
RESEARCH ARTICLE

World Englishes Today: Towards a Pluricentric Approach of Proficiency Testing

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ABSTRACT

Given the fact that one of the important topics in modern sociolinguistics today is the globalisation of English (Mesthrie & Bhatt, 2008), the aim of the present paper is twofold. First, it seeks to discuss the extent to which the spread of English around the world has resulted in the emergence of new linguistic varieties of English or World Englishes (Mourchid, 2019) and how English “no longer has one single base of authority, prestige and normativity” (Mesthrie & Bhatt, 2008, p. 3). Second, the paper also seeks to provide “a rationale for proficiency testing that subscribes to the view that accepting English as the global target language requires a proficiency testing framework beyond the monolithic EFL and ESL-based tests” (Al-Kadi, 2022, p. 39). This being said, the current paper calls for a shift in paradigm from the monocentric approach, which conceives of English as being a single language, to the pluricentric approach that celebrates the linguistic variation exhibited in the English language, and which better reflects the sociolinguistic reality of present-day English, which, in turn, reflects the new trend of proficiency testing needed in a modern world where diverse varieties of English compete and struggle to find their ways in EFL classrooms.

KEYWORDS

Inner Circle, Expanding Circle, Monocentrism, Outer Circle, Pluricentrism, Proficiency Testing, World Englishes

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1. Introduction

Nowadays, English “has acquired unprecedented sociological and ideological dimensions” (Kachru, 1991, p. 180) to the extent that 1) it is considered now as the language of international communication (Crystal, 2003; Kirkpatrick, 2007; Mourchid et al., 2023), and 2) the most widely used lingua franca whose non-native speakers outnumber its native speakers (see Chang, 2014; Kirkpatrick, 2007; Wang & Fang, 2020; Mourchid et al., 2023). However, it seems that the field of English language teaching (ELT) remains unaffected by the changes that English undergoes today. For example, the way ESL/ EFL learners are being tested in the majority of Outer-Circle contexts (i.e., countries or territories where English is used as a second language (ESL)) and Expanding Circle contexts (i.e., countries or territories where English is used as a foreign language(EFL)) suggests that ESL/ EFL learners are still being encouraged to conform to the native-speaker norms, while there is almost a total negligence of the variety of norms that exists in Inner Circle contexts other than the U.S. and the U.K. (where English is mostly used as a native language (ENL)) and other Outer- and Expanding-Circle contexts. This being the case, the present study intervenes to question the place of English language variation in proficiency testing and if it is really still a handy practice to keep measuring the language proficiency of the 21st ESL/ EFL learners based on the so-called ‘native-like’ proficiency, which, honestly speaking, seems an unattainable goal and reality itself attests that not all ESL/ EFL learners who learn English learn it to speak with native speakers from Inner-Circle countries or territories. We do, in fact, see people who learn English just to have a good job or to work with other non-native speakers of the language, and the

change in demographics mentioned earlier (i.e. non-native speakers of English outnumbering its native speakers) is a good example that clearly illustrates the decreasing relevance of the native-speaker model and its total suitability in ESL/ EFL contexts worldwide.

2. Literature Review

2.1. The Spread of English

Because of the global spread of English and because of the increasing interest in learning it either as a second language or a foreign language, English has recently enjoyed a dominant position among the languages of the world. In this regard, Kachru (1991) points out that "English has acquired unprecedented sociological and ideological dimensions" (p. 180).

ENL, ESL, EFL

The spread of English has been discussed by different scholars in different ways; however, the spread of English, according to Jenkins (2009, p. 15), "is often discussed in terms of three distinct groups of users, those who speak English respectively as":

- a native language (**ENL**)
- a second language (**ESL**)
- a foreign language (**ELF**)
- **English as Native Language**¹ is defined by Jenkins as "the language of those born and raised in one of the countries where English is historically the first language to be spoken." She argues that speakers of English as a native language are said to number around 350 million (Jenkins, 2009).
- **English as a Second Language** is defined by Jenkins as "the language spoken in a large number of territories such as India, Bangladesh, Nigeria and Singapore, which were once colonized by the English". Again, she argues that speakers of English as a second language are said to number around 350 million (Jenkins, 2009).
- **English as a Foreign Language**, as defined by Jenkins, is "the language of those for whom the language serves no purposes within their countries". These people have historically "learned the language in order to use it with its native speakers in the US and UK- though this is no longer the case". The number of speakers of EFL, according to Jenkins, is more difficult to assess, and much depends on the level of competence which is used to identify such speakers. She, however, states that if "we use the criterion of 'reasonable competence', then the number is likely to be around 1 billion (although it should be said that this figure is not uncontroversial)".

2.2 Inner Circle, Outer Circle, Expanding Circle

To account for the spread of English as a world language, the Indo-US linguist Braj Kachru (1992) believes that "[t]he traditional dichotomy between native and nonnative is functionally un insightful and linguistically questionable" (p. 3) and suggests that the spread of English around the world, as Figure 1 below illustrates, may be represented in terms of "three concentric circles, representing different ways in which the language has been acquired and is currently used" (Crystal 2003, p. 60). Kachru's three circles are called the *Inner Circle*, the *Outer Circle* and the *Expanding Circle*, respectively, and are defined as follows:

- **The Inner Circle:** refers to countries/ territories where English is spoken as a first language and is, thus, a native language. This circle includes the USA, UK, Canada, Australia and New Zealand.
- **The Outer Circle** (also called **the Extended Circle**): refers to countries/ territories where English is spoken as a second language. These countries are ex-colonies of the USA or UK. This circle includes Bangladesh, Ghana, India, Kenya, Malaysia, Nigeria, Pakistan and many other countries.
- **The Expanding Circle**² (also called **the Extending Circle**): refers to those countries/ territories where English serves no administrative purposes; it is used for international purposes and is, thus, spoken as a foreign language. This circle includes countries like Morocco, China, Egypt, Indonesia, etc.

¹ - English as a Native Language is sometimes called 'English as a mother tongue' (EMT, for short).

² - Crystal (2003, p. 60) suggests that "the term 'expanding' reflects its origins in the 1980s: today, with English recognized virtually everywhere, a tense change to *expanded circle* would better reflect the contemporary sense."

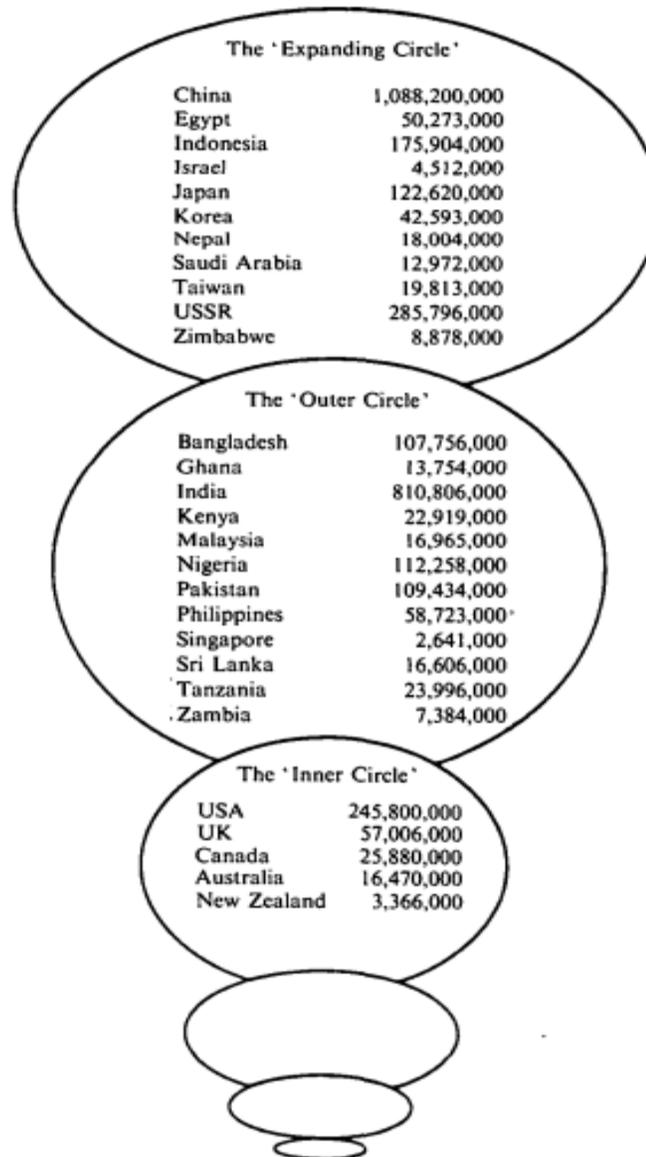


Figure 1 Kachru's three-circle model of World Englishes (source: Kachru, 1992, p. 3)

Commenting on Kachru's model of World Englishes, Jenkins (2009, pp. 18-20) argues that "the English spoken in the Inner Circle is said to be 'norm-providing', that in the Outer Circle to be 'norm-developing' and that in the Expanding Circle to be 'norm-dependent'." The Kachruvian model, Jenkins claims, implies that "while ESL varieties of English have become institutionalised and are developing their own standards, the EFL varieties are regarded, in this model, as 'performance' varieties without any official status and therefore dependent on the standards set by native speakers in the Inner Circle." However, this is no longer the case. Some scholars have proposed that even in countries where English is spoken as a foreign language, they may be speaking English that is not dependent on the norms set by those who live in the USA or UK.

2.3. World Englishes

Before the emergence of World Englishes research, English was usually thought of as one unique variety having one grammar, one spelling form (with slight differences) and a restricted number of lexical items. This World English ideology has unfortunately dominated research in ELT and applied linguistics for long years. However, beginning in the 1980s, few voices have started to describe the reality of English as being *pluricentric* rather than being *monocentric*. The new approach was meant as a reaction taken against the monocentric approach that used to conceive of English as being one unique variety that provides the norms for all the speakers of the language in Outer and Expanding circle settings.

The monocentric vs. the pluricentric distinction can be clearly observed in the literature written on English when it comes to how scholars use terms like *international English* vs. *international Englishes*, *World English* vs. *World Englishes*, *global English* vs. *global*

Englishes, etc. The -es ending has been added to the word *English* to express the plurality of English, being a group of different varieties (Bolton, 2006).

According to Bolton (2006, p. 240), the term *World Englishes* has a number of different “meanings and interpretations.” The term, Bolton points out, can be explained in three different senses. First, it “functions as an umbrella label referring to a wide range of differing approaches to the description and analysis of English(es) worldwide” (p. 240). Seen in this first sense, a number of terms have “come into use”, including “English as an international (auxiliary) language, global English(es), international English(es), localized varieties of English, new varieties of English, world English(es), new Englishes, alongside such more traditional terms as ESL (English as a Second Language) and EFL (English as a Foreign Language)” (p. 240).

Second, the term is also used in “a narrower sense” to “specifically refer to the “new Englishes” found in the Caribbean and in West African and East African societies such as Nigeria and Kenya, and to such Asian Englishes as Hong Kong English, Indian English, Malaysian English, Singaporean English, and Philippine English” (p. 240).

Third, the term “refers to the wide-ranging approach to the study of the English language worldwide, particularly associated with Braj B. Kachru and other scholars working in a ‘world Englishes paradigm’” (p. 240).

2.4. Proficiency Testing

As for the new trends in proficiency testing, Canagarajah (2006) believes that “the changing pedagogical priorities suggest that we have to move away from a reliance on discrete-item tests on format grammatical competence and develop instruments that are sensitive to performance and pragmatics” (p. 229). In other words, there has to be a shift in focus from “language as a system to language as social practice, from grammar to pragmatics, from competence to performance” (Canagarajah, 2006, p. 234).

Tomlinson (2010) also points out that “learners of English are being tested on a variety of English they do not and never will speak. They are being tested on British English or American English and not on the Singapore English or Brazilian English or the international English they speak” (p. 599). This means that the majority of learners worldwide, if not all of them, are, thus, still being tested on Inner Circle Englishes. Relatedly, Canagarajah (2006) believes that “because it is unwise to define proficiency based on a single variety and because it is impossible to teach or measure proficiency in many varieties simultaneously, we have to consider revising the dominant paradigms of assessment” (p. 229). In the same vein, Matsuda (2003) points out that “[a]ssessment in Japanese EFL classrooms tends to focus on how closely learners conform to the native norm, mostly American and British” (p. 723). Proshina (2007) also suggests that English has turned “from a monocentric language, with British as its primary center, [to a pluricentric one] with many centers and many cultures” (p. 33).

3. Conclusion

The aim of the present study is to raise readers’ awareness regarding English language variation and proficiency testing. It is hoped that language professionals will get to know more about World Englishes and the new trends in proficiency testing. It is also hoped that ESL/ EFL learners will be exposed to different varieties of English and that their proficiency will not be defined in terms of a single variety of English or the extent to which they conform to the native speaker model. As has been previously mentioned, the sociolinguistic reality of English in this new globalized era calls for questioning the way English is being introduced to ESL/ EFL learners and the urgent need for a shift in paradigm in the field of English language teaching from a monocentric approach that sees the English language as a single language to a pluricentric one that celebrates English language variation.

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