

The Intercultural Speaker Model: Language Proficiency and the “Native Speaker” redefined

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In 2008, David Crystal estimated that the number of speakers of English had not only risen to a third of the world’s population, but that non-native speakers outnumbered native speakers by 4:1. The prevalence of English in the world is a direct consequence of Western colonialism, military conflict between rival European powers and the economic strength of the US in the twentieth century (Phillipson, 2012). The immense linguistic capital of English as well as the idealisation of English and American values resulted in a monolingual ethos in language education which is organised around the Native Speaker Model (ibid.). It reinforces the sense that learners should aim for native-like command of the language and totally immerse into the native culture. According to textbooks and materials, native culture refers largely to Anglo-American cultures and only occasionally to optional, newer forms of English, although through a predominantly British lens (Kelly, 2015).

Given that the number of diverse non-native English speakers continues to rise, it is not unreasonable to question the previously unconditional acceptance of the native-speaker authority with regards to what constitutes “proper” English. During my time in the proPIC project, I came across an alternative model which does not force non-native speakers to imitate a native speaker and instead allows them to keep their cultural and linguistic “baggage”: The Intercultural Speaker Model (House, 2007). The Intercultural Speaker is a fluent language user who is independent from both native and new culture and thus creates a unique form of English. They serve as multicultural agents who can interact with diverse English speakers and respect individual styles and backgrounds (ibid).

English in the international context has long been a reason for discourse in Second Language Acquisition theory (SLA). Little empirical work has been done however, and language policies continue to rely on the native speaker model (Seidelhofer, 2003). During the project I observed how non-native English speakers facilitate the English language to communicate interculturally on an academic level. My considerations lead me to the following questions:

What are the common linguistic standards of Intercultural Speakers of English? Once established, how do these standards apply to language education? (Siwik, 2019: 2)

I realised quickly that it is nearly impossible to define one common version of International English that could facilitate the innate diversity that comes with Intercultural Speakers (Siwik, 2019). Nonetheless, I was able to get an insight into what intercultural communication in an academic setting looks like.

I used the guidelines for assessment of spoken performance by the *Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR)* in order to identify common themes among participants. I then compared these to native speaker performance in a recorded interview. What was observed was that out of the five qualitative aspects, *Range, Accuracy, Fluency, Interaction* and *Coherence*, all remained relevant (CEFR, 2001). However, the way in which they were achieved differed notably.

For example, idiomatic expressions are a skill that find extensive use in the *Range* aspect of native speaker performance but rarely in the intercultural context. The participants would seldom use idioms and if they did, they would resort to the ones that had a more literal meaning or simply paraphrase them:

(...) You have to know exactly what you’re after, what you want to observe.
(Siwik, 2019: 19)

Paraphrasing and code switching between first and second language (L1 and L2) were generally competencies that seemed more relevant to the non-native speakers. In one of the conversations a participant used a German word to describe an observation he made during the project. He then paraphrased the meaning of the word and other participants suggested English synonyms. Interestingly, the conversation continued seamlessly after that, which showed the highly consensus-oriented focus of intercultural conversations (Siwik, 2019).

Another interesting observation was made regarding L1 interference, which is a common phenomenon in SLA and describes the grammatical impact of the L1 on the L2 in the early stages of acquisition. Crystal

suggested that certain grammatical changes by non-native speakers will inevitably become new widespread grammatical variations (Crystal, 2008). There were persistent grammatical variations evident among participants in areas such as tense, prepositions, adjectives, or position of adverbs, although they generally showed a high level of accuracy in other grammatical areas.

GRAMMAR VARIANCES

“And then I started in the school”

“(…) a little bit more better”

“So, we had to press every time non-verbal communication”

STANDARD GRAMMAR

“(…)she was involved in everything that was happening even though the room itself did not offer the opportunity to reach out to every student in the room”

“(…) the main point of this app is that it facilitates the work for the feedback observation – for the post observation feedback.”

(Siwik, 2019: 23)

Overall, Intercultural Speakers were able to facilitate diverse non-native accents, different grammatical styles, and proficiency levels. If there were problems during interaction, they could get around these difficulties using strategies such as paraphrasing, code switching and mutual correction. They avoided ambiguity through repetition and the sensible use of idiomatic expressions.

Let us assume we acknowledge these skills as crucial for learners of English in the future. How would we teach them? Some scholars have suggested the use of core English pronunciation, as well as identifying relevant and less relevant grammatical features of current standard English to leave room for regional variations as a potential course of action (Seidlhofer, 2003; Grzega, 2010). Furthermore, there is a huge advantage in participating in transnational projects to collaborate with different people from diverse backgrounds to develop skills that go beyond the limits of the traditional classroom.

Teaching the English language brings an additional responsibility to its teachers and learners. Although it may be of noble intention to use English as a tool for international communication, cultural exchange, and peace efforts, it is accompanied by the bitter reality of neocolonialism. Capital-based globalisation is the continuation of a system that centres the global West and its cultures as benchmark for what is considered ‘international’. Traditional approaches to literature in English promote predominantly British or American white (and often male) authors at the expense of all others. Efforts have to be made to include more postcolonial literature and authors with diverse backgrounds.

There is a need for real change in European language education. The fact that non-native English speakers outnumber native speakers to such a high degree and, due to their ability to connect with members of diverse cultures in this shared L2, they now hold the balance of power when it comes to evolving the English language. Future teachings of English to Intercultural Speakers demand that teaching techniques evolve to meet their needs.

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