World Englishes in language testing: a call for research

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With illustrative material from Hong Kong and Korea

NATIVE speakers of English are a minority; there are far more non-native speakers in the world (cf. Kachru 1997, Pennycook 2001). In addition, native speakers' standard or 'correct' English, in terms of its grammar and phonology, is not always useful or even appropriate in international contexts (cf. Gisborne 2000, Newbrook 1998, Shim 1999). However, despite global changes in the use of the language, the norms for ENL (English as a Native Language) remain dominant, most notably for the assessment of oral proficiency. Yet it is a major deficiency in the use of international oral tests that the proficiency of non-native speakers is measured against unrealistic and irrelevant standards (cf. Jenkins, 1996). The present paper focuses on the need to revisit the testing of English oral proficiency for non-native speakers, bearing in mind that English is used for world-wide communication and that being able to understand one another (cf. McKay, 2002) is the most important goal.

Introduction

In language testing, validity is the most important concept, especially in terms of adequacy and appropriateness, including how scores are interpreted and used (cf. Bachman, 1990). Are the scores in international tests of oral proficiency in English interpreted and used appropriately?

It has been said that the goal of language assessment is to reduce to the greatest possible degree sources of error external to the learner's performance, so as to reflect the candidate's true ability (cf. Wigglesworth, 2001:188). In oral test performance, such sources of error are varied. Among them, the *rater effect* on test scores has been studied by such researchers as Bachman *et al*. (1995), Brown (1995), Chalhoub-Deville (1995a, 1995b), Edler (1993), Lumley & McNamara (1995), Lunz *et al*. (1990), Lynch & McNamara (1998), Upshur & Turner (1999), Weigle (1998), and Wigglesworth (1993). There has however been little research relating to the rater effect on test scores achieved by speakers of English as a second or foreign language (ESL or EFL) within the perspective of World Englishes (WEs). This is an important issue in English-language education, in terms of both the global use of English and problems of teaching, learning, and testing.

Earlier research (Weir, 1990; Wigglesworth, 1993) indicates that one rater may be more or less lenient than another in scoring English-language oral tests. There has, however, been no support for the view that native speakers are more suitable and more reliable as raters than non-native speakers (cf. Brown, 1995). It is not therefore appropriate to say that test scores given by native speakers are more accurate than those given by non-native speakers.

The present paper reviews the concept of World Englishes and the use of English in ESL and EFL countries, provides examples of English use in both Hong Kong and Korea, and

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closes by suggesting how a WEs perspective can improve language testing.

The concept of World Englishes (WEs)

Pluralism is an integral concept within the framework of World Englishes (Bhatt, 2001), in which Kachru's three-concentric-circle model of WEs (1982) has been widely used as the standard representation. This model locates English speakers in three groups: inner circle, outer circle, and expanding circle. The *inner circle* covers speakers of English as a Native Language (ENL) and includes the UK, the USA, Ireland, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. The *outer circle* contains speakers of English as a Second or Additional Language (ESL/EAL), who use it for intra-national communication; it includes India, Nigeria, Hong Kong, Singapore, and the Philippines. The *expanding circle* contains speakers of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), and recognises the international importance of English. It includes such countries as China, Russia, Brazil, Korea, and Japan.

The model also describes the global situation of the language: the *inner circle* comprises the long-standing English-using countries, the *outer circle* the institutionalized English-using countries, and the *expanding circle* those countries in which English has various roles and is used for more limited purposes than in the outer circle. It is, in effect, the rest of the world. Most learners of English in the expanding-circle countries rarely have much contact with native speakers (Kachru & Nelson, 2001).

Standards for World Englishes

There has been considerable debate over standards for WEs. There are two very different views on this issue (cf. Kachru, 1986, 1997; Quirk, 1982; and Quirk & Widdowson, 1985). Quirk and Kachru have provided very different arguments with regard to standards. Quirk argues that the kind of English which unites all those who use the language should be the standard variety, and that in non-native contexts only standard English (avowedly the speech and writing of educated native speakers) should be used in teaching and testing. Non-native English teachers should therefore be in constant contact with such native speakers.

In contrast, however, Kachru (1985) argues

for the re-examination of traditional notions of standardization and for models which pay attention to users of *localized* English as providing the norms in the outer circle. He has argued that norms should be recognized by the people who use English in all speech communities and that both native and non-native communities should work together in developing standards. However, in this he has excluded the varieties of English in the expanding circle, being concerned mainly with people in the outer circle and Englishes used only in the inner and outer circles.

Recently, Sifakis' argument (2004) has nicely summarized these points of view on standards by suggesting *N-bound* and *C-bound* perspectives. Here, *N* stands for '*n*orm' and *C* for '*c*ommunication, *c*omprehensibility, and *c*ulture'. His N-bound perspective emphasizes regularity, codification, and standardness while the C-bound perspective focuses on 'a pattern of learned, group-related perceptions including both verbal and non-verbal language, attitudes, values, belief systems, disbelief systems, and behaviors' (2004:240). That is, the process of cross-cultural comprehensibility between learners as a communicative goal in itself is the main point in C-bound perspectives and notions of accuracy and standards are not the main focus.

In sum, there are two perspectives on standards: that English-language learners should *either* seek and promote one variety of English as standard *or* include attributes of a variety of Englishes. In either case, WEs should be viewed in C-bound terms, variability being respected rather than ignored in favour of a central variety viewed as the 'standard'. Consequently, when non-native speakers' English oral proficiency is evaluated in such contexts as those in ESL and EFL countries, raters should understand that standards must not be solely based on native-like standards. To look more fully at this proposal, the roles of English in two East Asian locales – Hong Kong and Korea – are considered.

Hong Kong

English is used as a second language in Hong Kong. Government policy in the the territory requires that children become *trilingual* (in spoken Cantonese, Putonghua/Mandarin, and English) and *biliterate* (in written Chinese and English): cf. Tsui & Bunton (2000:287). There

is however an increasing demand for English, especially in the employment sector: cf. Bolton (2002). The demand is such that Hong Kong Chinese who speak English in addition to Cantonese regularly import and employ Filipina housekeepers, who speak English and, in addition to their other duties, can help the children practise the language.

During the period of colonial rule the British model was referred to when making judgements about standards in both education and business. After the transfer of sovereignty in 1997, however, Hong Kong was transformed from a colonial into a global city (Bolton 2000:265), a development which had a major impact on language learning and the degree of multilingualism in Hong Kong society at large.

Policies promoting English as a teaching medium have, among other factors, led to a distinctive Hong Kong English (cf. Bolton, 2000, 2002; Li, 2000). Bolton and Kwok (1990:166) have outlined some features of the phonology of Hong Kong English, indicating that local speakers of English typically share a number of features constituting a Hong Kong accent. Hung (2000) has argued that the phonology of Hong Kong English is the product of 'interaction' between English and Cantonese. For example, Hong Kong students know that the name *hung dak gei* ('Kentucky') is foreign in origin and therefore assume that those of their English teachers who are native speakers of the language will recognize it – which they do not, finding no association whatever between the indigenized word and the original name.

Many studies (cf. Benson, 1994; Carless, 1995; Chan & Kwok, 1985; Taylor, 1989) have been published on a distinct Hong Kong vocabulary, of which the following items (from Bolton, 2000: 276-9) are examples:

1 *astronaut* someone whose family has emigrated (for example, to Australia or Canada), but who remains working in Hong Kong, and spends a great deal of time flying between his/her family and Hong Kong
2 *banana* a westernized Chinese person (yellow on the outside, white on the inside)
3 *black hand* a behind-the-scenes mastermind who plans political or criminal activities
4 *cocktail* a party at which cocktails are served

Hong Kong English also has grammatical variations, including for example the following double-verb 'zero-relative' sentence structures (from Gisborne, 2002:144):

5 This is the student did it.
6 Hong Kong is a small island has a large population.
7 There was a fire broke out.

Newbrook (1998) has claimed that Hong Kong students were surprised to learn that using 'zero' subject relatives, as in these sentences, is non-standard and generally unacceptable in English. Li and Tse (2002) investigated communicative events in Hong Kong, relating to who speaks what to whom, when, and where. They found that Hong Kong English speakers use English more often than Chinese, to the extent that using English in their daily lives has become natural. The following statements occurred among the participants of Li and Tse's focus-group interview (2002:156-58):

8 Sometimes I could not help but spell out the English words. I find it quite natural to use the English words that I didn't notice I was using them until I had already spoken them.
9 Sometimes I would feel that using only Cantonese expressions would decrease the rapport among friends.
10 I feel that speaking without any English expressions is really inconvenient in terms of communication. For example, Chase is the name of a bank, but people rarely speak its Chinese name when recalling this bank because people use the English name Chase in the advertisement and TV commercials.
11 I also noticed that I tend to use more English words when I was talking to my sister and my mother, especially, my sister.

English in Hong Kong serves to illuminate theoretical issues relating to the linguistic variation in the outer-circle societies in Asia and elsewhere (Bolton & Nelson, 2002:263). However, by far the most influential variable in terms of the standardization of norms in the territory is the Language Proficiency Assessment for Teachers (LPAT), the test that teachers of English and of Putonghua take to prove that they have reached a publicly recognised benchmark for language proficiency (cf. Luk & Lin, in press).

The speaking element includes: (1) reading a poem and a prose passage aloud, (2) telling a story/recounting an experience/presenting

arguments, and (3) a group interaction task. Candidates' scores are based on a scale from 1, the lowest, to 5, the highest proficiency level. Raters evaluate the candidates' oral proficiency in terms of six categories: (1) pronunciation, stress, and intonation; (2) reading aloud with meaning; (3) grammatical accuracy; (4) organization and cohesion; (5) interacting with peers; (6) explaining language matters to peers.

Two assessors (a native speaker of English and a Hong Kong English-language speaker) assign score levels using the descriptors of the LPAT rating scales, which indicate that only 'native-like' proficiency can attain level 5, the highest in terms of pronunciation, stress, and intonation (cf. Luk & Lin, in press).

Through an interview with an assessor of the test, Luk and Lin found that features which do not conform to British or American accents would be considered problematic by the assessor, while the presence of candidates' L1 characteristics would disadvantage them in their LPAT assessments. In sum, the situation in Hong Kong seems to reveal a willingness to diverge from the WEs paradigm at the same time as there is a linguistic hegemony in which the norms in the inner circle are used for the assessment of the ESL speakers *despite the fact that Hong Kong has its own localized English*. A huge mismatch therefore exists between English use and English tests in Hong Kong.

In order to resolve such problems, it is necessary to examine the extent to which proficient English speakers in Kachru's outer circle are aware of WEs and to what extent they agree with the application of a WEs perspective in language testing. In addition, such examinations call for an investigation as to whether or not proficient English speakers in the outer circle are different in their ratings of non-native speakers' English language oral proficiency from those who reside in both the inner and expanding circles.

English in Korea

Korea is one of many countries in which English is used as a foreign language. Since the enactment in 1995 of the Korean 'globalization' policy of reforming English education, English-language programmes have focused more on developing students' oral proficiency than on reading and grammar (Ministry of Education, 1997). The current curricula, intended to guide

Korean English education from 1995 to 2010, state that communicative language teaching (CLT) should replace the previously dominant audio-lingual method (ALM) in middle schools and the grammar-translation method in high schools (Kwon, 2000).

According to the national curriculum, students study English from the third grade onward, and the aim of the programme is 'to motivate a student's interest in English and to develop basic communicative competence' (Ministry of Education, 1996). The government's decision to use English as a mandatory classroom language is considered appropriate as a means of attaining the communicative competence proposed by the national curriculum in Korea.

However, a problem arises, first, when Korean English teachers (who are not themselves ready for communicative language teaching) have to speak in a classroom, and, second, when people considered native speakers come from such countries as Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia, to teach English in a language school. In both cases, Korean learners seem to be in the process of developing a Koreanized English. Indeed, Shim (1999) discovered the following non-standard examples in English textbooks used in middle and high schools [italics added]:

1 Although it is *a hard work*, I enjoy it.
2 An old man showed *a great patience*.
3 We go to school *day by day*.
4 Spring is *just soon to come*.

From these examples we see that the norms for English in Korea do not always follow those of the inner circle. There are morphological and syntactic divergences in Korean English, in for example the use of uncountable nouns and idiomatic expressions. As a result, students study, and are tested on, one variety of English – codified Korean English – until the end of high school. However, upon entering universities, they must study for English tests that are based on standard American English (cf. Shim, 1999).

Korean students seem to have dual goals in learning English: a short-term goal related to the college entrance exams, and a long-term goal related to using English for international communication. In other words, they study for college entrance exams until high school, but on entering university they start to work on developing English language oral proficiency,

taking tests developed from, and based on, inner-circle norms, such as the Test of Spoken English (TSE), the Test of Oral Proficiency (TOP), and the Spoken English Proficiency Test (SEPT) – because those tests are required for certain jobs. Tests based on American English are chosen to measure Korean students' English language oral proficiency because in Korea they are normally considered the most authoritative tests.

In effect, Korean students use a Korean English in their speech communities (cf. Shim, 1999), but are often evaluated in terms of standard American English for employment purposes.

In order to be an English teacher in Seoul, candidates usually show their TSE scores in order to prove their oral proficiency. As a result, adult students are likely to be frustrated with the discrepancy between what they use in real situations and what they are tested on. Test scores are misused in that they do not represent the Korean student's actual use of English within the Korean speech community. Moreover, misinterpretation of the test score could have serious consequences for candidates who want to be English teachers or to be employed in the business world in Korea.

In sum, because the test scores of Korean students' English language oral proficiency have a significant impact on the test-takers' social status, it is necessary to check whether or not the test scores, given by various raters living in different English language contexts, are accurate.

World Englishes in language testing

The primary concern in language testing is to demonstrate that the interpretation and use of test scores are valid (cf. the American Education Research Association [AERA], 1999). Research (cf. Bamgbose, 1998; Jenkins, 2000; Lowenberg, 2002) has demonstrated that English proficiency tests in Kachru's (1982) outer-circle countries no longer exclusively follow native speaker's norms: local norms for local tests have been developed and used widely in their communities (cf. Kachru, 1997; Lowenberg, 2002). Indeed, even in the expanding circle, the norms for English use do not always follow those of the inner circle (cf. Dushku, 1998; Griffin, 1997; Shim, 1994, 1999; Stanlaw, 2002; Zhao & Campbell, 1995). There are morphological, syntactic, and pragmatic divergences between normative features of English

in the expanding circle. Thus, Example 1, below, is used in Korea while Example 2 is used in China (Shim, 1999), and all are ungrammatical in terms of standard American English, while Example 3 is not acceptable in the US or Korea, but is acceptable in the UK and China (Lowenberg, 2002):

1 Although it is *a hard work*, I enjoy it. (Shim, 1999, p. 252)
2 Iceberg *lettuces* are down in price and should be selling for between 35p and 55p, depending on size. (Lowenberg, 2002, p. 432)
3 There's the post office *in* St. Andrews Street. (Lowenberg, 2002, p. 433)

Because of such examples, the interpretation and use of scores in widely used international English language oral proficiency tests must be reconsidered. If the assessment of non-native speakers' English-language oral proficiency is solely based on inner-circle norms and is used in the outer or expanding circles, there may be serious problems in interpreting test scores in specific contexts: Such scores usually serve as 'gatekeepers' that allow or deny access to educational or business sectors (Fox, 2004) and seriously impact the social status of the test-takers. Test score interpretation and use will therefore be questionable.

To minimize the inappropriateness of such interpretation of test scores in English oral proficiency, it is necessary to reconsider the uses of both English and the test scores in terms of Kachru's (1982) model of WEs. In particular, raters in various countries need to be more concerned with English change and variation both linguistically and pragmatically. Brown (2004:318) has argued that the following range of Englishes might have some impact on test scores:

1 The English(es) of the test-takers' local community
2 The dominant English of the test-taker (which may not be the same as the local community at large)
3 The English(es) of the test content
4 The English(es) of the test proctors
5 The English(es) of the test scores/raters
6 The English(es) of the decision target community
7 The English(es) of the decision target purpose
8 The English(es) of the decision makers

There will be no problem if all the Englishes

listed above are the same. However, that is not necessarily the case, and questions of validity arise. Davies *et al* (2003:574) have argued that tests should emphasize the ability to communicate effectively in English as it is actually used in the region where the tests are taken, rather than relate proficiency to the norms of, say, the United States, the United Kingdom, or Australia. In sum, both the developers and the users of English-language oral proficiency tests should understand the relationship among these varieties of Englishes in the assessment process, in order to improve the validity of such language testing.

Once test-users become aware of misinterpretations of test scores and even the mis-scoring of a test-taker's language ability, they should rethink the assessment process. International English-language oral proficiency tests that have a general assessment purpose with regard to non-native speakers' English oral proficiency, and are used in countries where people have their own localized/nativized Englishes, should be carefully revalidated within the WEs perspective.

Conclusion

Many English learners in ESL and EFL contexts are taught by non-native speakers, and 'standard' American or British English is likely to be considered a norm for teaching and learning the language (Bolton, 2002). However, since the purpose of language is communication, a variety of Englishes cannot be deemed incorrect on pragmatic grounds if English speakers understand each other in their communication. There are different types of Englishes in the world, and the native speaker should no longer be the only model of English language use. The WEs approach has thus become an important area in the language teaching and testing fields. English language testers, researchers, and educators should be aware of the WEs perspective and reconsider the native speaker as a model for English language oral proficiency in international contexts.

Despite the fact that there are many varieties of English in the world used for various purposes, only a few authoritative English language oral proficiency tests are used. Thus, in Hong Kong, the Language Proficiency Assessment for Teachers (LPAT) is used to evaluate the English language oral proficiency of prospective English teachers in secondary

schools. In Korea, oral tests such as the Test of Spoken English (TSE), the Test of Oral Proficiency (TOP), and the Spoken English Proficiency Test (SEPT) are used in many business and educational sectors in order to hire and promote employees and to evaluate prospective secondary-school English teachers. According to the rating descriptions of these three tests, they seem to have native speakers as models to measure non-native speakers' oral proficiency. As the language is used and evaluated for various purposes in ESL and EFL countries, a new direction for English oral proficiency tests for non-native speakers is needed.

English educators and researchers should be aware of the importance of a range of Englishes in international contexts while test developers should reflect this practical issue in the context of language assessment. Moreover, WEs in language testing have hardly been researched, despite the large amount of research on WEs in general, at least as far as the late 1980s are concerned (Kachru, 1992). Researchers in English education should consider this issue and, if necessary, implement changes in 'who should evaluate' and 'what should be evaluated' when assessing non-native speakers' English language oral proficiency. In effect, rating criteria and the practices of raters should be reconsidered and re-established, so as to acknowledge the evolution of World Englishes. ∎

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