

# All Englishes Are Equal (But Some Are More Equal Than Others)\*

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## Abstract

*This paper reports on the use of English as a medium of instruction in a multilingual context. While most students are either from the Expanding Circle or from the Outer Circle, most lecturers are from the Expanding Circle. Very few (if any) are from the Inner Circle. The case study focuses on the students' written English. It finds that students who write 'native-like' English have a clear advantage. Students from the Outer Circle who use localized varieties of English face particular problems of intelligibility. The paper argues that English may not be the 'common language' it is often believed to be, and that it may introduce new inequalities.*

*Keywords.* Expanding Circle, English as a Lingua Franca, English-medium instruction, multilingualism, native speaker, outer circle.

## Introduction

The view persists that English belongs to its native speakers, and that they decide what constitutes standard language. Yet, the terms native speaker and standard language are highly problematic, even though they are rarely questioned (Seidlhofer, 2011, p. 5). I take the view that language is a discursive construct, and so is the belief in the existence of a standard language and a native speaker. As stated by Seidlhofer (ibid., p. 10), a reconceptualization of English is needed, as well as a discussion about the ownership of English, an issue raised by Widdowson (1994).

English as a lingua franca (ELF) is widely discussed in applied linguistics (for a comprehensive survey, see Jenkins, 2007 and Seidlhofer, 2011). ELF may be regarded as the variety of English which is used in an international context in which most speakers are non-native speakers of English. As the new owners of the language (or at least of this particular variety), they set the norms, based on actual - and flexible - language usage. Thus ELF may be regarded as everyone's language, and it is no longer linked to any particular culture. It does remain a question, however, if all owners are equal, or whether some might be more equal than others, as I will argue in this paper. In an international educational context, the use of English appears to be problematic, even though it is considered to be the academic lingua franca. First of all, all users of English bring in their own varieties of English ('native' as well as 'non-native'). This may lead to serious problems regarding mutual intelligibility. Secondly, language users may have different expectations of the language to be used. This may also be an issue for teachers of English, an increasing number of whom are non-native speakers of English but who tend to apply native speaker norms. They may also find it difficult to decide what is 'correct' or 'appropriate' English.

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\* The article is a summary of an ongoing research project based on my own teaching experience. Part of the research has been presented at the ELF Conference in Istanbul (2012).

The broad context of this ongoing research project is the use of English as a medium of instruction (EMI) in a non-English speaking environment. That is, for most students as well as their lecturers, English is not the first language, and it is not their first medium of instruction either. My case study refers to an Advanced Master's programme in Development Studies, taught in English for an international audience at the University of Antwerp, in the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium (Flanders). For many students, English remains a problem, even though they meet the admission requirements and in spite of language facilities provided by the Department (e.g. intensive language courses, individual coaching).

### **The Concentric Circles Model**

The varieties of English referred to in his paper can be classified by means of Kachru's Concentric Circles of English model. Although developed in the 1980s, Kachru's model is still widely used to describe the different varieties of English (see e.g. Bayyurt, 2012, p. 301). Kachru (1985) distinguishes three Circles of English: the norm-providing Inner Circle, which refers to the traditional bases of English (e.g. UK, USA), the norm-developing Outer Circle, which refers to regions where English plays an important role as a second language, often in a multilingual setting (e.g. India), and the norm-dependent Expanding Circle, where English is taught as a foreign language, and which acknowledges the importance of English as an international language (e.g. the Netherlands).

Although the Concentric Circles model has had a tremendous impact on teaching and research practices, it has shortcomings as well (see e.g. Seidlhofer, 2011, p. 5). First of all, the model is an oversimplification of reality, and there are grey areas between the Circles. This, however, has been recognized by Kachru (2005, p. 214). In spite of his claim that all three Circles are equally important (*ibid.*, p. 219), the model is commonly perceived as locating the Inner Circle and the native speakers at the centre of the model, a position which is disputed nowadays (e.g. by Jenkins, 2007 and Seidlhofer, 2011).

In Kachruvian terms, the Outer Circle comprises those regions where English serves as an official language, which is present in daily life and which is spoken as a second language (Bayyurt, 2012, p. 301). Yet, my data clearly show that there are various degrees of being an 'official' language, often in combination with one or more other languages. Moreover, English is not present in everyone's daily life (as many do not have access to English at all) whereas for other people in the Outer Circle English serves as the first language (see also Schneider, 2010). On the other hand, English is increasingly being used as a common language in the Expanding Circle, for instance in higher education. In several of these countries, English can hardly be called a foreign language anymore (e.g. in the Netherlands), and new varieties of English are emerging as a result of which these 'norm-dependent countries' may actually become 'norm-developing countries'. Due to globalization, the Inner Circle has become as linguistically complex as the other two circles, and increasing numbers of people do not speak English as a first language.

Kachru's model of Asian Englishes (which may hold for African varieties of English as well) provides a more dynamic version of the Concentric Circles as it allows

for overlap between the Circles (Kachru, 2005, p. 13). These varieties share a number of characteristics as well: English has been transplanted from either Britain or the United States as part of a (neo-) colonization process, the varieties share a number of diaspora features (e.g. creativity and innovation, as in the literature produced by Outer Circle writers), and they share mythologies about English which manifest themselves in the norms and the recognition of canons from the Inner Circle (ibid., p. 25). Within the Outer Circle, one may observe a Cline of proficiency (ibid., p. 39), ranging from 'broken English' to 'educated English', which is marked by contextual and pragmatic functions (e.g. discourse organization) as well as linguistic features (pronunciation, grammar, lexicon). There appears to be a conflict between endonormative ('localized' English) and exonormative ('English' English) models. In the latter case, there may be a discrepancy between idealized linguistic norms (e.g. approximating British English) and actual linguistic behaviour. The 'imitation model' and the rejection of localized varieties may lead to linguistic insecurity (ibid., p. 124). Although there is a growing tendency to accept endocentric norms, localized varieties of English may have adverse effects on the international intelligibility of English, as a result of which students from the Outer Circle may face particular problems in an international academic context.

Even though Kachru's 2005 model is more dynamic than his 1985 model, the very concept of concentric circles does not account for today's complex multilingual and interlingual practices, which can be referred to as 'linguistic superdiversity' (Blommaert, 2010, p. 6). All emerging varieties of English (from whichever circle) are bound to add to the linguistic ecology of English, even though not all of them have the same prestige.

## Case Study

### *Context*

For one of their introductory courses, the students have to write a critical literature review (3,500 words). As most students are not familiar with the format, both content- and language-wise, individual language coaching is provided during the writing process. Additional content support and English language classes are provided as well. Yet, for some students the assignment remains problematic.

Before the start of the course, all students take an English language placement test. They also have to complete a linguistic profile regarding their home language(s) and their language(s) of instruction, and to comment on their experience with English-medium instruction (if any). In addition, short interviews are organized to clarify some of the issues raised. An additional group discussion regarding English-medium instruction is organized at the end of the course.

### *Research Setup*

The research focus is on the students' use of written English. Considerable attention is being paid to the assignment, as for most students it is their first experience with academic writing, and for some it is their first experience with studying in English. The assignments are analysed in terms of readability, accurateness, and correctness. The

analysis takes into account grammar, wording, composition, and progress between the draft version and the final version. Each item is marked on a scale from 1 (insufficient) to 5 (excellent). Three language lecturers were involved in the project, each marking an equal number of students. Content is rated by the content lecturers. All results were compared and double-checked afterwards. In this paper, I will report on the students' linguistic profile as well as on their written assignment.

### *Students' Linguistic Profile*

The group consisted of 59 students from 22 countries. Most of these students have a multilingual background, reflecting multilingualism in the countries they come from. Although very few speak English as a first language, many speak it as a second or a third language. In their present educational context, however, they all use English as a lingua franca. A sizeable number of them had had English as their medium of instruction, although the varieties of English used may differ significantly. It should be noted that many people in these countries do not have access to English or to education at all, as illiteracy remains considerable in most developing countries. It should also be noted that English often serves as the language of the elite and may thus be the access to power (political, economic, educational, etc.). Most lecturers in the programme are native speakers of Dutch, but all of them are proficient in English (C1 of the CEFR). Most English language lecturers are native speakers of Dutch as well.

In the following survey, the Inner Circle is loosely defined as countries where English is used as a first language (L1), the Outer Circle as countries where English is used as a second language (ESL), and the Expanding Circle as countries where English is used as a foreign language (EFL). Thus the students can be grouped as follows:

**Table 1.** Overview of the students

<b>Origin</b>	<b>Number</b>
Inner Circle	2 students / 2 countries: South Africa? (1), Jamaica? (1)
Outer Circle	35 students / 10 countries: Bangladesh (4), Cameroon (1), Ethiopia (11), India (1), Kenya (4), Nigeria (1), Philippines (2), Uganda (7), Zambia (3), Zimbabwe (1)
Expanding Circle	22 students / 10 countries: Belgium (2), Colombia (2), DR Congo (3), Ecuador (1), Indonesia (1), Kyrgyzstan (1), Nicaragua (3), Palestine (2), Rwanda (1), Vietnam (6)
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>59 students</b>

Most students are from the Outer or the Expanding Circle, while very few (if any at all) are from the Inner Circle. The fuzziness of the distinction between Inner and Outer Circle may be illustrated by the students from South Africa and Jamaica, two countries which are difficult to be classified (see e.g. Rajadurai, 2005). Both students were educated in English (that is, in an L1 context), but neither of them speaks English as a first language. Yet they may be regarded as Inner Circle users of English because of their expert command of the language. Given this criterion, however, some students from the Outer and Expanding Circles might be considered as Inner Circle users of English as well.

The situation in the Outer Circle turns out to be even more complex, and not all cases can be discussed here. It is highly questionable if some of these countries can be regarded as ESL countries. Many of them have adopted English as their official or national language. For instance, Cameroon recognizes its two former colonial languages (English and French) as official/national languages. English is not an official language in Bangladesh, even though it is widely used in higher education. As conceded by Kachru (2005, p. 67), Bangladesh “falls between an ESL and an EFL country”. When considered an ESL country, Bangladesh is part of the Outer Circle, as an EFL country it belongs to the Expanding Circle. Even though Ethiopia is usually not considered an ESL country in Kachru’s sense (Schmied, 2009, p. 188), it may count as an Outer Circle country as well, given the prominence of English in its secondary and higher education.

English can be the only language of instruction or it can be introduced at a later stage, usually in secondary or higher education (as in Bangladesh or Ethiopia). Moreover, English is used more often in private than in public education, and the level of education (and the level of English) tends to be higher in private education, which is also more expensive and thus elitist. As a result, English may be regarded as the language of power. Perhaps the most striking feature about the Outer Circle is that several countries have developed and more or less institutionalized their own varieties of English (e.g. India).

One may notice huge differences in the Expanding Circle as well. Whereas in some countries English can be regarded as a second language, in other countries English still is a foreign language. English may be regarded as a second language in regions where English is very prominent in daily life as well as in the education system. These regions are also culturally and linguistically related to English (e.g. the Dutch language area). English may be regarded as a foreign language in regions whose exposure to English is more recent, whose languages are remote from English, and whose medium of instruction is not another Western language. Although English appears to be very problematic for the Asian students from Vietnam and Indonesia, it also causes major problems for the Spanish-speaking students from Central and South America as well as for the students from French-speaking Africa. Personal differences may not be underestimated either. That is, some students pick up English more easily than others. This may be due to their aptitude to language learning, although exposure to English (e.g. in a work context) and a person’s socio-economic context have to be taken into account as well. For instance, parents who are better off may send their children to English-medium schools and they are likely to have more access to English themselves. This may explain why some students have much better English than other students even if they speak the same mother tongue.

### *Analysis of the Assignment*

The analysis revealed a considerable number of problems, many of which are related to issues other than just language. It should be noted that both content and language lecturers, apart from sharing a common language and a common culture, also share academic assumptions and language ideologies ('beliefs'), which set them apart from most of their students. The students' unfamiliarity with Western paradigms, which are dominant in academia, may be exacerbated by linguistic and other barriers.

Many students had problems organizing their ideas into a coherent text (that is, coherent from their lecturers' point of view), which may be due to the students' educational and cultural backgrounds. Moreover, the genre and the register of a research paper proved to be problematic as well. Many students appeared to be unfamiliar with academic conventions, even though many of them actually teach at universities. A sizeable number of students had problems with technical issues, including the use of punctuation and capitals. The language used ranges from 'perfect' English (in terms of readability as well as correctness) to almost incomprehensible English. Most problems are encountered by students whose L1 or medium of instruction is remote from English (e.g. Vietnamese) and/or whose instruction in English was either limited or deficient in an international context. From a Western language deficiency point of view (Kachru 2005, p. 140), the language used is often 'ungrammatical', and some issues appear to be very difficult for those students whose L1 lacks these features (e.g. articles, the tense system). Sentence structure tends to be very difficult as well, both internally (combining words in a sentence) and externally (combining sentences). Vocabulary is a problem too. Words and concepts are often translated literally from one's L1 ('idiom transfer'), which may make sense for speakers who share a language, but which leads to incomprehensible English in an international context.

The problems can be summarized as follows. In terms of readability and correctness, the Inner Circle students performed best. Some of the Outer Circle students' English turned out to be problematic. Whereas some write excellent, 'Inner Circle-like' English, other students have serious problems with their English, which may be difficult to understand in an international academic context. Moreover, many students do not appear to be aware of the problems their English may cause ('This is the way we write at school'). Others referred to their 'linguistic insecurity' when writing in English.

It is quite striking that there are considerable differences between individual users of English in the Outer Circle. These differences may be attributed to different causes (see also Kachru 2005, p. 39). First, the status of English in a particular region or country. If it is officially recognized, it has more weight and it may be present at all levels of society, including education. Second, and perhaps more important, the education system. As stated by the students, private schools tend to have better English than public schools. This is indeed reflected in the students' marks for English: students who attended private schools tended to have higher grades for their assignment. Third, the individual level. Some students have had more exposure to English than other students, due to their socio-economic, linguistic or regional background. Language aptitude may also be an important factor.

In the Expanding Circle considerable differences may be observed as well. Some students write excellent English, whereas others can hardly cope with the language. The most readable and correct English was written by students whose L1 is related to English and/or who were educated in a Western educational context, either in an English-speaking country or in an English-speaking environment in a non-English speaking country (e.g. the student from Kyrgyzstan). Students whose L1 and/or MI is remote from English encounter most problems.

### **Discussion and Suggestions for Further Research**

As argued by Ferguson (1981, p. xvi), English is less and less a European language. Kachru (2005, p. 233) points out that the diasporic communities in the Outer Circle are changing the Inner Circle's linguistic and cultural ecology. Yet, Expanding Circle varieties of English (especially in Europe?) are changing the linguistic ecology of English as well, for instance in an academic context. This aspect needs further analysis. Kachru's focus on countries does not account for the tremendous differences between individual users of English, which are not due to regional factors only. More importantly, his model fails to account for the emergence of ELF and the changing relationships between the varieties of English. Kachru's arguments in favour of the decolonization of English (2005, p. 150) and the recognition of Asian and African Englishes may be vital in the construction of local identities, but these Englishes may also be particularly problematic in an academic context in which international intelligibility is of crucial importance. Thus some users of English from the Expanding Circle may have a clear advantage over some Outer Circle users. This appears to be the case for speakers of languages related to English and whose cultural background is similar to Inner Circle speakers. Further linguistic and other analysis is needed to shed more light on these observations.

The question remains which and whose language norms are to be used in an international academic context. This is a sensitive issue, as norms are ideologically loaded and culturally slanted. Global standardization may not be evident, but it appears that Inner Circle norms remain dominant in academia, as one may observe in journals, research practices, curriculum design, textbooks, language teaching and testing, etc. More research is needed to study these aspects in detail, with a particular focus on ELF in an international academic context.

### **Conclusion**

One might wonder if English really is a lingua franca (that is, a truly common language). As pointed out by Jenkins (2009, p. 204), non-native English accents are evaluated according to their proximity to Inner Circle accents, in particular British and American accents. As a result, Scandinavian or Dutch accents, which sound relatively 'native-like' (that is, British or American-like), tend to be favoured over other accents. Accents which are perceived as furthest from native English (e.g. Chinese English) receive "extremely pejorative comments" (ibid.). Similarly, there may be more tolerance towards non-native varieties of English which resemble grammatical and other features of Inner Circle English. For instance, it has been argued to accept Dutch

English as a variety of English in its own right, with its own phonological and grammatical features (e.g. Edwards, 2010). Thus, varieties of English which are more remote from Inner Circle English (including Outer Circle varieties such as Indian English) may be perceived as more 'deficient' than some Expanding Circle varieties of English (such as Dutch English). This may also be due to culture-related factors. Thus cultural and linguistic Inner Circle proximity may be a clear advantage, which may be obvious in an academic context in which Anglo-Saxon paradigms are clearly dominant. Whereas the use of English as a lingua franca may be taken for granted in an international business context (Jenkins 2009, p. 3), its use may be more problematic in an educational context, which tends to be less pragmatic than a business context. By its very nature, education is focused on writing and speaking in a correct way. Also, the use of written language (that is, in an academic context) may be more problematic than spoken language, as it tends to be more formalised. As academic language is strongly rule-governed, deviation from the rules (language, conventions) is sanctioned negatively. Moreover, Anglo-Saxon (that is, 'American') norms are still very dominant in academia.

The idea of an Inner, Outer and Expanding circle may be something of the past, as it does not reflex the complexity of today's reality. Thus Kachru's model of concentric circles might be replaced by overlapping circles, accounting for individual differences. Ideally, ELF is to be situated in the part where all three circles overlap, but one may argue that the part where the Inner Circle and the Expanding Circle overlap may be a more likely candidate. The English spoken/written by a speaker of Dutch, German, or one of the Scandinavian languages may be more acceptable internationally (in terms of understandability, but also prestige) than the English spoken by someone from, say, Italy, China, and even India and other 'English-speaking' countries. Thus, Dnglish (Dutch English) may be more acceptable than Chinglish (Chinese English). As a result, one might argue that ELF is not the 'equaliser' it is often believed to be, but that it is about to create new inequalities. Paraphrasing George Orwell, one might conclude that all Englishes are equal, but some are more equal than others.

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### **Tüm İngilizceler Eşittir (Ama Bazıları Daha Eşittir)**

#### **Özet**

*Bu çalışmada İngilizce'nin çokdilli bir ortamda öğretim dili olarak kullanımı incelenmektedir. Öğrenciler Genişleyen Çember veya Orta Çember'den gelmekte olsa da öğretmenlerin çoğu Genişleyen Çember'den gelmektedir. Çok az bir kesimse Dış Çember'dendir. Bu vaka incelemesi öğrencilerin yazılı İngilizce kullanımına odaklanmaktadır. İngilizce'de ana dili gibi yazı yazabilen öğrencilerin belirgin bir avantajı bulunduğu görülmüştür. Dış Çember'den gelen ve İngilizce'nin yerel değişkelerini kullanan öğrencilerse anlaşılabilirlik sorunu yaşamaktadır. Bu çalışmada İngilizce'nin genelde kabul edildiği gibi 'ortak dil' olmayabileceğini ve yeni eşitsizlikler yaratabileceği iddia edilmektedir.*

*Anahtar sözcükler:* Genişleyen Çember, Lingua franca olarak İngilizce, İngilizce'nin öğretim dili olarak kullanımı, çokdillilik, ana dili konuşanı, dış çember.

