http://www.rdg.ac.uk/AcaDepts/cl/CALS/circles.html

Going round in circles: English as an International Language, and cross-cultural capability

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1. Introduction

Variously attributed to Wilde, Shaw and, most recently, Dylan Thomas (see Crystal 1997:131), the idea that native English speakers can be 'separated by the barrier of a common language' draws attention to the long-standing recognition that simply being speakers of English is no guarantee of mutual understanding. Given the global role of English -- with a 'middle-of-the road' estimate of 1,200 to 1,500 million speakers (Crystal op.cit. 61) -- it would be surprising if such a diversity of English users weren't separated as well as united by their common language.

Is it necessarily the case that English speakers will be separated by the barrier of their common language? If they are divided by the barrier of a common language, what is it that creates the barrier? And can the barrier be overcome? These questions are behind the thinking that has gone into writing this paper, in which, I would like, firstly, to consider inter-cultural communication and inter-cultural capability at the micro or local level in which individuals from different backgrounds interact, and secondly, to consider English as a World Language at the macro- level of cultural politics, with a view to raising some of the issues which will have to be taken into account when developing cross-cultural capability in the context of English as an International Language.

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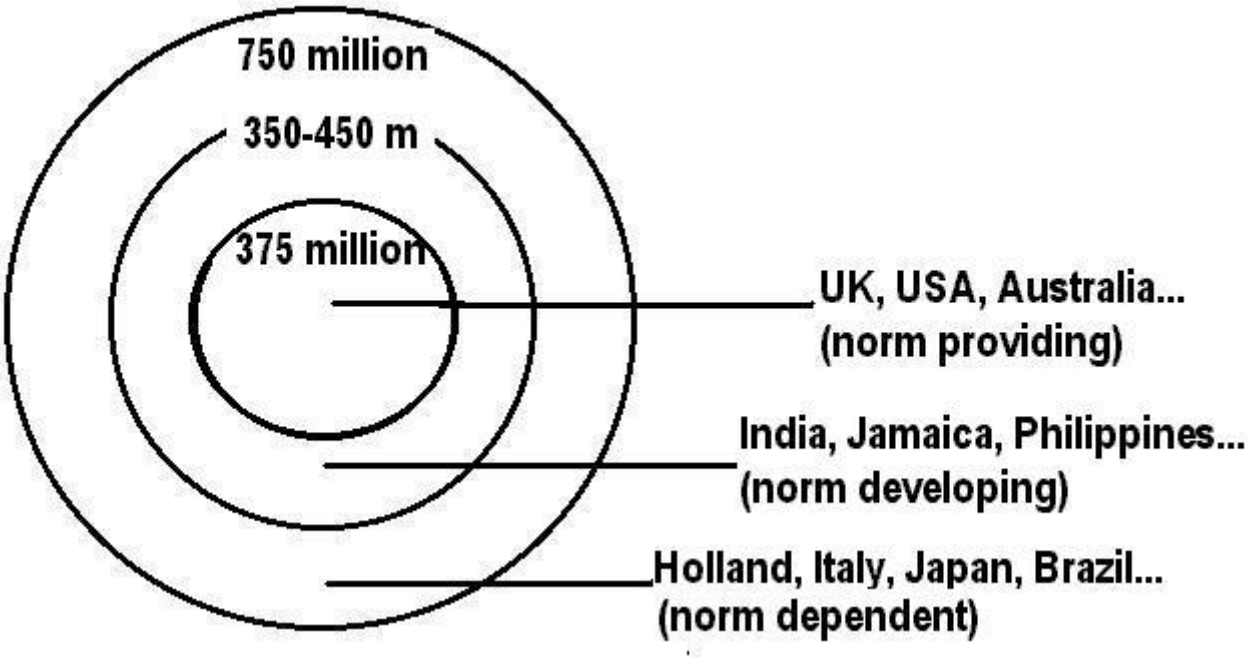
2. The three circles

Let us begin with Kachru's classification of English as a World Language as consisting of three circles (Kachru, 1982, 1988).



1. The **inner circle** refers to the traditional bases of English, where it is the primary language. Included in this circle are the USA, UK, Ireland, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. The varieties of English used here are, in Kachru's scheme, 'norm providing'.

2. The **outer or extended circle** involves the earlier phases of the spread of English in non-native settings, where the language has become part of a country's chief institutions, and plays an important 'second language' role in a multilingual setting. Singapore, India, Malawi and over fifty other territories are included in this circle. The varieties used here are what Kachru calls 'norm-developing': in regions using these varieties there has been a conflict between lingusitic norm and linguistic behaviour. Such varieties are both endo- and exonormative.

3. The **expanding circle** includes those nations which acknowledge the importance of English as an International Language. Historically, they do not belong to that group of countries which were colonised by members of the inner circle, and English doesn't have any special intranational status or function. They constitute the context in which English is taught as a 'foreign' language as the most useful vehicle of international communication. These are 'norm-dependent' varieties, and are essentially exonormative in Kachru's terms.

Crystal (op. cit., 54, 55), while warning that such data should be carefully interpreted, lists some seventy-five territories in which English 'has held or continues to hold, a special place as a member of either the inner or the outer circles'. What is more significant, though, is the growth in the expanding circle, which has resulted in English being used by non-native speakers among themselves at least as much as between native and non-native English speakers.

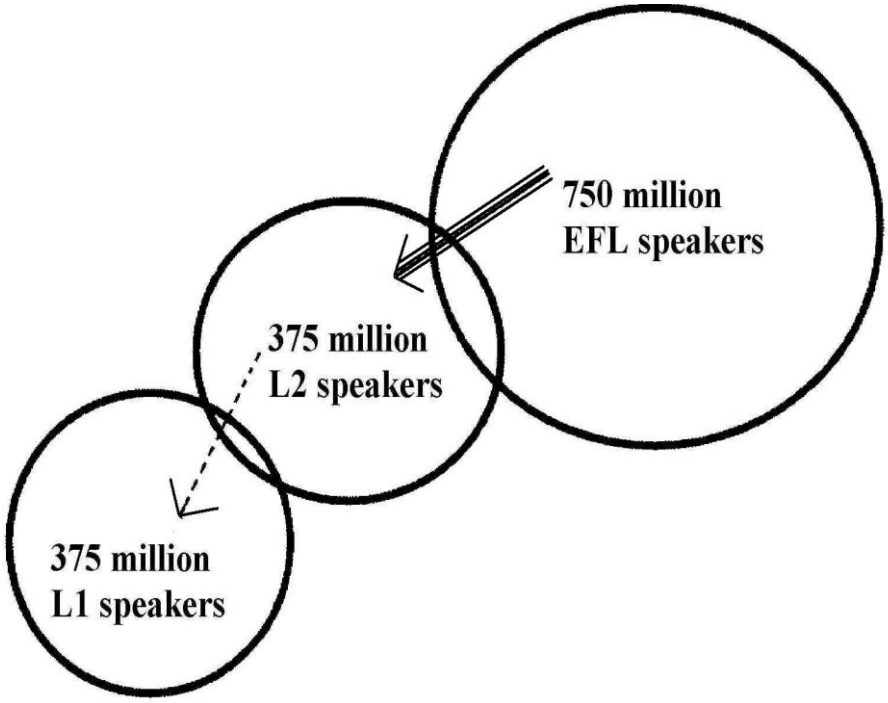


Figure: Showing the three circles of English as overlapping makes it easier to see how the 'centre of gravity' will shift towards L2 speakers at the start of the 21st century [from Graddol 1997:10]

In fact, Graddol (1977:10) suggests that the three circles of English overlap, with the 'centre of gravity' shifting towards L2 English speakers at the start of the 21st century so that in the next century, 'those who speak English alongside other languages will outnumber first-language speakers and, increasingly, will decide the global future of the language.' Schnitzer (ibid., 229) also points out that it is among non-native speakers of English 'where the use of English is truly expanding', so that the 'ownership' of English has shifted from the centre to the periphery (see also Widdowson, 1993, 1994 on the issue of ownership and control.) Furthermore, as Kachru (1985: 20) observes:

> ...with its diffusion, English ceases to be an exponent of only one culture -- the Western Judaeo-Christian culture; it is now perhaps the world's most multicultural language, a fact which is, unfortunately, not well recognized.

Some twelve years after the publication of the paper in which those words appeared, I think it would be true to say that the multi-cultural character of English is recognized, even if we are still finding ways of understanding the full implications of this for cross- or inter-cultural capability.

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3. Intercomprehensibility & Communicative Competence

The unprecedented expansion of English (Fishman and Cooper (1977), Crystal (op.cit.), Graddol (op.cit.)) has given rise to a concern with the maintenance of mutual intelligibility, largely defined in linguistic terms. While not denying the importance of linguistic competence as a basis for communication, it seems to me that in any discussion of the role of

English as an International Language and of the issues involved in maintaining standards (see, for example, Quirk, 1985, 1990) and safeguarding intercomprehensibility, competence needs to be defined more broadly. As Kachru (op.cit.:28), puts it

> In the international context one must ask: What does the term 'communicative competence' mean for English?

Canale and Swain (1980, 1983) and, more recently, Bachman (1990), have addressed the issue of communicative competence, albeit not with the express intention of answering Kachru's question. Drawing on the earlier definition of communicative competence proposed by Hymes (1972), Canale and Swain proposed three sub competencies within their model of communicative competence:

> **Sociolinguistic:** the individual's understanding of social relations & the potential impact such understanding has for communication, and for choosing what to say that is appropriate
>
> **Discourse:** the user's knowledge of rules of discourse, of how spoken and written texts are organized, and what might influence whether they are considered to be well formed
>
> **Strategic:** the way in which the language user, when faced with a communicative problem, improvises his or her way to a solution; is compensatory in function.

Bachman, in a further development, has added pragmatic competence, consisting of illocutionary, sociolinguistic and lexical competencies. Thus competence embraces not only appropriateness -- that is, sociolinguistic competence -- but also the communication of speaker intentions -- that is, illocutionary competence. In his revised model, Bachman also extends the scope of strategic competence, which performs a mediating role between meaning and intentions (i.e., the message which is to be conveyed), underlying competencies, background knowledge and context of situation. Strategic competence carries out this role by determining communicative goals, assessing communicative resources, planning communication, and then executing the plan. Whereas in the earlier model, strategic competence was seen to be compensatory, in this extended definition, it has an executive function.

In defining the nature of these various competencies, it is the native speaker who is taken as the ideal. However, as is pointed out by Davies (1995:127), in the context of proficiency in ELT,

> The native speaker is a fine myth: we need it as a model, a goal, almost an inspiration. But it is useless as a measure; it will not help us define our goals.

Importantly, for the purposes of my argument,

> it is, after all, just not the case that all 'native speakers' share the same sociolinguistic competence (op.cit., 156)

So, then, if the sociolinguistic competence of even inner-circle speakers needs to be relitavised, it will be necessary to take an even broader view of such competence when extending the term to embrance speakers of all three circles.

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4. Intercultural Competence & English as an International Language

In fact, as Thomas (1984) points out, it is differences in pragmatic competence which can be problematic in cross-cultural discourse. Likewise, when considering English as an international language, it is likely to be pragmatic failure which affects communication, rather than the grammatical and lexical features commonly taken as being problematic. Furthermore, as Thomas argues, it is possible to have achieved a very high level of linguistic proficiency, while having a relatively low level of sociopragmatic proficiency. This can result in such speakers using language which for some reason is deemed inappropriate, incomprehensible or even offensive. Why?

To answer this question, I will refer to two illustrative incidents which I will then discuss as a way of unpacking pragmatic competence as an aspect of inter-cultural capability.

Example 1

A Canadian manager has been posted to the Athens office of his organization. He is assigned a Greek secretary. On a daily basis, he assigns work to her. One day, she complains to a colleague, 'I wish he would just tell me what to do instead of asking me. After all, he's the boss and I'm here to do what he wants.'

Example 2

Beginning a visit to Seoul, I found that the telephone in my room wasn't working properly. When I dialled a number, although I could hear the person at the other end, they couldn't hear me. In other words, there was one-way communication, which isn't much use on a telephone when only the verbal channel is available for the exchange of messages. Since I couldn't phone anyone for assistance, I went down to the hotel concierge to request her to ask housekeeping to send someone to collect a bag of laundry from my room and to arrange for a technician to come and fix the telephone. The concierge immediately acted upon my request, and having called housekeeping, she said to me:

'I think you had better wait in your room.'

4.1 Sociopragmatic Competence

In example 1, we have a mixture of assumptions about the rights and obligations of two parties in a relationship characterized by asymmetrical distribution of power and the way this power will be exercised and acknowledged. The Canadian boss brings with him the expectation that power distance between boss and secretary is to be minimized by attending to

the face wants of the subordinate party. This is done by the use of such politeness strategies as seeming to give the subordinate the option not to perform a requested act by using conventional indirect requests, such as 'Could you type this letter?' Thomas (1995:161) observes that:

> allowing options (or giving the appearance of allowing options) is absolutely central to Western notions of politeness....

Clearly, a Canadian secretary knows that a direct, on-record refusal would be face threatening to her boss -- and job-threatening to herself. To avoid threats to either, she could employ indirect refusal strategies -- including hints -- which would avoid on record refusal, thus sustaining the appearance of harmony because, as Green (1989:147, cited in Thomas 1995) points out, sustaining appearances is important.

> ...the speaker is really only going through the motions of offering options or showing respect for the addressee's feelings. The offer may be a facade, the options nonviable, and the respect a sham. It is the fact that an effort was made to go through the motions at all that makes the act an act of politeness.

In the Canadian-Greek case, the two parties have not yet negotiated a shared set of norms. The secretary acknowledges and accepts the power difference between herself and her boss. She is dependent on him for work, and she accepts that he has the right to tell her to carry out various secretarial duties, and that she has the obligation to complete them. To her, the Canadian boss seems insincere when he requests her to do something for him because as far as she is concerned, the power relationship admits no options -- so why pretend that she has a choice? Why not simply tell her to do the typing? In short, she does not interpret the deference which her boss displays towards her as an act of politeness.

What we have here, therefore, are sociopragmatic differences between the two parties. The Canadian boss has carried his sociopragmatic norms into the Greek setting, where they violate the expectations of his Greek subordinate. Each is defining and acting within the situation differently. Clearly, their encounters are not unsuccessful: the boss makes requests for action, the secretary completes the requested work. However, at least one of the parties feels dissatisfied with the mismatch of styles. Neither party is fully interculturally competent. Both parties need to find a way of analyzing and dealing with the misunderstanding. After all, if the secretary constantly doubts the sincerity of her boss, the relationship is threatened. And if the boss is unaware of the effects of this, he is operating under an illusion which may one day be rudely shattered.

4.2 Pragmalinguistic competence

In the Korean example, the concierge was demonstrating solicitousness for the guest, except that, when she said 'I think you had better wait in your room', she was using a form of words which, as far as her guest was concerned, did not quite match her intentions given the status relationships involved. What she said would, in a comparable British context, typically be used to indicate a recommendation made by a speaker with some authority or power over the hearer by virtue of status or knowledge. Furthermore, it will be assumed that the speaker's superior authority will be acknowledged by the hearer, who will accept the limitation on their freedom of action implied by the speaker's recommendation. In this particular event, however, the status roles were such that the hearer, a hotel guest, is typically regarded as

being superior in status to a hotel employee. Within an Anglo-American context, it is generally inappropriate for subordinate to make a recommendation to a superordinate, even when the proposed action is for the benefit of the latter -- that is, even if the speaker is demonstrating solicitousness towards the hearer. Indeed, demonstrating solicitousness requires a balancing act between displaying concern for the other party, while at the same time observing the politeness principles of avoiding imposition and allowing choice. Rather than use a form of words which carry the force of a recommendation, therefore, the speaker could still have indicated her solicitousness by using a tentatively expressed suggestion, such as:

> ' If you'd like to wait in your room, someone will be along shortly.'
> ' Perhaps you could wait in your room until someone comes from housekeeping.'
> 'Someone will come to your room shortly.'

All of these acknowledge that it is up to the hearer to exercise his freedom of action -- although not to return to his room to await the service providers would, of course, be rather perverse. By using such conventionally polite suggestions, the speaker would not have given the impression of imposing on the hearer. In this way, the speaker's language would have matched her intentions.

These examples have illustrated two dimensions of paragmatic competence at the level of interpersonal interaction. In the first example, we were considering **sociopragmatic** competence (Thomas, 1983, 1984:226), which involves the assessment of social parameters affecting linguistic choice: size of imposition, the social distance between speaker and hearer, and their relative rights and obligations. The assessment of these factors is realized in the kinds of topic choices that are made, the exercise of floor control and turn-taking and the kinds of politeness strategy deemed appropriate given the perception of the respective status and power of participants.

In the second example, we were dealing with **pragmalinguistic** competence (Thomas, op.cit., White, 1993), involving the matching of linguistic form to speaker's intention, often in aspects of highly conventionalized usage, such as is common in service encounters. Both sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic problems can and do occur in inter-cultural communication because of differences between parties in their

- definition of the communicative event itself
- understanding of their rights and obligations as interactants
- perception of relative status and social distance
- interpretations assigned to specific linguistic forms.

Such differences can be related to differences in subjective culture, that is, intangible attitudes, values, feelings.

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5. The 'Culture' in Intercultural

5.1 Culture as coherent system

This now brings us to the term 'culture', which is defined in a multitude of ways. I will consider three of them. The first defines culture as a closed, coherent system of meanings in which an individual participates. Culture is something 'out there', and an inter-cultural event is one in which 'cultures collide' (Blommaert, 1995:20). Culture is separated from the individuals or the event itself, being viewed both as the source of a problem and as a means of explaining the problem away without, however, solving it. Cross-cultural comparison, analagous to contrastive linguistics, identifies differences, and these are used to account for or to predict communication problems.

Scovel (1994) is critical of such an approach, warning that

> As long as we remain proccupied with simplistic cross-cultural contrasts between societies..., I do not believe we will gain much insight into the relationship between culture and SLA. What we need are approaches which begin with these contrasts, but include variations within the target culture and the ways in which both the mother and target cultures vary from cultural universals (p.217).

An alternative approach to the study of variations is to begin with the features of the inter-cultural event itself, and it is this to which I will now turn.

5.2 Culture as context dependent

This second view is one in which culture becomes context- and situation-dependent; it is not seen as an a-priori influence upon communication. Thus culture is part of the event and not something external to it. Yet, as Blommaert points out, no one's culture can be 'zero-ed' because we each occupy a sort of 'ethnic habitus' that makes us part of our culture group and distinct from members of other groups.

Intercultural communication then becomes something that is negotiated at local level by participants, involving mutual adaptation and the creation of a third space different from the 'home' spaces of participants, and shared by all. Difficulties may arise, of course, in the process of negotiation through limitations in the sociopragmatic and strategic competence of some or all participants. After all, there are individual differences in these competencies, and as Agar (1994) reminds us, we have to remember that in any inter-cultural encounter, 'it's persons not cultures that are in contact'. Although people have mappings (or schemata) in their heads, the contact itself is situated in a specific time and place. Furthermore, as Blommaert suggests, while there will be some limitations on what individuals can communicate and understand in any given encounter, 'the possible set of exchangeable meanings has to be constructed in the course of the interaction itself' during which participants establish a consensus which is 'a one-time construct'. This process will involve building what Agar calls 'new frames' and engaging in a process of mutual accommodation. The 2-way process of accommodation will involve scrutinising each other and the context, searching for common ground, and developing a dialogue.

Clare Kramsch (1993), who also advocates a dialogic approach in which participants (teachers, learners, interactants) are involved in the challenge of changing frames of reference, suggests that:

> one of the primary tasks in the development of cross-cultural competence should be not so much to fill one frame with different contents, but, rather, to make explicit the boundaries of the frame and try out a different one (p.223)

Critiquing different approaches, she makes it clear that:

> What we should seek in cross-cultural education are less bridges than a deep understanding of the boundaries. We can teach the boundary, we cannot teach the bridge. (Op.cit., 228)

She then outlines various ways of training learners ' to adopt different ways of seeing', including the use of personal constructs and role play, the purpose of which is not to reach a right or wrong solution:

> nor even to find ways of bridging the gap, but to identify and explore the boundary and to explore oneself in the process (op.cit. 231.)

through dialogue in which:

> each person tries to see the world through the other's eyes without losing sight of him or herself (ibid.)

The goal is neither balance nor consensus,

> but a paradoxical, irreducible confrontation that may change one in the process.

So, then, in this view, inter-cultural capability is transformative, not simply additive.

5.3 Culture as ideology: language and power

The third view sees culture as ideology, which takes us from the local to the national and international, and to a position which has come to occupy an important place in contemporary discussions of the role of English as an International Language. The view of culture as ideology necessarily involves issues of power and domination, associated with the kind of critique of linguistic imperialism presented by Phillipson (1992), who in the world-wide spread of English discerns the imposition of the language on the outer circle by inner circle interests. His is a deterministic view of linguistic imperialism which largely overlooks local cultural politics and which tends to cast members of the outer circle in the role of helpless and largely unconscious victims of a linguistic hegemony in which they are persuaded to connive, a view strongly criticized by Davies (1996). It is also a view which is at odds with Fiske's interpretation of popular culture (Fiske 1989) -- of which English as an International Language is undoubtely a component . Fiske refuses to see popular culture as 'the culture of the subdued'. Instead it is a way whereby people use, abuse and even subvert products to create their own meanings and messages. In other words, people are agents and not merely objects in the creation of their own meanings. Similarly, the spread and use of English as an International Language depends on the functions and meanings developed by its users.

Like Phillipson, Pennycook (1994) also proposes a link between the English language, colonialism and global capitalism, but when discussing the complex linguistic situation in Singapore, he points out that while:

> it is important to recognize that many aspects of Singaporean culture are part of a global network of discursive systems...it is important not to assume a deterministic relationship of imperialism here. It is impossible to discuss the worldliness of English without looking in depth at the local cultural politics of Singapore, and particularly at the discourses of pragmatism, multiracialism and meritocratism that define many aspects of Singapore life (op.cit., 225)

What Pennycook says of Singapore can be extrapolated to other settings. Indeed, although Malaysia and Singapore are taken as case studies to illustrate the cultural politics of English, what they illustrate has much broader implications.

Pennycook describes the tension which exists between English, on the one hand, seen as a neutral, pragmatic language, essential for national development, but on the other, seen as a language tied to undesirable forms of Western culture, values and knowledge which threaten local cultural identities. The response to this conflict is the protection of citizens from this immoral, decadent way of life by combating English through an emphasis on local languages, cultural values and practices. This gives rise to 'conflicting discourses' of the kind noted by Prodromou (1988) in his account of the impact of English in contemporary Greece and by Pennycook in Malaysia and Singapore.

5.3.1 Conflicting discourses

Firstly, there is the discourse of Pragmatism in which English is a neutral language necessary for economic growth, as in English for science and technology. Secondly, there is the discourse of Multiracialism, in which English occupies the role of a neutral language that bridges the 'problem' of ethnicity -- English as a bridge across the races. Thirdly, there is the discourse of Meritocratism in which English is a key to social mobility and socio-economic status. Here, English fills the role of gatekeeper to social and economic prestige.

Pennycook points out that it isn't only the power and position of English globally that needs to be considered, 'but also the struggles around English in its local contexts' (op.cit., 219) characterised by these competing discourses. He also makes the point, overlooked by Phillipson, that using English doesn't necessarily imply a deterministic imposition of cultural and discursive frameworks, since English can be used and appropriated in different ways, as in 'writing back' from the outer to inner circles. In short, English is taken over and employed by outer circle users as a way of asserting cultural and political independence from inner circle interests. Pennycook sees the teacher's role as giving learners access to those standard forms of the language linked to social and economic prestige as a step towards encouraging them 'to find ways of using the language that they feel are expressive of their own needs and desires...so that they can start to claim and negotiate a voice in English.' (op.cit., 317) In other words, they learn to resist or evade the forces that would subordinate them.

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6. Conclusion

I would like to conclude by returning to where I began and reviewing where we have been. As we have seen, English as a World Language performs a significant role within and between each of Kachru's three circles. Although the spread of English, as Pennycook has noted:

> ...produced the need to define and to control the language, to produce a body of knowledge that held the language and its desired meanings firmly in the hands of the central colonial institutions... (op. cit., 104)

today, as Schnitzer (1995:230) points out, deviance from the model of the monocultural native speaker 'is rampant' so that there are likely to be

> interesting divergences and commonalities in the Englishes used across languages and cultures. Intercultural communication is the order of the day, not integration into native-English-speaking cultures.

Inter-cultural communication involves individuals in contact, negotiating meanings at local level, but drawing on frames and norms derived from their own cultural habits and identities. Successful inter-cultural communication in English, the shared language, will involve reframing and developing new norms through raising and refining learners' 'metapragmatic awareness' (Thomas, 1983). It will also involve a process of mutual transformation, and not merely a one way mapping of conventions from one culture onto another.

The effectiveness of such transformation cannot be isolated from the cultural politics of English in the particular sites in which such encounters take place, since, in the discourse of meritocratism, English serves as a gatekeeper to social and economic prestige. The teaching of English as an International Language, informed by a critical analytic framework (Pennycook, op.cit.) and 'conscientization' (Kramsch, op.cit., 243) will need to be conducted in full awareness of the multiple purposes and roles of English, and of the local as well as global effects of cultural politics. Inter-cultural capability in English will involve the development of a broadly defined communicative competence, especially the development of pragmatic and strategic competencies, so that users of English as an International Language will have the means of participating effectively in the variety of discourses with which English is associated. They will also have a means of challenging and changing these discourses in creative and empowering ways. In this process, English as a World Language will evolve, becoming a means whereby its users in all three circles are able to develop their inter-cultural capability and -- who knows? -- achieve high levels of mutual understanding -- in spite of the barrier of a common language.

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