

Research Article

English as the Pluricentric Language: Changes within the Educational Process

Thi Chau Ngan Nguyen^{1*}

¹ University of Finance – Marketing, Vietnam

* Correspondence: ntc.ngan@ufm.edu.vn

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Abstract: The limited exposure to the native-like environment has been argued to incubate the priority of communicative meanings over language correctness or grammatical rules. This paper explores the mobility of English across contexts which are not tied to fixed rules, hence creating the varieties of Englishes. With the employment of document collection and semi-structured interview, the study first examined the diverse picture of English language used in spheres of life in some countries in Asia. It then investigated the Vietnamese teachers' perspectives on practices to promote learners' tolerance towards the emergence of nativized Englishes. The paper concludes with recommendations on methods to tailor the peculiarities of English to users in today's globalized world. Accordingly, 'good' standard English should not be the sole benchmark for competent communication in multilingual and multicultural contexts. Instead, English programs in higher education should focus on developing responsive skills and sensitivities for a mobile language repertoire.

Keywords: World Englishes (WEs); pluricentric language; nativization; communicative function; emerging paradigm

1. Introduction

Globalization has been defined in myriad ways that have reflected changing historical moments and conditions. Early work by Giddens (1990, p. 64) proposed globalization as “the intensification of worldwide social relations which link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa”. Around the same time, Appadurai (1996, p. 33) proposed globalization as disjunctural flows in a series of ‘scapes’, “ethnoscapes, mediascapes, technoscapes, financescapes, and ideoscapes”. While these positions are useful in understanding the complexity of globalization processes, the work that is of most relevance to this study is that of Blommaert (2010, p. 2) who approaches globalization as “sociolinguistic subject matter which prioritizes language: language is something intrinsically connected to processes of globalization”.

English is increasingly spoken by people from diverse linguistic backgrounds. The use of the term, ‘non-native’ speakers, to distinguish these English speakers from those for whom English served as their first language, has been critiqued for its assumption of inherent superiority and ownership. Different authors have argued for other, less deficit terms such as ‘non-English-speaking background’ (Lee McKay, 2012), ‘English as an international language’ (Kumaravadivelu, 2012; Lee McKay, 2012), ‘English as an additional language’ (Costley, 2014) in preference. However, Seidlhofer (2011) purposefully uses the terms ‘native’ and ‘non-native’ speakers to highlight the range of language practices that emerge between and within these groups.

According to Kirkpatrick (2007), the plural concept of World Englishes (WEs) has emerged to describe how the English language has been re-territorialized and appropriated into new national settings, taking on the color of local languages and cultures. With regard to WEs, Kachru (1992, 2005) mapped the current sociolinguistic profile of English in three concentric circles: The Inner Circle refers to countries such as USA, UK, and Australia where English is the first or most common native language. The Outer Circle represents countries such as Singapore, Malaysia, and India where English serves as an official, institutionalized additional language. The Expanding Circle includes countries such as China, Indonesia, and

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Vietnam where English is used essentially in English as a Lingua Franca (EFL) contexts. However, this map is not static because “the role of English may change globally in relation to social, economic, and political forces” (Pennycook, 2010, p. 680).

Taking a WEs perspective, the paper first presents some relevant literature on the widespread use of English vis-à-vis its nativization (the impact of local languages on English, Jenkins, 2006) by non-native speakers. Some common signs and adverts are then delineated which are expected to instill useful insights into the increasing usage of WEs. The study continues with the analysis of interview data that promotes more viewpoints on the adoption of English and educators’ activities to get learners more exposed to the pluricentric language in the context of globalization, and concludes with discussion and implications for teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in Vietnamese education institutions

2. Relevant literature on World Englishes

In this section of the study, the author brings together some of the key research fields from the literature. According to Kachru and Nelson (2011), English captures its major role in many scopes involving academic, diplomatic and economic activities. It is common to learn that some parts of Asia have institutionalized or nativized English such as Singapore with Singlish, Philippines, and others in the Expanding circle as China with Chinglish, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, and Vietnam. In other respects, Bhowmik (2015) argues that it appears to be impossible to characterize the norms for Standard English (SE) when its non-stop spread has rooted the more hybridized and diverse English language.

Another study conducted by Leimgruber (2013) highlighted the speed of English usage by non-native speakers which has been claimed to construct the so called “varieties” of English. The author explained that “These varieties are usually given a geographical label (‘Singapore English’, ‘Welsh English’, ‘South African English’, ‘Fiji English’, etc), and are described in terms of their pronunciation, their grammar, and their vocabulary (p. 3).” In this regard, Leimgruber (2013) introduced the typical *modus operandi* to describe the English variety through the sociolinguistic lens to shape the employment of specific characteristics regarding the phonological, grammatical, and lexical levels.

Code-switching has been argued to prevalently occur between interactions with many feasible languages. In the words of Leimgruber (2013, p. 3) “More often than not, English co-exists with other languages: for instance, Singapore English lives side by side with Mandarin, Malay, Tamil, and a host of varieties of Chinese, Dravidian, and Indo-Aryan.” On this point, interlocutors simultaneously use these languages to some extents switching from one language to another in which unexpectedly the linguistic features pertained to these languages appear to be effectively adopted to index certain social meanings (Leimgruber, 2013).

As mentioned above, interactions among non-native English speakers are continuously increasing. Suffice it to say that there should be “an awareness among WEs and ELF researchers regarding the need for pluricentric rather than monocentric approach to the teaching and use of English” (Jenkins, 2006, p. 173). Accordingly, the author suggests the recognition of systematic forms of learners’ errors as local variety. Furthermore, issues are raised in relation to interlocutors’ finding ways to accommodate communication for getting the shared meanings. Jenkins (2006, p. 174) argues that “Both pluricentrism and accommodation in the teaching and testing of English are logical developments of WEs and ELF research and far more relevant to the majority of learners than the acquisition of native-like competence.”

3. Results and Discussion

The paper explicates the theory of sociolinguistics of globalization, particularly the emerging paradigm (Blommaert, 2010) to research the language use in dynamic multicultural and multilingual contexts. In Blommaert’s (2010, p. 6) emerging paradigm, “movement of people across space is never a move across empty spaces. These spaces are filled with norms, expectations, conceptions of what counts as proper and normal language use and what does not count as such”. This creates greater potential for communicative trouble and greater demand for communicative flexibility. Another term employed in this study is pluricentric language which de-notes languages with several interacting codified standard forms, providing a national variety (Bhowmik, 2015; Clyne, 2008; Jenkins, 2006).

3.1. WEs varieties in Singapore, China, and Vietnam

Since its independence in 1965, Singapore adopted the four official languages with equal status including English, Malay, Mandarin and Tamil (Kachru & Nelson, 2011). According to the authors, “English was made the sole medium of instruction at the primary and secondary levels for the purposes of national integration and international competitiveness in the economic sphere in 1987, p. 183.” As mentioned above regarding the language nativization, there occurred the variety called “Singapore English, especially its vernacular form Singlish (Leimgruber, 2013, p.4)”. In the words of Leimgruber (2013), lexical resources utilized in this variety incorporate elements from many languages such as English, Malay, Cantonese, Hokkien. With regard to this, it is common for interlocutors to obtain code-switching to greater extents between Singlish and another language (Leimgruber, 2013).

Regarding the following photos (figure 1), people find it easy to comprehend the meanings to be transmitted.

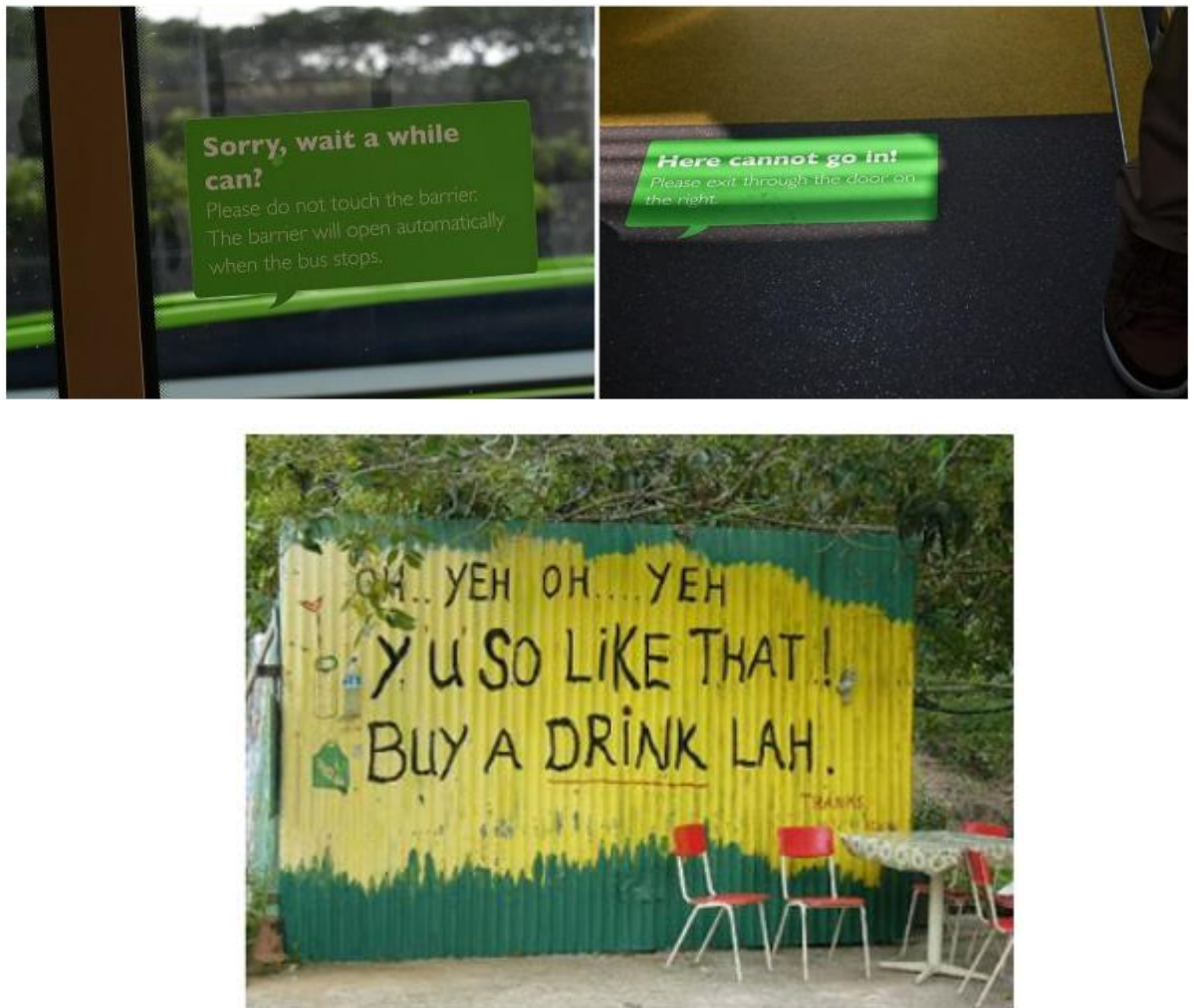


Figure 1. Examples of Singlish. *Source:* <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Singlish>

For the first two photos, it is evident to recognize that using short forms is common in Singlish. Following this, passengers are expected to get the point of communication in relation to the rules when using the public transportation. Of the fourth notice adopts the suffix “lah” in “BUY A DRINK LAH” that aims to place emphasis on the sentence as to attract customers to the shop.

In addition to the typical signs and notices, associating many languages and using short forms are also common in spoken Singlish for daily interactions. “*siao, makan, angmob*” are some of the typical examples of using other languages as in the following situations (Traveloka, 2024.):

Situation 1: **Michelle:** Last night, I was so hungry that I ate three bowls of rice and a McDonald’s meal.

Ryan: You *siao* (crazy) ah?

Situation 2: **Sarah:** Have you *makan* (eat) yet?

Adam: No, I was waiting for you so we can have lunch together.

Situation 3: **Lilian:** Oh my gosh, did you see that *angmoh* (Westerners with fairer complexion)? He's so handsome!

John: Which one?

Situation 4: **Jacky:** The movie that day good *ah?* (Translation of the full form: Did you like the movie we watched the other day?)

Anna: Yeah, good *hor?* (Translation: I know right? I loved it!)

Another popular variety of English is identified as Chinglish in which “words are ungrammatically strung together, with often inappropriate lexis and probably only a partially comprehensible pronunciation” (Qiong, 2004, p. 27). Fang (2016, p.2) argues that Chinglish is described as interference from the L1 (in this case, Chinese) during the process of English learning.” Despite some concerns about the Chinglish to be considered as pidgin, it is typically acceptable if the messages are delivered in accordance with the intended meanings achieved among the speakers. The following examples are grammatically constructed; however, the shared meanings are supposed to be prevalent.

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Figure 2. Examples of Chinglish. *Source:* <https://l1-school.com/chinglish/>

To the first notice, the words used to make up the phrase sound like to be the result of kind of literal translation. However, it seems not to be so difficult for the message to be understood as “Be careful, don’t slip over”. The second photo captures the similar interpretation, indicating the basic meaning as “Do not disturb small grass”.





Figure 3. Examples of the so-called Vietlish. *Source:* <https://tienphong.vn/nhung-loi-tieng-anh-khoi-hai-tren-bien-hieu-post618594.tpo>

Of similar preference, foreign language education in Vietnam has undergone considerable change over time. English used to be the mandated foreign language taught during the American-Vietnamese War from 1955 to 1975, but was banished from the education system (Wright, 2002) after the Communist victory. Since economic reforms in 1986, English has been widely featured on its key role for foreign cooperation and integration.

Figure 3 shows the examples of the so-called Vietlish. Despite the spelling mistakes identified in the four words “caurt, welcom, les’t, infomation”, it is evident that communicators have no difficulties to get the indented meanings. The concept *lookalike* English (Blommaert, 2012a) is adopted to explicate the interpretation of the four words mentioned. According to Blommaert (2012a), *lookalike* English is created by people who have limited English competence; however, their social knowledge of English helps them guess at meanings in that social context.

Errors in written forms are also common, and the tolerance can be accepted providing that the communicative functions are achieved to some extents. The following sentences are the typical examples:

They *works* in Vietnam, and the two reasons is good landscape and food. (subject - verb agreement)

We *have* good dinner with her family last night. (verb tense)

3.2. Teachers’ account of WEs

When asked about the English used in today globalized world with multilingual practices, the four teachers of English (hereafter named as Teacher A, Teacher B, Teacher C, and Teacher D) who have been in charge of English courses at higher education institutions in Ho Chi Minh City described a wide range of spheres. Teachers D reported as follows:

Today, English is used not just in classrooms or offices but also in everyday life, like in music, movies, and ads. Young people like music from the UK and US and English shows on Netflix. So, Vietnamese songs often add a few English lines to please their listeners.

By the same token, Teacher C highlighted the continuing rising demand for adopting English to communicate in varied contexts:

English is widely used in business, commerce, education, tourism, and entertainment. Thus, there should be a must-have intermediate language so that the parties can communicate with each other, entailing the diverse subjects ranging from businessmen, international students, salesmen to tour guides.

By Teacher C and Teacher D’s account, it can be inferred that English is widely utilized by nonnative speakers, thus creating a more diverse nonnative-nonnative interactions.

The next point delineated in the interview characterized the prescribed rules and grammar in relation to standard English. In this regards, Teacher B reported that “English increasingly becomes more flexible accepting many changes in pronunciation and grammatical structures used by multilingual and multicultural groups.” The Teacher also said that “It is an inevitable part of the language development process to be more appropriate with the local culture as well as the articulation organs that are relatively different between the groups using the language.” In Teacher A’s opinion, local impacts on English resulting in nativization can be accepted for communicative purposes. However, to some specific professions, standard English is more prioritized which demand accurate established rules and grammatical correctness to achieve authentication.

On the point regarding language correctness, Teacher C supported the idea favoring communicative functions. She said that “Since WEs are used in multicultural communication settings, the primary goal is to convey the message between speakers. This means there is more tolerance for errors, rather than strictly adhering to traditional language rules.” Accordingly, Teacher A, B, and C shared the same point mentioning accent in learners’ assessment. They argued that accent should not be included in the grading criteria because it is impossible to judge one’s local accent due to its particular traits. Providing that the examinee satisfies the criteria including clear pronunciation and fine intonation, there is no evidence for the examiner to not accept the defined marks.

Another striking point drawing linguistic researchers and teachers’ attention is the incorporation of WEs into the language curriculum. On this point, Teacher A agreed that:

It is crucial for students to be exposed to WEs. This is reflected in the way books, learning materials, and international language tests include a variety of accents like British, American, Australian, and Indian. As a result, learners will be able to understand different accents in real-world communication upon graduation.

In the same vein, Teacher B supported the view on introducing WEs practices. The Teachers said that “In addition to prioritizing standard English, learners can explore different WEs through authentic materials, such as interactions between nonnative speakers, movies, and reality TV shows.”

4. Conclusions and Implications

Concerns have been raised regarding the standards and codification of English in which the second term is more common in countries adopting WEs. In this respect, Kachru and Nelson (2006, p. 13) present “the debate between those who see a deterioration in standards and therefore reject notions of indigenized Englishes, and those who argue that indigenized Englishes demonstrate the acculturation of English to varied contexts and celebrate the creative potential of its users.” With regard to the argument between standard or nativized/indigenized Englishes, depending on the ultimate goal of English usage, interlocutors define the rules to adhere to and should be recognized as their communicative achievements. As described in the previous sections, Singlish, Chinglish, the so-called Vietlish, or other varieties such as Indian English, the priority is communicative function rather than the language correctness. In support of this respect, Teacher C highlighted the attainment of shared meanings to satisfy the aim of their communication despite their lack of standard English.

Besides the popular use of code-mixing as described in Singlish notices, lookalike English (Blommaert, 2012a) is another typical variation used for daily interactions in non-English speaking countries such as Vietnam. It appears that speakers have no difficulties to guess the intended meanings from the messages employing such lookalike English. From this stance, it can be inferred interlocutors are tolerant towards nonnative English interactions, and “it is believed that English will be used more for its communicative functions, leaving standards to be of less significance” Bhowmik (2015, p. 145).

Of the similar point, Matsuda (2003) suggests that classroom assessment should prioritize communicative effectiveness rather than only prescribed rules based on the standard norms defined by English speaking countries. To some extents, this might be the contentious issue; however, the author pinpoints that “incorporating World Englishes does not mean removing native varieties from English classes or replacing them with less-perfect ones; rather, they add to the current repertoire and thus enrich the curriculum” (Matsuda, 2003, p. 726).

The sociolinguistics of globalization enables the focus on the meaningful communication between nonnative English inter-locutors in multilingual and multicultural settings. The most crucial feature characterizing between standard and WEs varieties is the accent. In the words of Blommaert (2012b, p. 2) “English is, in a globalizing world, essentially becoming a language defined by non-native usage, and, wherever English occurs in the world, it occurs with an accent (and this includes so-called ‘accentless’ varieties). To develop English language learners’ success, “both pluricentrism and accommodation in the teaching and testing of English are logical developments of WES and ELF research and far more relevant to the majority of learners than the acquisition of native-like competence” (Jenkins, 2006, p. 174), and “ELT must promote pluricentrism as its core and diversity of English in the real sense of the term to do away with the so-called native-speaking norms for standard English” (Bhowmik, 2015, p. p156).

Recommendations on Methods to Tailor the Peculiarities of English

Instead of dismissing lookalike English as non-native, it should be considered as a sign of social change with the diversity and unpredictability of modern, mobile, and multicultural societies (Peck & Banda, 2014). In the words of Hout and Praet (2016), it would be necessary to let students be exposed to the informal language used in social media such as shop windows, posters, graffiti. In this regard, the direction helps students understand and respect the English varieties and their peculiar characteristics.

In addition to providing students with standard English forms, teachers should incorporate real-world communicative practices with odd local interpretations. Even if the English makes no sense and the users do not seem to aim for clearer communication, their ultimate desire is to acknowledge the social value associated with English.

Classroom materials cannot cover the emerging changes, hence using authentic materials works to be the best option. Real-life materials such as instruction manuals, menus, news sites, and forums, flyers, posters, and online ads will be the fascinating sources to engage students with common English forms across the globe. In addition, teachers can provide students with scenarios using lookalike English in various settings such as in a business meeting or at a social event. Also, teachers can organize games like “Guess the Meaning” to guess the meaning of lookalike English phrases or sentences or create mock dialogues to highlight how peculiar versions differ from standard English.

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