in Cabramatta, Sydney, has caused serious misunderstandings between them and the Australians in their neighborhood (p. 2). A Vietnamese person might say to an Australian shopkeeper, “Give me a packet of cigarettes” or “I want a kilo of pork.” These are direct translations from Vietnamese polite requests. The Australian, however, thought the Vietnamese person was rude because of the lack of Standard English “softeners” such as “Could I have?” He was so angry that he raised his voice.

Another incident published in the Vietnam News also shows that non-native speakers should adapt to cultural norms of native speakers to avoid misunderstanding (p. 4): Thu Ha was a Vietnamese woman working for an American company in which English is the medium of communication. One day, the boss asked her if she was satisfied with her salary. Ha thought, “I really want a raise because of the amount of work I do.” But she could not bring myself to say what she wanted. She just smiled and her salary remained unchanged.

What happened is that Ha failed to behave according to the shared culture of the BANA countries by making a direct request for a raise. She stayed within a Vietnamese principle of politeness, in which a smile is often used to express embarrassment or an unpleasant emotion, or to hide the truth, ignorance, disappointment, pride, or wrongdoing. Ha carried a Vietnamese cultural norm into a conversation with a person from a very different cultural background and suffered the consequences.

These two examples refer to communication between non-native and native speakers of English. In cross-cultural communication between non-native speakers themselves, users of English must also behave following an international norm, most likely the norm of the BANA countries, if they wish to avoid misunderstanding. For example, when a Vietnamese person says “How are you?” as a greeting to a Japanese person—instead of “Where are you going?”, which is the equivalent appropriate expression in Vietnamese—he is behaving according to a norm of native English speakers. If he says “Where are you going?”, the Japanese person might not understand him because he might not share the same expression as a greeting in his own culture. Similarly, when a Chinese scientist and a Dutch
colleague use English to communicate at an international conference, both tend to behave by the shared cultural norms of the BANA countries, given the big difference between Chinese and Dutch cultures.

**Standard English in International Contexts**

I have attempted to claim that the kind of English used in international contexts is Standard English and that this variety of English is not neutral or free of the shared culture of its native speakers. To attain effective communication in international settings, non-native speakers must use linguistic and cultural norms, which are mostly set by native speakers of English. However, I do not mean that the Standard variety of English dominates all levels of communication. Other varieties of English may be used within local or regional settings. This view is well expressed by Peter (p. 394):

*Norms and standards for world Englishes are best considered as an interaction of the meaning potential of the social semiotic and the linguistic form of the language. Where the social semiotic is local, the norm must be local. Likewise, when the intended social semiotic in international, an international norm (most likely British or American) will be used.*

**Ownership of English and the Issue of Cultural Knowledge**

**English and Culture**

When someone claims English is the international language of business, science, technology, education, and entertainment, to whose business, science, technology, education, and entertainment does he refer? Pennycook’s work shows that English does, in fact, connect people using culture and knowledge which “are far less readily localizable” (p. 19). This culture and knowledge, as he observes, are Western-oriented. In education, for example, he notices that a large proportion of textbooks in the world are published in English and designed either for the English-speaking market in the BANA countries or for an international market. In both cases, he concludes, students around the world are not only obliged to reach a high level of competence in English for their studies, but also dependent on forms of Western knowledge that are of “little value and of extreme inappropriateness to the local context” (p. 20).

A second example is the dominance of the English language in music. Flaitz points out that English has threatened French hegemony over their own music.

In many countries in Kachru’s “outer circle,” such as Singapore, the Philippines, and India, where English is widely used as a second language, this question of the ownership of English and culture is more complicated. Linguistically, local people can develop new Englishes and use these non-standard varieties for many functions within their local and national communities. Kachru’s work has shown that localized varieties of English are not linguistically deficient and that the use of localized varieties can strengthen community and national identities. For this reason, it would not be incorrect to claim that a Singaporean owns “Singlish” or an Indian owns Indian English. Nevertheless, as long as these varieties have not been widely used for international communication, and as long as Standard English is the educational target in places such as Hong Kong and Singapore, then English in an international context still belongs to the BANA countries. In terms of culture, the spread of Western books, science, technology, music, and foods in Singapore makes Lim concerned with a dilemma: to use English “as a means to plug into world technology, [yet] not to imbibe a culture we do not want” (p. 58). This dilemma has also been widely experienced in other countries where new Englishes or local varieties of English are used.

**English and Culture in Vietnam**

In countries which belong Kachru’s “expanding circle,” such as Vietnam, the issue of the ownership of English is probably less complicated. Since Vietnam opened its door to the outside world in 1987, and especially since the country joined ASEAN (the Association of South East Asian Nations), English has become much more important than before. In 1994, Vietnam’s Prime Minister signed an order requiring all government workers at all levels to achieve certain levels of English. On the surface, English, as Malcolm Young, the teaching operations director of the British Council in Hanoi, points out, “is being pursued avidly across a broad spectrum, from shoeshine boys up to established families and officials” (*Far Eastern Economic Review*, p. 42).

A deeper look at the situation reveals that English is most important because it is a foreign language compulsory subject at school and university. According to a study conducted by Do, 71% of Vietnamese students study English because it is required as a compulsory subject, 57.3% said English would provide them with more
opportunities for better jobs and overseas studies, and 67.3% thought they would use English to understand Western culture and values.

Le notices that the purpose for learning English in Vietnam is quite different from other countries in the region, where the needs for communication are greater. Le concludes that in general students of English in Vietnam fall into three major categories: (1) Some view English as a tool for more attractive and lucrative employment opportunities. (2) Others need a good knowledge of English to study further at colleges or universities. (3) The majority of students, however, learn English just to pass the national examinations. “These students do not have an obvious communicative need, except for a few people who work for international businesses and organizations” (p. 74).

**English and Foreign Aid**

Regarding the ownership of English, it is noteworthy that much English language education in Vietnam is provided via foreign aid from the BANA countries. The British Council has been in the country for a long time and has been supporting many teacher training and English language training activities across the country. BAVE (Business Alliance for Vietnamese Education), an American business organization, is funding a large project to design and introduce a new ELT textbook series to Vietnamese secondary schools (the audio cassettes for this record only an American accent). More importantly, since 1997, Australia, through AusAID, has given 17 million dollars annually to send students to do postgraduate studies in Australia, and 15 million dollars annually to fund the VAT (Vietnam-Australia Training Project) in Hanoi, whose purpose is to train teachers of English or to retrain former teachers of Russian, and to enhance the English language skills of people going to study abroad (Website of the Australian Embassy in Hanoi). With all this funding from Western countries for English language education, English cannot be considered a neutral medium unlinked with Western cultural and ideological values.

Since the country is trying to further its integration into international and regional communities, Vietnamese people will soon need a working command of English not only to interact with Americans, Britons, and Australians, but also to form relationships with neighboring countries such as Singapore and the Philippines. Perhaps soon, the issue of teaching varieties of English for regional communication will be raised in Vietnam.

**Implications for Language Educators**

**Two Competing Forces**

Widdowson is correct in saying there are two natural forces in all human affairs. One is the need to explore the outside world; the other is to preserve one’s identity. Language, as he argues, naturally reflects these forces. It helps us to communicate with the outside world, but at the same time, it allows us to identify ourselves, to reinforce our solidarity.

As EFL teachers, we need to be well aware of these two forces in our students. More importantly, we need to be aware that these two forces—the issues of internationalism and identity—as Crystal points out, “raise an immediate problem, because they conflict” (p. 113).

Therefore, teachers’ responsibilities are daunting: We must help students gain access to Standard English, which empowers them to achieve effective international communication, but at the same time we must allow students to use English in their own way to achieve their own ends in their own contexts. More importantly, we must try to ensure cooperation or at least harmony between these two needs.

**Standardizing and Flexibility**

In many teaching contexts, though, it is insufficient to say that Standard English is the primary target of education, even if Standard English is flexibly defined. If English is more than an instrument of access to international communication, then the aim of our profession is more complicated than just teaching language as a medium or a tool. It is important for teachers to know the different communication needs of students, and even to show students interconnections and differences between local, regional, and global norms for communication.

For this reason, being sensitive to the social, cultural, and political contexts of a country is essential for EFL teachers. Teachers should have a right to say that a certain use of English is not standard and to show students the standard use, but they should not have a right to correct students by yelling “wrong” or forbidding them to use a non-standard form which may work well in the student’s own world. It would be wise for teachers to clarify and negotiate with students regarding with whom or in which contexts they can use which variety of English. It is also important for teachers, as Nelson suggests, to distinguish mistakes from local dialect features.
in order to respond appropriately to students’ language production.

In Singapore, for example, English is used for communication not only at the international level, but also at the local and national levels. It would be inadequate for teachers to take only Singaporean English or only Standard English as the target of education. Lim observes that “the responsibility of language educators [is] to ensure that while the child has picked up localized varieties informally, he should also be taught those forms that are acceptable to the English-speaking communities in the region, and in the world” (p. 68).

In Vietnam, students at this time primarily learn English to pass mandatory examinations, while some learn English to use in international communication settings. Standard English would undoubtedly serve as the target of education. However, as the examination system changes and the need to communicate with regional countries increases, English teachers in Vietnam need to be prepared for a more complicated role.

On the issue of teaching culture, we as EFL teachers must help our students toward intelligible outside communication as well as the preservation of inner identity, and toward harmonization between these two issues or forces. If effective international communication requires students to be aware of cultural differences, then cultural information regarding the BANA countries needs to be introduced for the sake of understanding. Teachers can help students learn that people are different, and that in some cases we need to change our behavior to fit the context. This does not mean that the new cultural behavior is necessarily better than our own.

In terms of teaching materials, I agree with Lan that local materials dealing with local issues in the local context should be promoted to balance the old dependence on materials from the BANA countries. However, in addition to formal curricula, it is important for teachers to use an unlimited resource that is close at hand—students’ life stories. Teachers need to maximize opportunities for students to talk and write about their own experiences using their own voices. This can help students “to take control of language, to find the word and make words serve their purposes” (ILEA, in Wasima, Harsoom, and Naysmith, p. 233).

**Conclusion**

International communication through English is a pressing issue. If English is the primary or only choice for international communication, then language professionals must ensure that English becomes a truly international language which people around the globe can use equally to serve their own varying purposes.

**References**


*A teacher who is attempting to teach without inspiring the pupil with a desire to learn is hammering on cold iron.*

– Horace Mann


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