



2018 HAWAII UNIVERSITY INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCES
ARTS, HUMANITIES, SOCIAL SCIENCES & EDUCATION JANUARY 3 - 6, 2018
PRINCE WAIKIKI HOTEL, HONOLULU, HAWAII

LANGUAGE LEARNERS' MULTIMODAL CONCEPTUALIZATION OF ENGLISH IN THE CONTEXT OF ITS INTERNATIONAL STATUS

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Synopsis:

The purpose of this research was to explore how English-as-a-foreign-language learners conceptualize English in the context of its international status. The results suggest that thinking about English in terms of access, its status as a universal language, and aspects of learning reflect societal discourse of English in Taiwan. The study provides an example as to how English teachers might begin to understand their students' assumptions of English and its learning based on which to then design curriculum that can effect a re-conceptualization in students.

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Abstract

The purpose of this research was to explore how English-as-a-foreign-language learners conceptualize English in the context of its international status. The results suggest that thinking about English in terms of access, its status as a universal language, and aspects of learning reflect societal discourse of English in Taiwan. The study provides an example as to how English teachers might begin to understand their students' assumptions of English and its learning based on which to then design curriculum that can effect a re-conceptualization in students.

Keywords: English as an international language, English-language learners

Introduction

The global spread of English provided the stimulus for re-thinking ways of describing the status of English in the world. Kachru (1985) famously proposed the three concentric circles of English speakers around the world. The inner circle includes countries where English is spoken as a native language while the outer circle consists of previous colonies such as India, where English is often learned as a second language and used for intra-national communication. The expanding circle countries are where English is used mainly for international communication and learned as a foreign language. Since this influential model was first proposed more than 30 years ago, other ways of delineating the position of English across the globe have also been put forth.

The most common descriptors of English include *World Englishes* (WE), *English as an international language* (EIL) and *English as a lingua franca* (ELF). Jenkins (2009) explained the different emphases of these terms. She argued that the most agreed upon way of understanding WE “refers to *all* local English varieties regardless of which of Kachru’s three circles they come from” (p. 200, italics in the original), although there are some who reject the notion that the English spoken in expanding circle countries is a “variety” in the same way as the English spoken in outer circle and inner circle countries, opting instead for the term “interlanguage.” Jenkins also stated that the concept of ELF emphasized “a specific communication context...the common language of choice, among speakers who come from different linguacultural backgrounds” (p. 200). Within such a view, during intercultural communicative situations, all speakers have the responsibility to make themselves understood as well as to understand the other parties, regardless of which of Kachru’s circles they are from. More importantly, inner circle speakers should not expect to “set the linguistic agenda” (p. 201). This study adopts the understanding of EIL following Matsuda and Friedrich (2011)’s conceptualization, which is similar to Jenkins’ (2006) and Seidlhofer (2004)’s conceptualization of ELF, as “a *function* that English performs in multilingual contexts” (Friedrich & Matsuda, 2010, p. 20) rather than as a particular variety, as there is no “one clearly distinguishable, codified, and unitary variety called International English” (Seidlhofer, 2004, p. 211).

Jenkins’ (2006) review of the literature found that research in ELF have focused on pronunciation (e.g. Deterding & Kirkpatrick, 2006), pragmatics (e.g. House, 1999), phonology (e.g. Jenkins, 2000), spoken academic ELF (e.g. Mauranen, 2003), lexicogrammar (e.g. Seidlhofer, 2004), accommodation skills (e.g. Jenkins, 2000), and the teaching of varieties other than American and British ones (e.g. Heller, 1999; Heller & Martin-Jones, 2001). Sharifian (2009) found that EIL research often concerns “native/non-native divide,” “attitudes and identity(ies),” and “teacher education and language testing” (p. 6). In Taiwan, EIL research mainly concerns students’ and

teachers' knowledge of and attitudes towards English varieties and the ownership of English (e.g. Chien, 2014; Ke & Cahyani, 2014; Liou, 2010).

Within a language education perspective, Jenkins (2006) recognized the importance of awareness-raising in English-language classrooms. She argued that language educators and learners alike “need to learn *not* (a variety of) English, but about Englishes, their similarities and differences, issues involved in intelligibility, the strong link between language and identity, and so on” (p. 17, italics added). She further suggested that awareness-raising could include, depending on students' level of proficiency, a simple exercise of exposure to the different varieties of English, or discussions that push students to consider issues relating to the global status of English and the dynamic interplay between language and issues of identity. Matsuda and Friedrich (2011) echoed Jenkins' (2006) proposition, suggesting that language learners need to be taught that differences in English varieties should not only be understood in terms of phonological features, but that they imply intricate sociocultural worldviews. As such, they further argued, “given the language's function as a lingua franca, awareness of issues that pertain to the global society as a whole is important,” for example, topics such as “world peace and environment conservation [that] cut across national boundaries” (p. 340).

Matsuda and Friedrich (2011) made an important argument that the “international” or “lingua franca” nature of English necessitates a focus on “issues that pertain to the global society as a whole” (p. 340) and not solely on the phonological or syntactic differences among varieties. Similarly, Sonntag (2003) reminded that “the political dimension of global English,” or what others (e.g. Canagarajah, 1999; Holliday, 2005; Wallace, 2012) have called the critical perspective, necessitates as much recognition and discussion “as its linguistic and cultural definition, although often subtler and less extensively commented upon” (p. xi). Unfortunately, however, as Jenkins (2006) observed, “the paradigm shift has not yet started to filter through into language teaching itself” and that “such a shift in attitudes and practices will not be implemented without a struggle” (p. 174).

Other scholars have also pointed out the need for “awareness-raising around interconnected and complex problems” (Gimenez, Fogaca, & Metliss, 2011, p. 50) in the teaching of EIL. For example, Matsuda's (2002) research with Japanese secondary students found that they generally equate the terms “foreign” and “abroad” with western countries, particular those in North America and Europe. In addition, this understanding is also reflected in their lack of awareness of the differences among the varieties of Englishes. What is worse is that the students seem to hold stereotypical and prejudicial views of the parts of the world of which they have little knowledge.

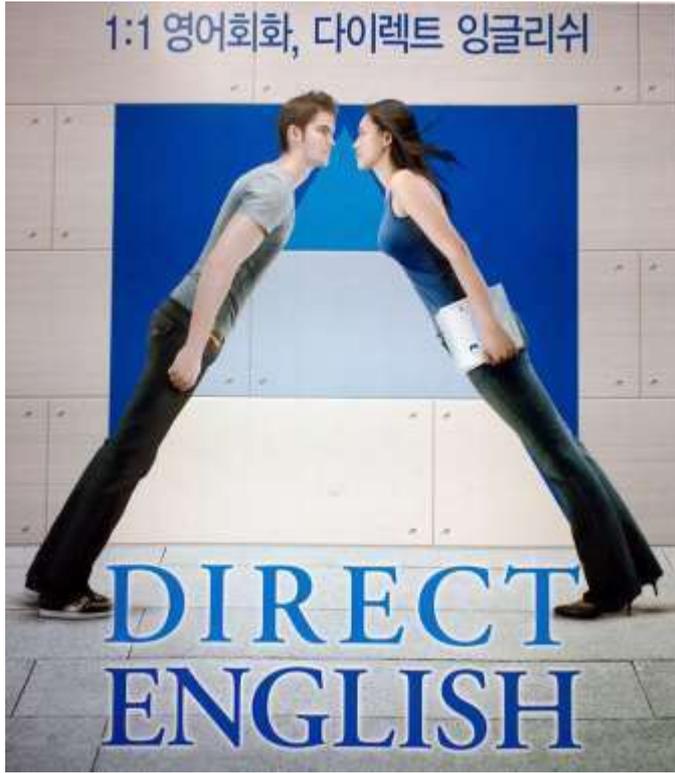
The present study therefore aimed to explore an implementation of EIL

pedagogy that incorporates a critical perspective. Specifically, the goal was for the students to explore other conceptualizations of English and, through the process, to examine their own assumptions of English and other ways of relating to the language. It is important to point out that the focus of the study is not on English varieties. Instead, the study focuses on content rather than on pronunciation or grammatical features. The research was guided by the question: How do English-as-a-foreign-language (EFL) students conceptualize English in the context of its international status?

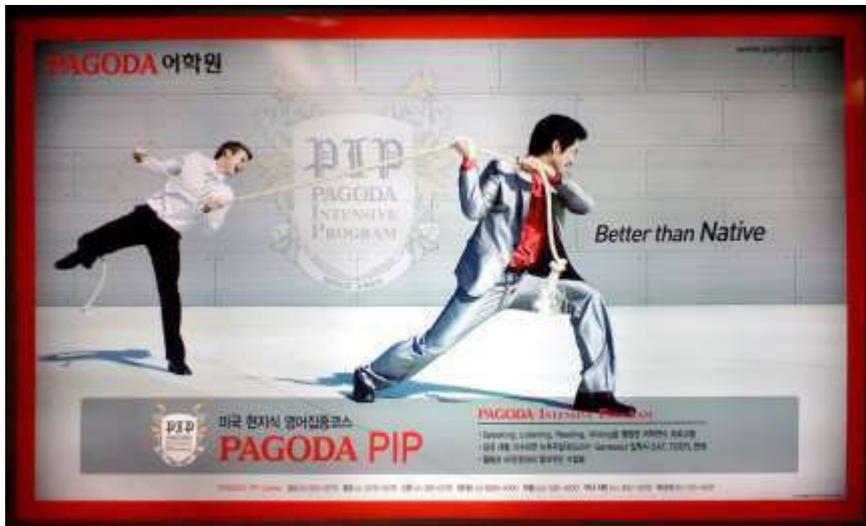
Method

This qualitative practitioner-inquiry study was conducted at a university in northern Taiwan in a general English course for non-English majors that the researcher taught. The participants in this study were the 33 students enrolled in the course. Freshman general English courses at the university take place for three consecutive hours each week for a total of 18 weeks over two semesters. The study was conducted in the spring semester of this year-long course.

Data collection took place as part of the course implementation. Specifically, in order to help the students consider how English is understood in different parts of the world, I discussed with the students three posters and three videos of advertisements and commercials of private English-learning institutions around the world. In order to provide an international perspective for how people in different regions make sense of English, the posters were from another Asian country, Korea, but with very different underlying assumptions of English (see posters 1 and 2 below). Poster 3, also from Korea, shares a view of English more similar to Taiwan's, i.e. that English provides an edge for business people. As for the three videos, video 1 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JGAMppuXf7U>) is a commercial for Soesman Language Institute, a Dutch based institute. Video 2 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VSdxqIBfEAw>) is a commercial for Berlitz Language Institute, and the commercial is German related. Video 3 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YkgqhjbApQE&index=7&list=PL0E112DF7AC6D54E3>) is a Taiwan commercial for *Studio Classroom*. Through the posters and commercials of language institutes from other countries, I aimed to provide students with perspectives towards English that are different from those dominant in Taiwan.



Poster 1.



Poster 2.



Poster 3.

In particular, the class discussed the ways in which English is promoted in the three posters (i.e. as a way for interpersonal relationships in poster 1, to compete with foreigners in poster 2, and as business advantage in poster 3) and in the three videos (i.e. as an everyday part of life without the ability of which one may become the butt of the joke in video 1, as a life and death matter in video 2, and as an essential skill in the workplace in video 3). Through this discussion, the class was then able to examine the underlying assumptions of English in different parts of the world.

Towards the end of the semester, the students were assigned a final project in which they individually designed a poster or a video that promotes English for a private language-learning institute. The purpose of this work was to help the students reflect on their own assumptions of English and also to show how they consider English and its learning. In the final weeks of the course, the students presented their works and shared their reflections with the class.

The 33 students' posters and videos were collected as the major data for this study. These works were analyzed following the inductive content analysis approach (Cho & Lee, 2014; Schreier, 2012), which Thomas (2006) explained as following the

procedures of “preparation of raw data files, close reading of text, creation of categories, overlapping coding and uncoded text, continuing revision and refinement of category system” (pp. 241-242). I examined the students’ works’ by iteratively coding and recoding the posters and videos before finally discovering patterns and then overarching themes that helped me to consider the students’ works in relation to the theoretical discussions of EIL in the literature. Finally, I re-read my researcher journal, which documented my thinking throughout the course, and compared my thoughts of the students’ works during the course implementation with the results of my analysis. This back and forth helped me to examine and re-examine the appropriateness of the themes I generated.

Findings and Discussion

The students’ advertisements and commercials revealed that they think of English in terms of access (i.e. English as an avenue towards desired results), its global status (i.e. pervasive in every corner of the world), and learning (i.e. ideal ways to learn English). Below, I discuss a few of the representative works from each of these themes to exemplify the students’ thinking. (Each of the students in the course were assigned a random number for ease of identification and to ensure anonymity. For example, S1 refers to the student who was assigned the number one.)

Access

A common understanding in Taiwan is that English provides access to the world. This is reflected upon in the advertisements that some students made. In S33’s work, she considered access provided by English from the perspective of a backpacker. Her advertisement (see Figure 1) shows backpackers opening their arms high and wide and ready to embrace the world (i.e. “language won’t be an obstacle”), with famous tourist attractions in the U.S. and in Europe within reach.



Figure 1. S33's poster.

S21 presented the issue of access in relation to English as a gatekeeper. In her advertisement (see Figure 2), English, or rather, the lack of it, is presented as the reason why “immigration officers seem so unfriendly.” She argued that there is no escaping English with a play on words in relation to customs officers, i.e. “You can’t run away this time,” a sentence placed under a visual that zooms in on a customs officer holding a passport, suggesting that English is a part of a person’s legitimate documentation if one wishes to gain entry to desired domains.



Figure 2. S21's poster.

While both these students' works suggest English as providing access, they do so from different perspectives. For S33, English provided an added-value while for S21 the lack of English served as that which obstructs admission into desired places. The advertisements from this group of students present the potential access afforded by English as the reason to learn English.

English Worldwide

Other students showed the global spread and dominance of English in their works. For example, S10 presented a world map (see Figure 3) formed by a single sentence, "English is important." This effectively shows the pervasiveness of English as the world is made up of only this one sentence repeated numerous times, thus supporting the claim that English dominates the world.



Figure 3. S10’s poster.

In contrast, S18 (see Figure 4) emphasized the universal status of English through its various speakers, including not only different people in the world proclaiming their ability to “speak in English,” but also aliens. Thus, while it is an attempt at humor, the poster effectually demonstrated the all-encompassing nature of English. Even though S10 paid attention to the geographical prevalence of English while S18 focused on its speakers, both successfully showed the ubiquity of English. The advertisements from this group of students present the dominance of English worldwide as the reason to learn English.



Figure 4. S18's poster. (Note: This student provided his cell phone number in the bottom-left corner, which I blacked out.)

Learning

Still other students presented their advertisements for a private language institute by addressing different aspects of learning. For example, S13's promotional poster (see Figure 5) emphasized that fear need not be a part of English-learning if it is done with the assistance of an institution called Freedom English. The underlying assumption of this advertisement is that every English learner has had negative experiences learning the language, which is why this language institute guarantees "no inferiority" and "no teasing." Thus, it seems that even for relatively successful learners, as the students in this study are, negative emotions can still be an unforgettable part of their English trajectories



Figure 5. S13's poster.

Another way that students thought about English learning is that it provides an improved existence. For example, in the view of S16 (see Figure 6), this understanding is summarized as “better English, better life,” in contrast to a life of hell overwhelmed by “language barrier.” S16’s advertisement presents the language institute as a crossroad in which people choose between a “better life” or a life of “hell.” What is most interesting is that the lack of English does not just involve a devastating situation or a barrier, but rather, characterized as the way to “hell.” And this is not the only reference to “hell” as a consequence of the lack of English described by the students. The advertisements from this group of students present various rationale for learning English, i.e. as a way towards improved life opportunities as a result of its possession or as a precursor to failure due to the lack of English.



Figure 6. S16's poster.

Thus, the results suggest that asking the students to produce advertisements and commercials for language institutes allowed the researcher to examine why and how English is important for EFL learners. The findings also reveal that despite the researcher's efforts to expand the students' conceptualization of English, it seems challenging for the students to re-think English from a standpoint that is different from the dominant perspective in Taiwan. In other words, thinking about English in terms of access, its status as a universal language, and aspects of learning precisely reflect societal discourse of English in Taiwan.

Conclusion

The findings provide somber pedagogical implications. In Taiwan, students at the tertiary level of education are, for the most part, required to take only one year of EFL course, such as Freshman English. However, such a one-year course (with classes meeting only once a week over an 18-week semester for a total of two semesters) cannot seemingly enable the students to rethink their underlying assumptions of English, let alone to provide enough exposure to the global issues that are intertwined with the hegemonic status of English as an international language. Thus, it seems pertinent for teachers to find creative ways, perhaps to make use of technology and internet resources for self-learning outside of class, to provide learning opportunities for students to more closely examine sociocultural and political aspects of English and its status in the world. Such considerations and critical reflection may take more than

the one year that tertiary English teachers are afforded to work with students.

This classroom research has been timely, because, despite abundant theoretical discussions on the importance of recognizing the legitimacy of different varieties and views of English and the role of English teachers in realizing this legitimacy, the pedagogical implications discussed have, for the most part, “remained at the abstract level” (Matsuda & Friedrich, 2011, p. 333). Matsuda and Friedrich (2011) therefore cautioned that while teachers are repeatedly told that

their current practices may be inadequate in preparing learners for the use of English as an international language, they are usually not offered many sets of ideas or suggestions to start implementing necessary changes. It would be unfortunate if teachers resorted back to their familiar ways of teaching not because they believed they were effective but because they were unsure what else could be done. (p. 333)

This study provides an example as to how English teachers might begin to understand their students’ assumptions based on which to then design curriculum that can best guide students to engage in critical reflections of English and its learning.

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Acknowledgements

This research received funding support from the Ministry of Science and Technology of Taiwan (MOST 104-2410-H-002-152). I would also like to acknowledge my students, whose insights have been such inspiration to me.

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