English as a Multicultural Language in Asia and Intercultural Literacy*

Nobuyuki Honna

Aoyama Gakuin University

Abstract

As most Asian countries recognize English as an indispensable language for intranational or international communication, they are increasingly committed to strengthening and improving English language teaching (ELT). In parts of Asia where English serves as an official language and ELT expands and succeeds, people start speaking English among themselves. Wherever this happens, a set of indigenous patterns develop, the kind of patterns people find easier to handle. The same situation can develop in "English as an international language" countries, too. We need to fully understand these aspects of present-day English if we are to deal with their various ramifications. One important issue is diversity management. Based on the observation that a common language is not a uniform language but a diverse language, this paper argues that a plausible way of managing the multiculturalism of Asian English is not standardization but intercultural literacy.

(1) Introduction

English now is said to be an international language or a global language. When we say this, do we really understand what it means? This is a profoundly important question we have to ask ourselves in Japan now in view of the "developing Japanese with English abilities" initiatives introduced by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) in 2003 in an effort to improve Japan's English language teaching (ELT). Actually, it seems extremely difficult to comprehend various sorts of logical deductions stemming from the current state of the English language.

English today is a unique language, functionally and structurally quite different from other languages of the world (see Diagram 1on the next page). Functionally speaking, English has conspicuously spread among non-native speakers as a sizable number of Asian, African, Pacific, and other countries designate it as their official, associate official, or working language. In view of the situation, millions of students are learning English as a language for wider communication. According to a survey conducted by Japan's National Institute of Language in 1999, people of the world unanimously consider English as the most useful language for world-wide communication.

Thus, from a Japanese point of view, English is not the language for us to use only with Americans, the British, or any other native speakers of English. Rather, English is the language for us to use with Chinese, Koreans, Bruneians, Thais, Malaysians, Singaporeans, and other Asians. It is the language for us to use with Europeans, Africans, Arabians, South

Americans, and many others. That English has become an international language means that it has become a language for multinational communication
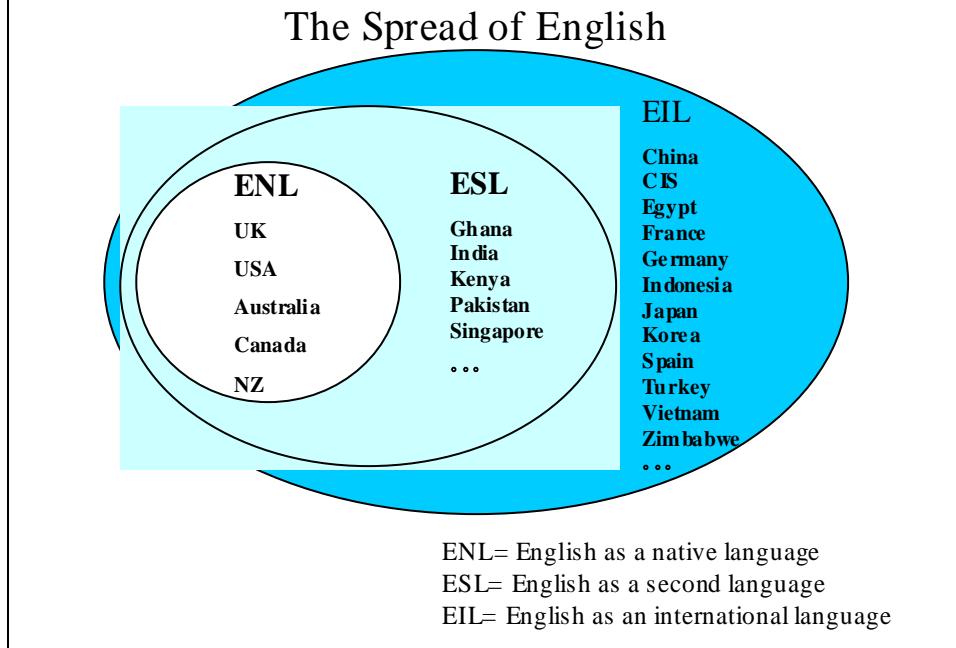

Diagram 1

Two Major Characteristics of Contemporary English

1. Global Spread:
   Internationalization of English

2. Development of Distinct Varieties:
   Diversification of English

Structurally speaking, as the spread of English progresses, English is bound to reflect a diversity of disparate cultures. Importantly, non-native speakers are taking advantage of this additional language and are exploring new dimensions of English usage, phonetically, lexically, syntactically, semantically, and pragmatically. Since no language is used to its fullest extent by its native speakers, there is always much room left for non-native speakers to exploit it in their unique ways. As a matter of fact, they are using English in non-Anglo-American cultural contexts. Actually, when Japanese speak English with Singaporeans, there is no room for American or British culture. It would be clumsy if the Japanese had to represent American ways of behavior and the Singaporeans the British version while speaking English to each other. The case is true with English conversations between Turks and Brazilians, French and Swedish people, or any other interactions there may occur on the global stage.

What actually happens is that Japanese behave like Japanese and speak English in Japanese ways, and so do Indonesians, Vietnamese, Italians, Danish, and many others respectively. This demonstrates that English now is a multicultural language (see Diagram 3 below).
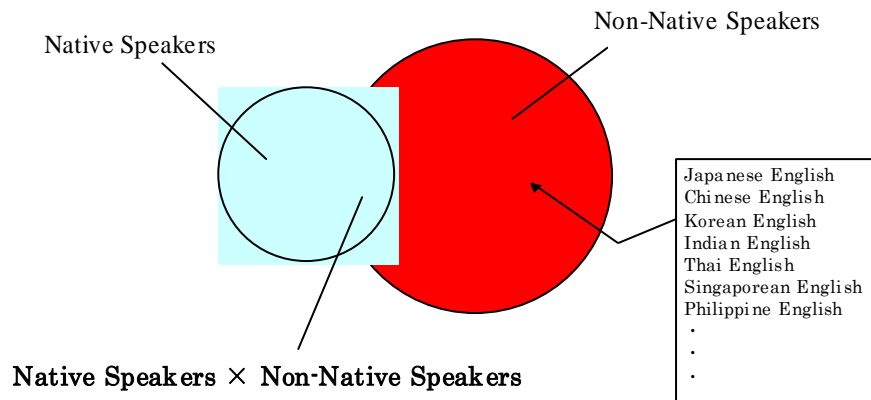
Diagram 2

The Spread of English

EIL

ENL

UK

USA

Australia

Canada

NZ

ESL

Ghana
India
Kenya
Pakistan
Singapore
° ° °

China
CIS
Egypt
France
Germany
Indonesia
Japan
Korea
Spain
Turkey
Vietnam
Zimbabwe
° ° °

ENL= English as a native language
ESL= English as a second language
EIL= English as an international language

(2) Diffusion and Adaptation

In order to grasp this English language trend, it is important that we fully understand the correlation between diffusion and adaptation. If things are to spread, they must most normally mutate. For example, if you wanted to start a MacDonald's store in India, what would you do? You could not serve beef hamburgers there because cows are holy and beef is taboo in Hinduism which is the religion of most people in India. MacDonald's stores in India now are popular spots because they serve chicken or mutton burgers, a great change needed to ensure the spread of this fast-food chain in a place whose cultural tradition is so different from the original country. We simply cannot internationalize things and ideas without having them accommodated to the customs and needs of people who are supposed to use them for their own purposes (see Diagram 4).

This principle apparently applies to language, too. The fact is that the internationalization of English has prompted the diversification of English. The diversification is the cost we have to pay for the internationalization of English. Here, it is important to recognize that English has become an international common language simply because it is being enriched as a culturally diverse language.

Diagram 3

Spread of English Among Non-Native Speakers:
English as a Multinational / Multicultural Language

Native Speakers

Non-Native Speakers

Japanese English
Chinese English
Korean English
Indian English
Thai English
Singaporean English
Philippine English
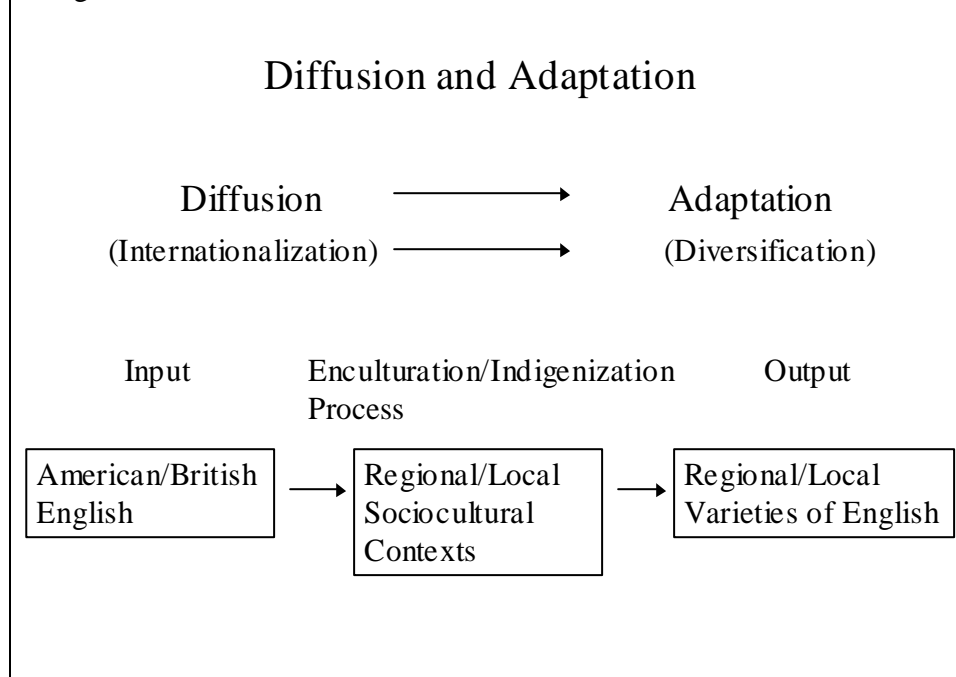.
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Native Speakers × Non-Native Speakers

In his *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (1996: 61), Samuel Huntington claims that English as a lingua franca is devoid of ethnicity, culture, or identity. In the same vein, people tend to believe that a common language is a uniform language. But this is not true. English can be a common language for multinational communication only when its cultural diversity is accepted. A common language has to be a multicultural language. A lot of allowances have to be made and differences accepted. If American English standards, for example, were imposed upon all users of English, English would never become an international common language.

(3) English in Asia

The spread of English as a language for multinational and multicultural communication utilized by an enormous number of non-native speakers shows that English is becoming more and more de-Anglo-Americanized in many regions of the world. This creates a new role that English can play in the contemporary world.

As a matter of fact, English has become a very important language in Asia. It is a working language for intranational and international communication in many parts of the region. According to a report, 350 million people speak English for various purposes in Asia, a number that is close to the combined populations of the United States and Great Britain, where English is a native tongue for most citizens.

Diagram 4

Diffusion and Adaptation

Diffusion   ⟶   Adaptation

(Internationalization)   ⟶   (Diversification)

Input   Enculturation/Indigenization   Output
             Process

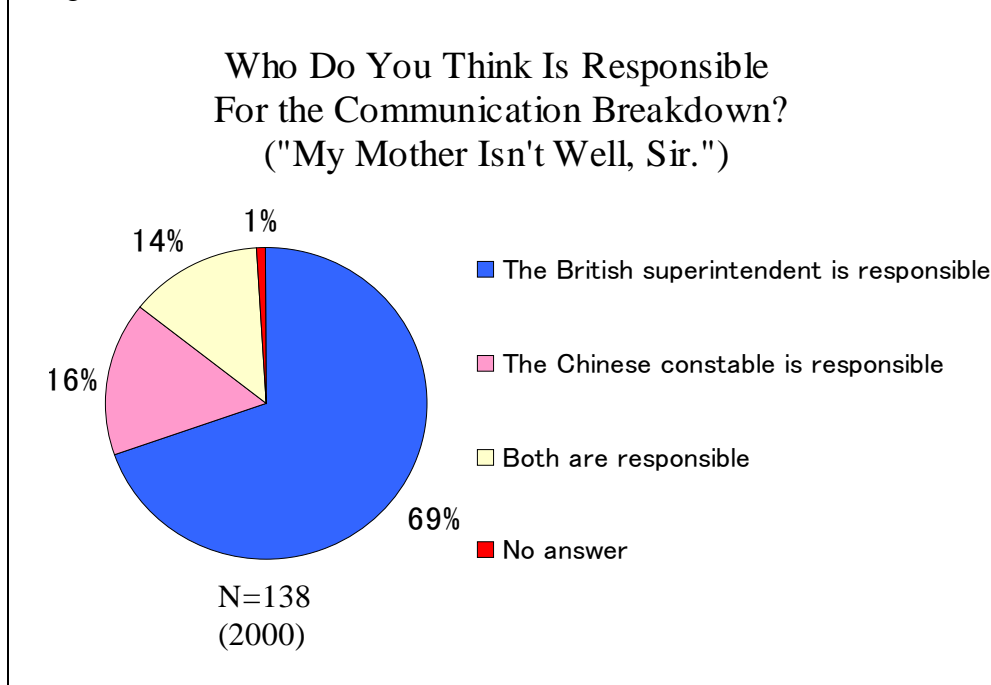| American/British English	→	Regional/Local Sociocultural Contexts	→	Regional/Local Varieties of English

Home and abroad, indeed, many Japanese are finding themselves using English more frequently with other Asians than with people from the UK or the USA. As we are expected to have more and more contact with them in the fields of business, tourism, overseas studies, environmental protection, or regional cooperation, it is high time that we started exploring issues in English communication in Asia.

Since we are all non-native speakers, we feel relaxed when we speak English with each other. Allowed to be less aware of the native-speaker standards, we find ourselves speaking English more flexibly and liberally. We should be more conscious of the significance of this fact in ELT.

In much of Asia, English is no longer a colonial import. Throughout the region, English is the language of education, culture, business and, above all, regional cooperation. English-speaking Asians claim English as their own language. Filipino poet Gemino Abad once said, "The English language is now ours. We have colonized it, too."

This is not a political statement. This is simply a descriptive remark concerning the current state of the English language in this part of the world. Thus, students are becoming more and more aware that English is an indispensable Asian language. The likelihood of using English with other Asians motivates an increasing number of students to learn the language better.
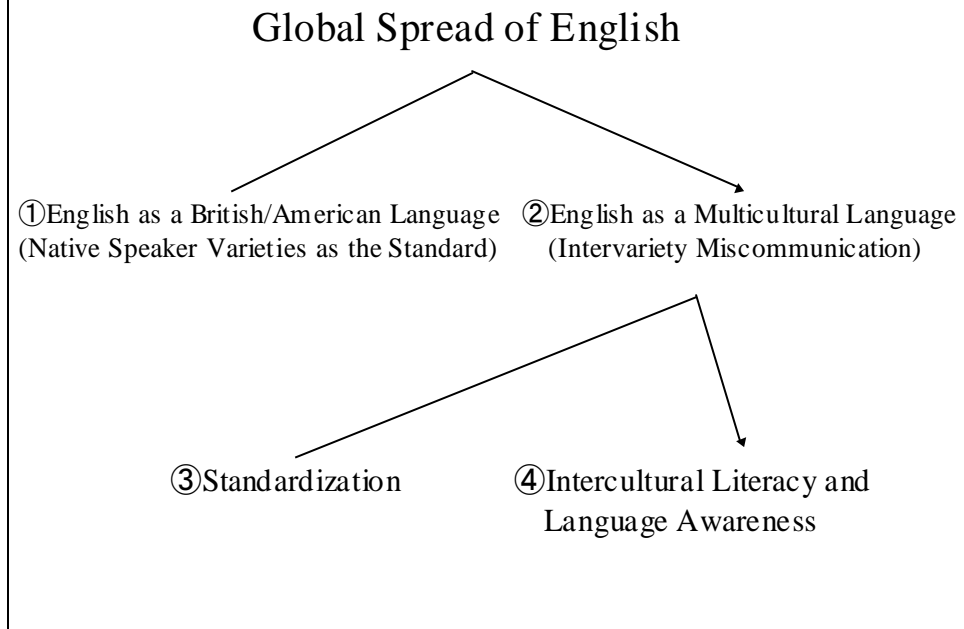
Diagram 5

Who Do You Think Is Responsible
For the Communication Breakdown?
("My Mother Isn't Well, Sir.")

1%

14%

16%

69%

■ The British superintendent is responsible

■ The Chinese constable is responsible

□ Both are responsible

■ No answer

N=138
(2000)

This story was told me by an Australian friend of mine who was sitting in the office of a superintendent of the Hong Kong Police Force prior to the territory's return to China in 1997. The superintendent was British. In those colonial days, almost all the police officers were expatriates and the sergeants and constables were all locals. My friend found himself there because he worked for a company who had been asked to explain the English-language communication problems that were common in the police force at that time.

There was a quiet knock at the door and in came a young Chinese police constable. He was, of course wearing his uniform. He saluted the superintendent and stood smartly to attention in front of the large wooden desk.

Diagram 6

Global Spread of English

①English as a British/American Language   ②English as a Multicultural Language
(Native Speaker Varieties as the Standard)   (Intervariety Miscommunication)

③Standardization   ④Intercultural Literacy and
Language Awareness

"Yes?" enquired the superintendent.

"My mother is not very well, sir", started the constable.

"Yes?" repeated the superintendent, a frown appearing on his brow.

"She has to go into hospital, sir", continued the constable.

"So?"

"On Thursday, sir".

The superintendent's frown was replaced by a look of exasperation. "What is it that you want?" he asked sternly.

At this direct question, the constable's face fell and he simply mumbled, "Nothing, sir. It's all right", and turned and left the room.

As soon as the door had closed the superintendent turned to me and said:

"You see. A classic case. They can't get to the point."

"So, what would you want him to say?" I asked.

"Well, instead of beating around the bush, he should come straight to the point. He obviously wants some leave so he can look after his mother. He should ask for leave and not waste my time going on about his poor mother."

"You want him to say something like, 'Can I have some leave please, sir?'"

"Yes, exactly", replied the superintendent.

(Source: Honna, et al., 2000, pp. 16-17)

As is presented in Diagram 5, most students expressed sympathy with the Chinese constable transferring a common Chinese way of making a request into English. They judged that the British superintendent, not the Chinese constable, was responsible for the communication breakdown because he was not able to accept the Chinese style even though he perfectly understood what his interlocutor said and meant.

The U.S.A. and the U.K. used to be the places to go to in order to learn English. But now this urge has comparatively weakened. "The best way to learn English is to go to a country where English is spoken." This is an expression Japanese students learn in the classroom. Now some Asian countries are added to a list of their destinations. A Japanese university which started a new Department of World Englishes in 2002 decided to send all its 1st year students to Singapore's RELC (Regional Language Centre) for English language training in Asian contexts.

College students in Japan are being informed of English as a multinational and multicultural language. High school teachers of English are showing positive attitudes toward the concept of English as such. Business people know that that is what English is all about, widely confronted with different varieties of English that are used in Asia and other parts of the world

In this connection, I have a survey result to share with you. After a few lectures on World Englishes, I asked my students about their reactions to a story on a failure in communication between a British superintendent and a Chinese constable that had occurred in the police department in Hong Kong before its return to China.

What is important in intercultural communication is one's capability and willingness to understand what the other has to say, not the disposition to impose one's values and norms upon the other. Actually, with some degree of intercultural awareness, one is capable of understanding the other even if the two persons' communication styles are different.

In this regard, the students' reactions were a remarkable departure from the traditional assumption that normative speakers should conform to native speakers' communication styles by all means. This was a prominent change in attitude that was made possible by recognizing English as a multicultural language.

Actually, Asian speakers of English would not have much difficulty handling a similar situation. In a Hong Kong branch of a Japanese company, an English-language conversation between a Chinese subordinate and a Japanese superordinate might run like this:

Chinese: My mother is not very well, sir.

Japanese: Oh, I'm sorry. You must be worried.

Chinese: She has to go into hospital, sir.

Japanese: When?

Chinese: On Thursday, sir.

Japanese: If you want to take a leave, I suggest you do not hesitate to ask. Take one when needed.

Furthermore, we could infer our communication partner's request immediately and might even volunteer a solution, such as:

Chinese: My mother is not very well, sir.

Japanese: Oh, you must be worried. Would you want to take a leave and take care of your mother?

Very often, Asian speakers of English deviate from American or British norms of communication and thereby understand each other and establish rapport. We could communicate with each other better when we did not follow the native speakers' norms than when we did.

(4) The Multiculturalism of English as an Asian Language

Asian varieties of English are diverse, however, with different social roles attached to the adopted language. Each country has used the language in its traditional cultural and linguistic contexts, thereby producing a distinct variety characterized by unique structural and functional features. Proficiency levels also differ with "English as a second language" (ESL) countries producing more skillful speakers than "English as an international language" (EIL) counterparts.

As most Asian countries recognize English as a useful language for intranational or international communication, they are increasingly committed to strengthening and improving English language teaching. Most ^ prominently, they start teaching English at the elementary school level. While primary school English is common in ESL countries, many EIL countries are now following suit, including Japan, China, and Korea. In parts of Asia where English

serves as an official language, and where ELT expands and succeeds, people start speaking English among themselves. Wherever this happens, a set of indigenous patterns develop, the kind of patterns people find easier to handle.

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

As a matter of fact, the forms and uses of English in Asia are enormously influenced by other Asian languages. While the influence often gets blurred in syntactic superposition, it is visible in lexical and idiomatic borrowing. Let me give you some examples of "face" from Singapore and Malaysian English, where Chinese phraseologies apparently are reflected.

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

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

2. This saved me a great deal of face.

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

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

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

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

In this connection, it has to be stressed that although these phrases are not part of British English or American English, they are not to be denigrated or stigmatized. If they are useful for certain purposes in Singapore and Malaysian societies, they tend to get deeply rooted there. Just because nonnative speakers do not use English the way native speakers do, does not mean they are wrong or using the language incorrectly.

It is also important to note that teachers do not teach local varieties of English in the school. They teach "Standard British English" in the classroom in Singapore and Malaysia. But if people are compelled or expected to speak English, it is natural that they should do so only in the way best fit for them. The same phenomenon can spring up in countries where English is taught as an international language if we encourage our students to speak English, as we must for various good reasons.

[This paragraph sounds strange. To what does the opening 'Here" refer? and 'indications' of what? Does 'indications' mean 'examples'?] Here are some from China and Japan. These data show that many interesting revelations can emerge from socio-cultural analysis of Asian varieties of English. In China, "face" collocations abound such as: practice of face; face negotiation, maintain (strive for) some amount of face; hold up the Chinese face to the world; she hasn't showed us the least amount of face; you shouldn't have given her so much face; you are simply losing my face; a Chinese way of giving face to somebody; have

no face (left); love (desire) for face; faceless; give (grant) me some face; reject (refuse) face; rather die to save face; take my face into consideration; your face is bigger than mine; there is no faceless communication; hierarchical face; group face; care for the other's face; and many others (Jia 2005).

Similarly, Japanese very often use Japanese expressions in English. Japanese speakers of English tend to say "We went to Kyoto by car yesterday" instead of "We drove to Kyoto yesterday," an expression preferred by Americans. If a friend failed to turn up at a designated place and time for a date or an appointment, a Japanese would say, "I went there. Why didn't you come?," while an American would say, "I was there. Where were you?" Japanese often greet their international acquaintances with, "Oh, I haven't seen you for a long time. Are you OK? You haven't changed. I wanted to see you," instead of a simple "Hi, how are you?"

Furthermore, if they were thrown into an English-speaking situation and were not equipped with right phrases, Japanese speakers might begin to say:

6. He has a wide face (is well known).

7. He has a black belly (is roguish).

8. He has a tall nose (is boastful).

It would be illogical to turn down these expressions as incorrect because these are non-native. Above all things, most Japanese learners are non-native speakers, encouraged to speak English by taking fall advantage of the repertory they have acquired, however limited it might be. It would also be hard to accept the presupposition that sentences 6/7/8 above are incorrect while sentences 9/10/11 below are correct simply because they are native-based.

9. He has a bitter tongue (is critical).

10. He has a sweet tooth (is fond of sweets).

11. He has green fingers (is fond of gardening).

I believe that this potential problem of Non-native Speaker English could not be solved not by forcing a restrictive conformism. Intercultural literacy can be a solution.

(5) Language Awareness as a Measure of Diversity Management

At this juncture, I would like to address one important issue: diversity management. In order to enrich English as a multicultural language and to ensure its intervarietal communicability in Asia, it is important that we develop internationally coordinated educational programs. Most effective is the introduction of language awareness training into school curriculums of Asian countries. Language awareness aims at our clear understanding of how language is designed and how people use language.

Teaching language awareness in Britain and Europe has proved useful for students to become conscious of the function of language in multilingual and multicultural settings (Hawkins 1983). In Asian countries, we should cooperate to work for similar goals in an

attempt to overcome, for instance, the possible inconveniences (such as unintelligibility and incomprehensibility) to be caused by the spread of English as a multicultural language in this part of the world.

One thing that should be included in these programs is the study of metaphor. A cognitive and expressive device human beings are generally equipped with, metaphor relates concept A to concept B. Human beings have a propensity to use basic and concrete experiences to understand and express profound and abstract affairs.

Yet, in many countries in Asia, 'metaphor' is considered a technical term for literary criticism, one limited to the analysis of fiction and poetry. It is essential that we understand that metaphor is an operation that ordinary people employ in all domains of their daily lives based on their perception of similarities in an array of natural and social phenomena.

As is noted in the "face" expressions, the body-part lexicon is a good example. People use it to refer to various affairs imaginatively related to body parts. For instance, Japanese may refer to the head, chest (or heart), and belly as containers, each intended for a different type of contents. Thus, the head is a container of knowledge ("He crammed everything into his head."), the chest of romantic thoughts ("He has his love for her hidden in his chest.") and the belly of emotions ("He decided to contain this conversation in his belly.").

If people are aware of the structure and the function of metaphorical extension, they should not be confounded to hear Japanese say in English:

12. 1 can't read his belly.

If people saw what metaphor is involved here, they would not have difficulty making sense of this sentence: 'I can't understand what he really wants'. The idea of metonymy (or synecdoche) should also be included in the study of metaphor. The knowledge of metonymy, a type of metaphor where a part represents a whole or vice versa, can save a lot of mis- or non-communication among speakers of different varieties of English. A Japanese train conductor might say:

13. Don't put your face out of the window.

If the face were understood as representing the head here, this ubiquitous expression might not appear incorrect, nonsensical, or illogical. It is not fair if non-native expressions are turned down while native expressions are invariably upheld, such as "Get your butt over here." Significantly, metonymy is part of our cognitive system. Human beings are made to talk about Thailand as a whole simply based on a few days of experience in Bangkok. If this is true, it is right to suggest that our bio-cognitive program be employed on a culturally equal foundation.

I have found that a short introduction of metaphorical analysis to Japanese students can improve their ability of semantic interpretation of unfamiliar phrases. Students had a few hours of work on body-part words such as 'navel' and others in Japanese. For example:

14. Suginami Ward is the belly button of Tokyo (i.e. Suginami Ward is located at the center of the Tokyo).

Then, students were given English sentences like:

15. The union's strong political muscle is a threat to the nation's economic reform.

16. The government is toothless against the guerrillas.

It was immediately clear that they were able to zero in on the metaphorical meanings of "muscle" and "toothless" despite the fact contemporary Japanese does not share these semantic extensions.

Similarly, the students were quick to discover the metaphors hidden in sentences like the following (Lakoff and Johnson 1986):

17. A journalist: Mr. President, I have a question. Mr. President: Reply: OK. Shoot. (Where the metaphors LANGUAGE IS WEAPON and WORDS ARE BULLETS are relevant.)

18. He shot down all of my arguments. (Where the metaphor ARGUMENT IS WAR prevails.)

Students' performance was recorded again in spite of the fact that contemporary Japanese does not codify the metaphorical relations.

While language awareness teaching is generally and independently important, it is essential for ELT. If we develop enlightening curriculums for language awareness in ELT and other language-related subjects, we will be able to use English better as a language for international and intercultural communication while enjoying its multicultural values.

Thus, As is shown in Diagram 6 on the next page, if we are to establish English as a multicultural language and use it as an international language in Asia, we have to address the issue of diversity management. Obviously, restrictive conformism cannot be a plausible way of accommodating the multiculturalism and multiformalism of Asian Englishes, or World Englishes in wider terms. In order for us, both native speakers and nonnative speakers, to be able to use English across cultures while enjoying its multicultural values, we will need to develop socio-pedagogical concepts of intercultural literacy, of which language awareness constitutes a fundamental component.

(6) English Language Teaching in Japan

With this much said, let me now refer to some aspects of Japan's ELT situation. The aim of Japan's ELT in public education is to develop a working command of this global language and nurture international and intercultural awareness on the part of our students. That is why ELT is often considered as part of a larger endeavor of international/intercultural understanding education.

Apparently, ELT for this goal is composed of three important elements (see diagram 7): (1) understanding other cultures, (2) explaining our own culture, and (3) teaching English as an international language, not as an American or a British language. In Japan's school curriculum, however, there is a remarkable imbalance of emphasis placed on these three components.

Diagram 7

Three Elements in Teaching English as a Language for
International/Intercultural Understanding and Communication

Understanding Other Culture

ELT for IU/C

Explaining Own Culture

Teaching English as an
International Language
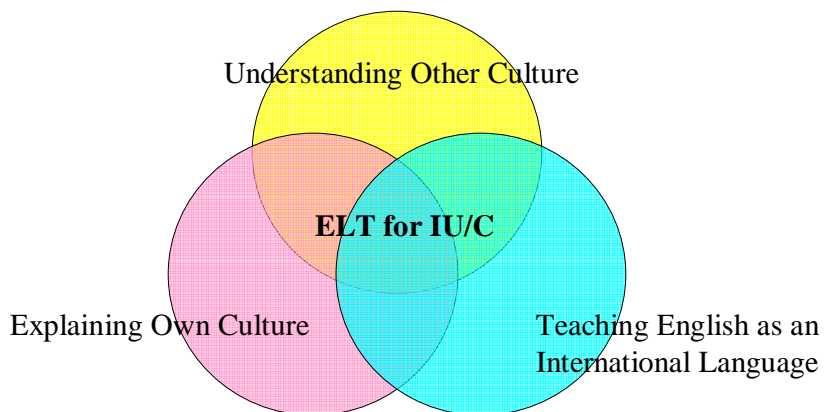
Japanese people generally see international/intercultural understanding as learning about other cultures. Consequently, awareness training in explaining Japanese ways of life explicitly is almost completely ignored. This is witnessed in many programs that municipalities organize for their citizens. Elementary and secondary school programs also are conducted in the same vein. Japanese customs are said to be too peculiar to be used in cross-cultural interaction.

Unfortunately, Japan's ELT is inclined to reinforce this tendency by putting much emphasis on reading about foreign cultures, mostly those of the U.S.A. and the U. K. With a clear understanding of English as a language for wider communication, it has now become obvious that an end should be put to this practice and a new track be prepared.

An increasing number of teachers of English are aware that Japanese people need this additional language to talk about themselves with people from abroad, to explain Japanese customs and express their opinions on international occasions. If we intensify practice of these self-expressive and explanatory communication skills in ELT, we will certainly contribute to correcting the most critical deficiency in Japan's international understanding education. I believe that this is the role ELT should play in public education. The indication is that new high school readers introduced in 2002 contain more Japanese topics.

Emphasis on expressive and explanatory communication skills in ELT has world-wide implications. If the world's ELT is culturally Anglo American oriented or dominated, what is going to happen when Japanese and Chinese meet? When they meet, it is unlikely that they will talk about London or New York.

Naturally, Japanese will be interested in China and Chinese in Japan. As such, we will have to be trained and prepared to discuss our ideas, values, and ways of life in English. English is said to be a language of information. But if we are not ready to give our information in English, we cannot take advantage of the power given the language.

To foster this cultural and linguistic proficiency, we need to provide our students with more opportunities to read and write and talk about Japan in English. We have to encourage them to talk about themselves every time they learn new words, phrases, and constructions.

Of course, comparative culture is an efficient way of doing this. Stories about different lives abroad can be used to stimulate their eagerness to talk about their families, friends, and communities. If I could have my own way, I would argue for more Asianization in the cultural content of ELT materials in Japan. For example, Japanese students should be better informed of some important aspects of English communication styles of other Asian Ws nationals. This idea is based on the fact that Japanese use English most frequently with other Asians.

Thus, the communicative approach is meant to put more value on mutual understanding than on simple mimicry and rigid pattern practice. Frequent exposure to English using environments is expected to make students aware of its varieties. The success of ELT largely depends on understanding English as a multicultural language. One of the benefits of this is that our students are assured that they can speak English but still sound Japanese. Intercultural literacy is a prerequisite for promoting English as such. In order to put all this into practice, it is essential we coordinate educational efforts based on the spirit of regional cooperation in Asia.

(7) Conclusion

The concept of English as a multicultural language is based on the fact that English is here to stay as an indispensable language for intranational and/or international communication in Asia and other parts of the world. In this paper, I have discussed a number of issues involved in recognizing and promoting English as an Asian language and teaching, learning, plus using English as such. As a diversity management approach, matters of intercultural literacy and language awareness have also been explored.

 This is a revised version of Honna (2003)

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