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An Examination of Considerations for the Future of Global English

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The driving force behind Globalization is Capitalism. As capitalists search for new avenues of investment and production, they must cross borders. The system morphs into a web of interdependent cultures and economies, with each culture and economy communicating with all the others. If these economies exist in different countries with different cultures, then language barriers become an issue. Furthermore, as Capitalism spreads to more cultures in a quest to fulfill profit requirements, more languages enter the global mix. A system consisting of five languages will eventually become a system consisting of nine or ten languages—the lines of communication become heavy and bogged-down. Also, more citizens across the world want a more global society, and communication will become essential to such a move (Mitrani, 2013).

One possible idea to fix this issue has been a global language. Unfortunately, most attempts at a global language have suffered from several difficulties: Esperanto being the most notable. However, in recent years—even decades—many advocates for a global language have championed English as the most likely candidate. Even the European Union acknowledges “French and Russian are shrinking in Africa and Eastern Europe…and yielding ground to English” (Kachru & Smith, 2009, p.8). As a result, the argument for Global English has begun to materialize. The purpose of this paper is to examine what kinds of considerations proponents of Global English need to remember while defining the language.

The Need for Global English

Urry (2004) claims that one essential part of Globalization is something he calls “global fluids” (p.196-7). Urry defines global fluids as “moltilities of people, information, objects, money, images, and risks that move…across regions” (p.196). Essentially, Urry is referring to the way in which cultures blend. Relocation, social media, and business transactions have caused people of different countries and cultures to interact. Urry believes that with these interactions, cultures will mix. Mitrani’s (2013) analysis of Global Civil Societies describes a similar scenario in which the world is no longer defined by geographical borders but a network of social relationships. However, the spread of cultures globally has blended many languages and cultures, and the one language many countries have in common is English.

The three largest driving forces behind the spread of English are Capitalism, Information and Communication Technologies, and Education. Many countries in East Asia are demanding an English speaking population, because the growth of global business has cultivated a demand for efficient English speaking workers “as it is the language of international business, commerce and finance” (Kachru & Smith, 2009, p.2). For many of these developing and emerging countries, the existence of a global language would ease the financial woes of business and communication across the globe (Etzioni, 2008). A global economy is driving the need for communication, and English is becoming the best candidate.

Education plays a major role in the spread and demand for English as well. The language is slowly being viewed as an academic tool as well as a subject (Taguchi, 2014). Many countries are looking at English “as a tool for communicating with foreigners, to acquire knowledge, to obtain opportunities and to achieve a certain status or accomplishment” (Lin, 2012, p.70). The list of countries looking at the benefits of English is staggering. China, Greece, Japan, South Africa, Qatar, and Nepal are all harboring some desire to increase the population of English speakers in their countries, whether it be the students themselves, the government, or even parents of students. (McKay, 2014; Mitsikopoulou, 2007; Sharma, 2012,). All of these
countries wish to enter into the highly lucrative global economy, and realize that English education is necessary in order to do so.

All of the aforementioned elements help to explain why English is now being viewed as the best choice for a global language. As Rajagopalan (2012) claims, “It is willingness to communicate that helps one postulate a common language, rather than the availability of a common language” (p.380). However, Standard English itself may not be enough to facilitate communication across the world. Global English is likely to be the better option.

Defining Standard English is not an easy task, given that different countries use it as their native language. However, many linguists believe there exist two types of Standard English. The first is the language as it is used in written contexts, or in grammars and dictionaries (Coye, 1998). The second is how educated speakers believe a word or words should be pronounced (Coye, 1998). Global English is a little more ambiguous than Standard English, but it is within its ambiguity that Global English finds its advantage. Seargeant (2010) claims there are many similarities between Global English and English as an International Language (EIL). EIL is being employed “specifically for international communication, often by speakers from different countries who do not have English as a mother tongue” (p. 103). The purpose of this essay is to discuss why Global English is the best choice for a global language as opposed to Standard English.

Cultural Considerations

One argument from the opponents of English as a global language is the possibility of undermining the countries and cultures that adopt it. Ives (2009) asks us to consider “under what circumstances [do English studies] further entrench psychological, cultural, economic and political subordination?” (p.671). Hegemony is of the greatest concerns to Ives. Hegemony is employed to ask us to consider whether or not the choice to learn English is of free will of citizens or enforced by some unstoppable power. The question is can you separate the English language from the cultures of the countries from which it originates? Critics wonder if the problem isn’t the teaching and learning of English itself, but actually the reasons why people make the choice to study English within their culture (Ives, 2009).

Global English can deal with this fear because it can sometimes be viewed as “a companion concept to the more general notion of globalization, and the name itself draws on the discursive connotations of theories of globalization” (Seargeant, 2010, p.106). Unfortunately, many scholars seem to think Global English is not suitable as a global language, since it carries the weight of global capitalism. For example, Marshall (2007) seems concerned that the US’s interests in global education are still focused on self-orientation in countries where the US has economic interests. However, English does not belong exclusively to the US; it is a language of many other countries. The US, UK, Australia, and Canada can lay claim to different styles of English—such variety creates what some people refer to as “Englishes” (Rajagopalan, 2012). The existence of “Englishes” already indicates that the language has become global and has little connection to one specific culture. By designating the label of the language to one being plural, instead of singular, we change the focus from the traditional native and non-native to a mindset that both native and non-native speakers are English speakers with equal respect paid to both (Lok, 2012). Essentially, we separate the old stigmas of colonialism, capitalism, and empirical oppression from the language and set it free into the world.

In order for this to work, English will have to become a malleable identity—one void of concrete rules. However, before traditionalists raise objection, English will still need to have an identity of its own. The idea is Global English does not have any native speakers, as it also contains American, British, and Australian varieties (Rajagopalan, 2012). The truth is that no one can stop the world from attaching to English. However, English can harbor two purposes: as a regional, static language and as a malleable means of communication across the world. Traditionalists can continue their fidelity to strict English rules. However, Kachru and Smith (2009) remind us “language is not dependent on grammars and dictionaries; English English existed long before it was codified in a dictionary or a grammar” (p.5).

However, the inclusion of the rest of the world will not be easy. The normative rules of English grammar must be set in reserve—as a reference if needed. The main task at hand will be to think of native and non-native speakers as native users of different “Englishes” across the world (Kachru & Smith, 2009). Global English must be autonomous from any specific country, culture, or people. Global English will have to be a hybrid of different grammars, dialects, and languages (Ives, 2009). The primary goal will be to treat Global English as a bastion for communication from anyone across the world that wishes to engage. Also, keeping in mind, Global English needs to be progressive rather than regressive by “not [replacing] their previous ‘spontaneous grammars’… [but instead incorporating] the various spontaneous grammars in a process that would include other cultural transformations” (Ives, 2009, p.677). The result of this practice will be an interchangeable set of grammars across the globe, shifting from Chinese English to Korean English and then to Turkish English—just to give a few examples.
In order for this idea to be implemented, two practices could—and should—be conducted. The first practice would be an observation study. The subject would need to be "a monolingual or multilingual English speaker, [who] might or might not exhibit varying patterns of (socio)linguistic behaviour over a period of exposure to other "Englishes" and languages" (Lok, 2012, p.423). The second practice could be an analysis of how English falls into other languages and societies. For example, a researcher could observe how English is integrated within Chinese and its different variations across East Asia (Lok, 2012). The task at hand will be to look at English in a "local" context. The local use of English "refers to the use of English for various functions by and among groups of people...for whom English is one of the languages used among their bilingual or multilingual repertoire" (Lok, 2012, p.425). If this goal can be accomplished, we can achieve and understand that we acknowledge linguistic differences (Lok, 2012). The cultures Global English infiltrates will need consideration. For this reason the empirical work regarding Global "Englishes" will be so important (Ives, 2009). Scholars and proponents will need to get to work—and some have—in trying to build a bridge across all forms of English.

Much work needs to be done: data gathered, cultures observed, and papers published. However, there exist numerous laboratories across the world that can foster this need: the classroom. Within English education across the world, we see trends, ideas, and practices that can facilitate the cultural respect needed to help foster English as a global language.

Educational Considerations

Education will be an important factor in fostering and developing global communication. So, English education may have to change as well. The days of Standard English being the rule in the classroom could be numbered—although much more analysis will need to be done before making such claims. Therefore, the best practice at this point is to see how Global English can best facilitate the educational practices in other countries.

The current expansion of global education requires us to remember that the spread of global education will only succeed with proper knowledge of foreign languages (Anifromov, 2010). The greatest hurdle is that the standards set by native speakers are the standard used to judge non-native speakers (Chovanec, 2012). The key will be to understand the limits of English language learners. Global educators will not be able to "dismiss what might be a different academic cultural tradition seeping through as text written in English merely as 'a lack of competence'" (Chovanec, 2012, p.7). Educators will have to put the student first, and the language second. As English education is now, most educators tend to harbor the same expectations of native speakers to non-native speakers (Chovanec, 2012). The current model of attempting to teach learners to replicate native speakers will need to yield to a method of teaching students of English to be confident non-native speakers (Anifromov, 2010).

While the aforementioned concept may appear to be an easing of the practices, the purpose of education is to foster a safe learning environment. Therefore, great consideration for the emotions of English learners must be a priority, as emotions heavily influence the learning process (Anifromov, 2010). A curriculum that stifles confidence will only ruin learner progression. For example, if students feel insecure in exploring English "they may consciously stick to several forms...they may have been exposed to through explicit schooling, and use those forms either excessively or incorrectly" (Chovanec, 2012, p.12). A thin line must be walked in teaching English to the world. Imposing strict, Standard English could oppress learner emotions, and, therefore, learner progression—causing poor understanding of the language. However, students may perform better if they are not punished if they use the grammars of their own languages woven throughout their use of English—the aforementioned Global English.

The most obvious place for these concepts is within English-medium education. English-medium education is the process of using English as the medium of instruction with the hopes that it will increase the proficiency of students (Taguchi, 2014). English-medium education provides a great avenue through which English can be taught without adhering to the stringent grammar of Standard English. Recalling Anifromov's (2010) call to promote learner emotions, we can use English-medium education to teach students the language, as the language itself develops.

We must also recognize the huge demand for English-medium education. The two main driving forces are the governments of non-native English speaking nations and parents wanting a better future for their children. The Japanese Ministry of Education announced an initiative to train its citizens to communicate effectively in international scenarios. A large portion of the plan focused on building English-medium education across the country (Taguchi, 2014). In Hong Kong, 75% of public schools are Chinese-medium focused (Taguchi, 2014). However, English-medium instruction remains intact—and sought after—in higher education. China has spent the last decade emphasizing English-medium education at its universities (Taguchi, 2014). Furthermore, South Africa has designated eleven official languages, with English remaining one of the top languages at schools (Taguchi, 2014). Governments across the globe are calling for more English-medium education to help strengthen their workforce.
The demand from parents is intense as well. In Greece, we can see a “cosmopolitan” discourse, an international…

orientation…found mainly in families from middle and upper socioeconomic classes” (Mitsikopoulou, 2007, p.240). Great efforts are being taken by Greek families to prepare their children for a global world. Children in Greece begin attending evening classes at the age of eight years old with three to six classes a week (Mitsikopoulou, 2007).

Global English can play an important role. If we recall Kachru and Smith’s (2009) idea of numerous users of different world “Englishes,” we can see the solution. Since most governments will refuse to make English a requirement instead of a choice for interested citizens who can compete in a globalized economy, English-medium education needs to be reevaluated. If we are to take the suggestions of Ives (2009) and Lok (2012), then we could assimilate “spontaneous grammars” and ‘local’ dialects into English-medium education, as we must also do with implementing and defining Global English. With this current education model, we can begin to define what Global English/“Englishes” look like as well as develop further English comprehension among students—even if it is not Standard English.

Technological Considerations

In the 21st century, education and technology go hand in hand. As technology shapes the methods within the global classroom, English education will have to recognize the new structure of the classroom. Mitsikopoulou’s (2007) study expanded beyond the demand for English education and into the demand for ICT literacy education. Greek citizens used to consider literary status to be associated with reading and writing in the Greek language, but now “this discourse places particular emphasis on English language learning as well as ICT literacies, thus affecting both education policies and out-of-school literacy practices” (p.236). Across the world, the demand for English is often linked to the spread and demand for ICT competencies and knowledge.

Technological developments demonstrate the privilege of knowing how to speak a language that is shared by the world (Etzioni, 2008). The aforementioned privileges are so tempting that many students push to expand their English use outside of the classroom on their own. In Nepal over 8,500 private boarding schools have made policies requiring the use of English within the classroom (Sharma, 2012). However, in a study conducted by Sharma, an interesting pattern of language use emerges among the youth in Nepal. When asked about their English use, the students never mentioned English as a language used in their personal lives (Sharma, 2012).

Despite their schools’ push for a more English literate student body, these students and their families still spoke to one another in Nepalese. Nepal is a country with an incredibly diverse use of language. Approximately 100 languages are used throughout Nepal—with English and Nepalese being the top two in use (Tin, 2014). One is safe in assuming that Nepalese is prominent because of its cultural roots. Students share experiences and memories with family in Nepalese. English has a strange history in Nepal. English was adopted by the ruling elite as an almost cosmopolitan luxury (Tin, 2014). Now, English is taught in schools starting in the first grade, and is seen as the best means of upward mobility (Tin, 2014).

When Sharma examined the ways in which these students use Facebook, English was a prominent fixture of their communication tool-kit. Whether the students were using idioms, telling jokes, or using a coded mix of Nepalese and English, Sharma discovered that the students wanted to use English to connect beyond their local environment (Sharma, 2012). These students knew that in order to communicate with friends in neighboring countries on social media, they would have to communicate via a shared language: English.

The examination of Facebook, and other social networking sites, has become an important variable in understanding the spread and grasp of English across the globe. These sites contain cultural content and ideas that originate from a variety of countries (Sharma, 2012). Technology will continue to grow, and the blending of cultures will grow proportionally with it. However, Sharma (2012) warns, “we need to be careful not to attribute such a shift (English usage growth) to the accessing of technology…but to the opportunities for social relations that technology has to offer” (p.495). Technology will reach into the “periphery,” but the flow will go both ways from the periphery to the rest of the world (Sharma, 2012). Global English scholars will need to keep a keen eye on how social networks will affect English as a global language, and not just how social networks will affect other cultures. The road ahead of Global English research is a tedious one, but necessary.

Conclusion

The process of defining and shaping Global English in the future will not be easy. Cultures and local dialects will need to be approached and handled with care. The emotions of students must be tended to with caution. The realm of social networking will need to be under constant surveillance from scholars and proponents. Just as when any cultures combine, the melding of languages with the existence of Global English will need to be handled with care.
Global English will need to approach other cultures ready to change and assimilate those languages and dialects. Instead of expecting other cultures to conform to English rules and the cultures from which they originate, the language needs to adapt to the cultures it encounters. Unlike Standard English, Global English can be molded and manipulated to fit with each language and culture it encounters. With the aforementioned mindset intact, hegemony will be secure and Global English can be a language of the world instead of one that infiltrates other cultures.

Furthermore, English-medium educators will need to make an effort to help students merge English into their own languages instead of keeping them separate. By doing so, educators can help students develop a healthy, “native” use of Global English. Education will also be one of the key elements in appropriately spreading Global English and an understanding of the language itself. As students demonstrate how they merge their native languages and Global English, scholars can further refine and emphasize a proper definition of the language.

Finally, emerging technologies will naturally affect how many people use English and how they use English. Additionally, technology will afford scholars the opportunity to analyze how the interactions between multiple cultures shapes the use of English across the world, and therefore further define Global English. Examining the different uses and applications of Global English throughout social media will help scholars and proponents understand the direction in which the language is moving.

Global English will more than likely always be a language of constant change, as more cultures emerge from the periphery into the global discussion. However, the task of global communication is not impossible. Yes, the aspects of a global language outlined in this paper are not the only ones up for consideration, but they’re a good place to start. As more citizens of the world emerge, looking for a means of communication, the ability to track potential changes in Global English will strengthen as said citizens ask for a seat at the table.

References


