ENGLISH AS AN INTERNATIONAL LANGUAGE (EIL), WORLD ENGLISHES WITHIN AN INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT, AND THE TOWER OF BABEL

Jerry Smith

Manager, Teacher Proficiency

U-Talk in Summit Online English Language Center

Dasmarinas, Cavite, Philippines

TESOL Instructor

Midwest Education Group

Chicago, USA

tesol.jerry@gmail.com

February 16, 2015

Abstract

This paper discusses the similarities between the Bible record of the Tower of Babel and the resulting confusion of languages and how it relates to modern times and the trend we see of English as an International Language (EIL). This paper then briefly examines the trend of being culturally sensitive in EIL by accepting cultural or "world Englishes" as a part of the English as a Second Language (ESL) paradigm. Furthermore, this paper demonstrates that world Englishes applied to EIL on a global scale will limit, not enhance effective communication by showing evidences of potential misunderstandings from the areas of grammar, phonetics, and lexis between EIL speakers. The author uses examples from a Filipino-English perspective but also includes references from other "Englishes." Finally, the point is raised that without a standardized English, where everyone has their own 'version' of the language in an EIL setting, we shall repeat history with a world where everyone speaks a language, but where understanding is limited. Hence, the Tower of Babel all over again.

Background

EIL and the Tower of Babel

The author used the expression "Tower of Babel" in the title of this paper as a reference to the events after the Great World Flood of Genesis chapters six through nine found in the Christian Bible. To summarize, not long after the Flood, unified mankind tried to build a tower reaching up into heaven. It was mankind's rebelliousness to God's command to replenish the earth and spread out. However, God would not allow this to come to pass at that time and visited man and confounded their unified language. It can be reasonably presumed, based on the variety of languages in the world today, that this unified language syntax was altered, its phonetics was changed, and obviously its lexis changed in order to confound their communication. This has been the case until modern times when English began to be the language of international communication.

The relevance here, or the relationship, is that God confounded the languages so that the people could not understand each other, and they left off their world plan. 'Reverse mechanics' or in this case, 'reverse linguistics' would then demonstrate that in order to function and have communication, a global community would need to have one language. That being the case, the stage has been set for English, and that English from England spread throughout the world. The Americans then took it a step further and now Hollywood, sports stars, academe, business, entertainment, all work together to become a foundation for the need of English in today's world (though, in the author's opinion, American English is not necessarily the most understandable). Nevertheless, the stage has been set. Therefore, grammar, phonetics, and lexis including idiom must also follow suit lest we return to the 'confounded languages' of the tower of Babel and an inability to communicate effectively.

A piece of English culture

As the phenomena of world Englishes increases, where each culture develops their own way of using English within their own culture. More cultures seem to be vying for a piece of the English identity pie as can be construed from a speech given by Professor Farzad Sharifian on EIL (Sharifian, 2011). Cultures seem to want a place for their version of English and to be accepted as part of the English community. Terms such as "Inner-Circle countries" and "Outer-Circle countries" (Sharifian, 2009, p3), English "imperialism" (Sharifian, 2009, p190) are applied to ("native-speaking") people or cultures who imply, apparently, through

English proficiency tests such as IELTS, TOEFL, TOEIC, and the like, that their (native) English is the one everyone should be following. The author agrees with Sharifian (2009, p.1) that, "as English rapidly develops more complex relationships within and between communities of speakers around the world, the dialogue addressing its role as a global language needs to continue to expand," and part of that dialogue is taking place here and now in this paper. Sharifian & Jamarami (2013) report:

> "Studies of intercultural communication in applied linguistics initially focused on miscommunication, mainly between native and non-native speakers of English. The advent of the twenty-first century has witnessed, however, a revolution in the contexts and contents of intercultural communication; technological advances such as chat rooms, emails, personal weblogs, Facebook, Twitter, mobile text messaging on the one hand, and the accelerated pace of people's international mobility on the other have given a new meaning to the term 'intercultural communication... Given the remarkable growth in the prevalence of intercultural communication among people from many cultural backgrounds, and across many contexts and channels, conceptual divides such as 'native/non-native' are now almost irrelevant. This has caused the power attached to English and native speaker-like English to lose much of its automatic domination."

However, comments such as "revolution," "power," and "domination" can give the the impression that through English language a perceived struggle for identity has arisen; that English is becoming or has already become a political issue rather than a simple objective tool for communication. Words such as these seem can be understood as expressing resentment, and lend support to Van Dijk's ("Discourse") term "discursive rhetoric," aimed at opposition against a particular entity's influence in the global English community. However, addressing the politics of the English language is not the purpose of this paper. Nevertheless, those who imply such ideas may be missing a fundamental point: That people of the world are learning English in order to communicate; and that, more effectively. People just want to use the language to do what they need to do. English language learning is not about the right of certain native-speaking cultures to own the language. It is about communication in today's global community where English is the

accepted language of academics, politics, industry, travel, and commerce. Why else does one learn English if not to use it for one purpose or another?

English as an International Language (EIL)

English among cultures

It has been suggested that ESL teachers consider the English culture of the learner when teaching ESL (e.g. Tarone, 2005; Sharifian, 2009; Sharifian & Jamarami, 2013) and to accept lapses in grammar, phonetics, or lexis as being part of the English language culture of that particular non-native speaker. Yes, it is likely that in a multi-cultural English-speaking gathering, if the interlocutors' levels are advanced enough, surely they can work out meaning. But, is it something one is willing and or able to do in business settings or perhaps urgent care situations? In an effort to elaborate more on this part of the discussion, the author must cite Sharifian (2009) once again, a seemingly recognized proponent of EIL:

"In general, we can say that English as an International Language refers to a paradigm for thinking, research and practice... EIL does not refer to a particular variety of English... One of the central themes of EIL as a paradigm is its recognition of World Englishes, regardless of which circles they belong to (Bolton, 2004; Kachru, 1986, 1992, cited in Sharifian p.2). This means revising the notion of 'proficiency' even for the English of native speakers. Canagarajah (2006 : 233, cited in Sharifian p.3) maintains that, 'in a context where we have to constantly shuttle between different varieties [of English] and communities, proficiency becomes complex...one needs the capacity to negotiate diverse varieties to facilitate communication.'"

It is the last statement which draws the author's attention: "'in a context where we have to constantly shuttle between different varieties [of English] and communities, proficiency becomes complex… one needs the capacity to negotiate diverse varieties to facilitate communication.'" This is the premise behind the current paper: that using these "world Englishes" in a "one-language" environment of EIL will repeat a "Babel-like" phenomena where these Englishes will eventually become unintelligible to those outside of a

particular English culture within the EIL paradigm. The result being, as Sharifian points out, is that we have to constantly "shuffle" between varieties of "Englishes." But, what sharifian does not seem to point out, is that the need arises for a single, standardized English where all can understand and communicate more effectively and readily. To support the author's point, Sharifian (2009) goes on to provide an example from Australia, an "Inner-Circle" country, where:

> English has its own "standard" dialect, and also Aboriginal people of Australia have their own "English" (p.4) A reference to 'multidialectal competence' in order to understand new varieties of English... not just true in Australia, but also increasingly throughout the world (p.4)...Intercultural competence' needs to be viewed as a core element of 'proficiency' in English when it is used for international communication (Sharifian p4).

Sharifian's comments support the current concern of an approaching "Babel-like" phenomena and the need for a standardized English for global communications, as mentioned previously. His solution however, is "intercultural competence." While more cultural awareness and sensitivity are certainly needed among people around the world, when we narrow it to the language of English, the question can be raised; how far do we take intercultural competence in English language teaching? Are EL teachers to incorporate all cultures into their teaching of a single, unifying language? Are EL learners learning English for their culture or to interact with other cultures? If the former, than why learn English when they can pick it up from their culture; if the latter, would there not be a benefit in a single, standardized English to learn?

English proficiency tests and EIL

In fact, one of the implied arguments for standardized English proficiency tests such as IELTS, OPI, TOEIC, TOEFL, and the like is to determine if a non-native speaker is capable of functioning or surviving in the English-speaking culture they desire to reside in. The fact that millions of people both young and old are preparing for and taking these English proficiency tests (www.britishcouncil.org) is an indicator that there is a standard or

acceptable form of English for each proficiency test maker. One writer even referred to it as 'gold plating' (Graddol 2006, quoted Sharifian 2009, p.192), perhaps to suggest that it is 'big business,' which it very well may be. Nevertheless, it is this standard of English that is accepted, used, practiced, and readily comprehended by the (usually native-speaking) residents of a particular native English-speaking locale; and it is to these locales that many language learners want to be involved with, whether for business, travel, emigration, or education, purposes. A simple Google search (search words, "why do we have english proficiency tests") will reveal that top universities require certain levels of English language proficiency. According to the British Council, the owners of the IELTS (www.ielts.org), there were 2 million IELTS tests last year (2013) .

In the text, "'Imperialism' of international tests: an EIL perspective" (Kahn, 2009) the author discusses the "imperialism" of international tests and the belief that "high-stakes" tests such as the TOEFL are biased against individuals who may be proficient in using English for international communication but have not been exposed to certain nuances of an inner-circle variety of english, in the case of TOEFL, it is the standard American English. But what is this "standard American English"? Later in the text, the term 'hegemony' is used in reference to "inner-circle" countries. Kahn then goes on to discuss lexical and usage differences between AE (American English), BE (British English), and AusE (Australian English) Englishes found in the TOEFL (p. 193). The question is raised, "whose norms are to be 'imposed.'"

Standardized Proficiency Guidelines and EIL

In fact it is understood that (all) proficiency guidelines determine level based on a "norm:" the level of effort given to understand what the speaker is expressing in English. An examination of an excerpt from the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages ("ACTFL") Advanced Speaking Level Criteria for example shows this: "Advanced-level speakers have sufficient control of basic structures and generic vocabulary to be understood by native speakers of the language, including those unaccustomed to non-native speech." An excerpt from the Intermediate level also supports this axiom: "Intermediate-level speakers are understood by interlocutors who are accustomed to dealing with non-native learners of

the language." And an excerpt from the Novice level further relates: "Novice-level speakers may be difficult to understand even by the most sympathetic interlocutors accustomed to non-native speech." Therefore, from the contrast between levels, obviously these guidelines are considering that there must be a "standard" English, as "the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines are "a description of what individuals can do with language in terms of speaking, writing, listening, and reading in real-world situations in a spontaneous and non-rehearsed context" ("ACTFL"). We could also do the same examination with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages ("CEFR").

And Now Comes Confusion

Perceived comprehension

Among non-native speakers and native speakers alike, there is what is also known as "perceived comprehension" (Brewer, 2008). The author has taken this a step further to integrate EIL into this phenomena, where one believes he has understood what was communicated (according to their own language culture) i.e. their particular world "English" within the EIL paradigm, but where misunderstandings do take place. The author has encountered this repeatedly over a period of eleven years of English language teaching of various cultures (Korean, Filipino, Chinese, Russian, Brazilian, Saudi Arabian, and more where the learner 'thinks' they understood the term, expression, or instructions, goes on their way (e.g. to complete an assignment, follow instructions, or directions) but come to find out, from the results, or lack of, they did not. The language learner thought he understood but in fact did not. An academic, business, medical, or other high risk setting is where the least amount of play of this nature can be allowed when communicating.

Self-Standardization

Since this is the present situation that we find ourselves concerning EIL, it would be unlikely that the English language will standardize itself among cultures. People will stick with what they know. For example, native speaking Americans say the word "math" while in the Philippines the word "maths" is used, despite the fact that technically, the term 'maths'

is grammatically incorrect; this, in a country that teaches English grammar from grade school through high school. The term "maths" is an 'English language culture' variant of Filipino English of the non-count noun "math." Semantically speaking, how many "maths" are there normally: 1, 2, 3? This is an established grammatical form. However, in the Philippine English form, it is "maths." Is it wrong? No, we cannot say it is wrong for them to use this term. However, could it lead to confusion in an EIL setting where someone who is not from the Philippines; someone who has studied English grammar religiously for years in order to be 'proficient' in English, is the recipient? Therefore, the solution is not to change the English of the culture, but to provide a standardized English for all to use.

Confusion

Would this particular case cause confusion between native and or non-native speakers, or between two non-native speakers from the Philippines? Not necessarily, but the confusion between interlocutors may compound through a prolonged dialogue of this nature, whether native or non-native speakers. We could also add to that the overall impression one might get when speaking with someone who does not use "acceptable grammar," i.e., the way the receiver knows it to be (because they 'studied it'). There are a lot of variables here which could ultimately lead us right back to everyone speaking their own English language, which in turn would theoretically create another need for teachers to teach another common language. Where would it end? Fundamental issues in grammar, phonetics, and lexis left unattended will lead us right back to the need to learn 'another' language in order to communicate. Minor points can compound into major points as will be briefly demonstrated in the following paragraphs.

Grammar Issues

This is not necessarily a reference to subtle issues such as using the word "more" with monosyllabic comparatives (e.g. 'more fresh' as opposed to 'fresher'). This of course is understandable in a conversation and would not necessarily detract comprehension of an utterance. But, what about the use of a verb instead of a noun (e.g. Filipinos use "overpass"

as a verb to indicate that one has gone past a particular location, such as in the statement, "He overpassed the house."); whereas to the native-English speaker the word "overpass" is conventionally known as a noun. Can we invent new words in an English culture? Certainly, yes, of course. History shows us that ("What Sort"). Nevertheless, beyond the particular English sub-culture, could they be clearly understood when speaking to someone outside of their own English culture? Would they believe themselves understood when a person who is not from that particular English subculture believes that they understood the message? So, where do we draw the line? Where does English comprehension end and a different language begin?

Other examples from the Philippines, i.e. Filipino English, is the use of the causative verbs "let" versus "have" and the use of the verbs "lift" versus "carry." Dictionary definitions of the words "let" and "have" give distinction as to their use in a sentence; "let," meaning to 'allow or permit,' while "have" infers 'cause to or to direct someone.' Filipino English (FE) however, does not make this distinction. For example, a teacher might, when speaking about her students, say something like, "I let them read their textbook," with the meaning that she "directed" them to read their textbooks (e.g. as part of doing seatwork). The native English speaker (NES) or the rehearsed non-native speaker (NNES) upon hearing this will (A) assume they understood the utterance perfectly, as English words were used in the right order and (B) the NES and or the rehearsed NNES will understand the nuance of the vocabulary "let" as expressing the giving of permission by the teacher, which has further meaning as perhaps the students were asking for permission to read, which was not the case. So, already, there is an element of misunderstanding. This is further compounded when (C) the speaker believes that her message was perfectly understood, since afterall, she was speaking English; when in actuality she was expressing that she "had" them read their textbook, an order. The shades of gray and inevitably black are numerous here. In an urgent care or other similarly crucial setting, there cannot be a difference between "let" and "have." For example, a man who has an illness is told to rest. The Filipino doctor tells the NES wife, "let him rest," which the NES understands as a choice rather than a crucial suggestion. However, as was pointed out, what the doctor may have meant was he 'must' rest, or "have him rest," a crucial part of the patient's recovery.

Another example is the use of the verb "carry." "Carry is not the lexeme that is understood among NES or rehearsed NNES, when it comes to FE and the use of "lift." Filipino English might use the term "carry" the couch, meaning to "lift" the couch. So where will it end? Communication of this nature is absolutely fine in the Filipino English community, but what happens when this same English is carried to an international setting. How can real communication take place amongst these discrepancies? There will always be an element of uncertainty in this kind of discourse.

More examples include the use of "in a few minutes" or "after a few minutes"? One well-known NNES speaker mentioned in his lecture, "I will tell you more about myself in a few minutes" and proceeded to talk about his background for a few minutes. However, the intended meaning was, "I will tell you more about myself for a few minutes." Another example: An ESL job ad written by a Korean author stated, that the applicant, "must stay in Korea now for face to face interview." With a little effort, we can decode this to mean that the applicant must be currently residing in Korea. However, do we want to give such effort to understand when it is an urgent need or in a business setting? There are other similar examples, but the evidence from these examples points to the need for a standard English.

Phonetic Issues

Certainly, any ESL teacher who has had exposure for even relatively short periods of time to English language learners will pick up the pronunciation issues. However, accent alone is acceptable between English speakers, as can be observed in a hypothetical conversation between a Brit, an American, an Australian, and a Canadian for example. They of course can fairly well understand each other's 'accents.' But, on a deeper level, from the area of phonetics, most teachers would likely be able to give examples of their students' issues; such as: /p/ vs. /f/, /th/ vs. /t/, /TH/ vs. /d/, /i:/ vs. /I/ and so on among their learners. We could point out the South Korean /r/ vs. /l/ difficulties; or the Filipino/th/ vs. /t/ difficulties; or the Brazilian /r/ vs. /h/ issues among so many. In one culture it may be 'live versus leave,' or in another it may be 'river versus liver,' or in another 'lapping versus laughing,' and it could likely continue for another page at least. The idea however, is that

phonetic issues of consonants go beyond simple accents but involve the comprehensibility of certain words and can very well lead to miscommunications in an oral setting.

It is surely without debate that any ESL teacher teaching in any non-native speaking culture reading this paper would have their own additions to this list. No offense intended to British readers, but we could also include the accent issue of BE: ma'am" /a:/ vs. "mom" /a:/ dilemma (AE "ma'am" /ae/ vs. "mom" /a:/) in a discussion of 'perceived comprehension' in a global community.

Lexical Issues

To take the current discussion a step further, a simple example from the Philippines will illustrate the lexical issue: The word "salvage" in the Philippines means to kill someone and dump their body in a canal (e.g. "He was salvaged last night."). This must certainly seem strange to a native speaker who has an almost opposite understanding of this lexeme; which is to "recover" something. Now, imagine two people using English in a friendly conversation, one Filipino and one American. The Filipino says "My friend was salvaged the other day." The Westerner will of course think that the guy's friend was recovered from something and move on in confusion as to why his Filipino friend was sad. Put this in a business setting: The Westerner says, "we'll need to salvage this plan," meaning that we need to make some adjustments and recover it. On the other hand, the Filipino thinks, "okay, he wants to scrap the plan," the direct opposite of the speaker's meaning, and the Filipino goes on to give up or destroy the plan to the speaker's frustration. The Filipino had perceived understanding, and the American believed the Filipino understood the word in the way he meant it. We could remove the native speaker and place for example a non-native speaker from Germany who has studied English vocabulary and understands the word "salvage" to mean exactly what the dictionary defines it to be, which is to "recover" something. The potential for misunderstanding is high. The question is raised: is that what we want when we sit down to political negotiations, have medical concerns, prepare business plans, pursue academic endeavors, conduct research, or have plain old conversations?

Ebonics and gangland speech

Another example of English as a "different" language is that of "Ebonics" the speech of black Americans (Perry & Delpit, 1998). English speakers who have had the chance to converse or listen to it would surely have difficulty understanding it (Perry & Delpit, 1998). Would this not be considered a separate language? Some would say that it is simply a dialect, but can this dialect be used to converse with everyone in an international setting? Let us imagine that Black-American speech (i.e. Ebonics) was the language of commerce and travel. Would the English speakers of the world need to take a course on Ebonics to function within the global community that uses Ebonics, or would they be able to speak their own "version" of English and all would be well? In actuality, a 1996 resolution by the Oakland School Board brought public attention to the term "Ebonics", and ruled that Ebonics is not English (Perry & Delpit, 1998, p.310-311). Therefore, it would be necessary to learn the new language. If we turn this to today's EIL paradigm and "world Englishes" we can see a similar stage being set.

What about gangland speech? Gangs in Los Angeles have their own English filled with their own vernacular. Is this merely an issue of jargon, or is it a different language altogether? It sounds English, but could the average businessman, university student, or world traveler understand it? Let us look at another example. South Koreans can speak English. They study it throughout their primary and secondary school years. However, when having a conversation with a typical Korean ESL learner, at times, it becomes somewhat of a challenge to comprehend. Yes, it could be a question of level or proficiency, but what English are they learning? A Korean English or a standard English? Again, where does one English end and the other begin? Do we need a "standard" English in an international setting? If so, what English should it be? What is the English that proficiency test makers are basing their scores on? Should it be the English that set the stage through international relations (e.g., the USA), commerce (the USA), academics (Great Britain), and entertainment (e.g., Hollywood), or a particular English subculture?

Conclusion

Of course it makes sense for any culture to bend English to suit its needs within the context of the culture. However, once we go outside of the English subcultures into an international setting, we require a standard English which will facilitate ready comprehension as well as dispel any misunderstandings or confusion as it relates to idiomatic expressions, gramamr, phonetics, and or lexis. This has been merely a crude presentation of an immediate concern. Much research and references are absent from this work in order to support it for the novice reader (i.e. one who is not in the field of language education). However, the linguist reader, or the ESL teacher on the forefront should be familiar with supporting theories, research, and experiences which correlate with the information presented in this paper; and as such, be able to make an informed judgment of the problem presented.

Evidence has been reasonably presented that in anything that is done internationally (i.e. EIL) there is a need to have a base line. If each community were to use their own language it could be interpreted in various ways, as was presented. While most would be close; with something that is an exact science 'close' may not be good enough. If you are someone who travels, it is nice to need to know only two languages, yours and English. Imagine how difficult it might be to travel the world and need to know the "English" of each country you visit.

We may be forgetting a fundamental point: that English is being learned in order to function and communicate in a growing global community where one language is needed. Proponents of EIL who are against an "imperialist" language owner are viewing English as a medium of or extension of political power. However, emotions and national pride aside, English is simply for communication not domination. Perhaps the author is somewhat naive and idealistic in his perception, but nonetheless optimistic that we can promote a dialogue regarding a standardized English.

It is important to note, that the author is not suggesting in this paper that all English speakers follow the American or other native speaking ("inner-circle") English. However, without a standard form of English, than we are right back at the Tower of Babel. The author's interest in this paper is not to insist on one man's idea of English, but to raise the point that we need a standard English where phonetics, grammar, and vocabulary match.

This paper presented disparities in these areas and is certainly a call for further discussion on this matter.

Call to Research

Therefore, the author always returns to these questions:

1. Can we communicate effectively if everyone is using a variant of English? (Would it be, for example, the Tower of Babel all over again?)

2. Should we teach a "standard" form of English for international settings?

3. What is that standard English to be taught/learned for international settings?

4. What English is being used to determine learner levels with English proficiency test makers.

Resources:

ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines 2012. www.actfl.org

Brewer, Beth Ann. (November 25, 2008). Effects of Lexical Simplification and Elaboration on ESL Readers' Local-Level Perceived Comprehension. Master's Thesis presented to Brigham Young University. http://contentdm.lib.byu.edu/cdm/ref/collection/ETD/id/1669

CEFR language levels explained. Go study link. http://gostudylink.net/en/support/levels

Finegan, Edward & Rickford, John R. Ebonics. (2004). Language in the USA: Themes for the Twenty-first Century. Cambridge University Press.

Khan, Sarah Zafar. (2009) *Imperialism of International Tests: An EIL Perspective.* Chapter 10, English as an International Language: Perspectives and Pedagogical Issues by Farzad Sharifian. Multilingual Matters / Channel View Publications, UK.

Miele, David B. & Molden, Daniel C. (2010). *Perceived Comprehension Naive Theories of Intelligence and the Role of Processing Fluency in Perceived Comprehension.* Journal of Experimental Psychology: American Psychological Association. 2010, Vol. 139, No. 3. http://www.academia.edu/347655/Naive_Theories_of_Intelligence_and_the_Role_of_Processing_Fluency_in_Perceived_Comprehension

Perry, Theresa & Delpit, Lisa D. (1998). "English (Language) It Is Political!: The Real Ebonics Debate." Beacon Press. Web.

Sharifian, Farzad. (2009). "English as an International Language: Perspectives and Pedagogical Issues." Multilingual Matters / Channel View Publications, UK. Web.

Sharifian, Farzad. (2011) *English as an International Language: An Overview of the Paradigm.* Video. A speech given at the EIL 2011 Lecture, Monash University, Malaysia. Web.

Sharifian, Farzad & Jamarani, Maryam. (2013). "Language and Intercultural Communication in the New Era." Routledge. Web.

Tarone, Elaine. (2005). *Schools of Fish: English for Access to International Academic and Professional Communities.* Journal of Asia TEFL, Vol. 2, No. 1, pp. 1-20, Spring 2005. Web.

Van Dijk, Teun. *Discourse and Knowledge*. Video. Lecture on Discourse and Knowledge. Web.

What Sort of Knowledge about Language Do English Teachers Need?
http://www.sp.uconn.edu/-jb100001/cogsci

www.ielts.org/

www.britishcouncil.org/