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Introducing English as an International Language in the Inner-Circle Classroom: Exploring World Englishes

With a background in the teaching of Spanish in the US and the teaching of English abroad, the authors had spent a great deal of time contemplating both linguistic diversity and the internationalization of college campuses. Considering that we found ourselves studying TESOL and had an opportunity to design our own English language course for international students in the Linguistics Department, we decided that tackling some of these issues as part of the course would be an intriguing challenge. Thus, using the knowledge we had gained through our international experiences, we organized a World Englishes course around the discussion of the concentric circles of English (Kachru, 1985), moving from inner-, to outer-, to expanding-circle Englishes with a focus on phonology, positioning, and the expansion of English. Throughout the course we aimed to explore student perceptions of the native-speaker model and inner-circle privilege by means of critical writing reflections, an exit questionnaire on English as an international language (EIL) opinions, and a pre- and posttest on accent recognition. With what we learned through teaching this course, we hope to inform and encourage EIL pedagogical design, specifically in inner-circle contexts in which the internationalization of English teaching has only recently taken hold.

English language teaching (ELT) now plays an essential role in the internationalization of universities in the US as increasingly more international students enroll in these institutions. According to Altbach and Knight (2007), *internationalization* refers to “the policies and practices undertaken by academic systems and institutions—and even individuals—to cope with the global academic environment” (p. 290). The ELT profession worldwide is in the pro-

cess of internationalizing the curricula to better serve the globalized needs of students, and a number of prominent TESOL scholars agree that English as an international language (EIL) should underlie an internationalized ELT curriculum (Matsuda, 2003, 2009; Matsuda & Friedrich, 2011; McKay, 2009). However, much of this research has centered on contexts outside of the US in which English is used as a lingua franca or foreign language, and it has been primarily theoretical rather than action based.

We agree that internationalizing the curriculum should extend to the inner circle (specifically, the US), and this opinion, along with our similar interdisciplinary backgrounds and shared interest in global English, led us to teach a class together regarding EIL at our university. As graduate students in TESOL, we had taken a variety of classes that exposed us to World Englishes and we were particularly surprised at the lack of research that had been conducted regarding the teaching of World Englishes in the inner circle. Considering that we had a background in the teaching of Spanish in the US and the teaching of English abroad, we had spent a great deal of time contemplating both linguistic diversity and the internationalization of college campuses. Therefore, when the opportunity arose to design our own English language course for international students as part of our teaching practicum in TESOL, we decided that addressing some of the issues regarding World Englishes and conducting action research regarding our experience designing, teaching, and evaluating the course would be an intriguing challenge. Upon presenting at a regional CATESOL conference about our intent to teach EIL in an inner-circle context, our colleagues shared their enthusiasm about the idea as well as their concerns with respect to students' opinions about such a course. With this in mind, our action research focused primarily on the reactions we observed in our students as they interacted with the material.

In particular, based on previous research regarding EIL (Matsuda, 2003; Matsuda & Friedrich, 2011; McKay, 2003, 2009), we aimed to explore student perceptions of the native-speaker model (NSM) and inner-circle privilege as well as the challenges and benefits of the course. With what we learned, we hope to inform and encourage EIL pedagogical design, specifically in the inner circle (Kachru, 1985), in which the internationalization of ELT has only recently taken hold.

Literature Review

Matsuda and Friedrich (2011) state that "there is no one variety that is or can be used successfully in all situations of international communication" (p. 127). Various ELT practitioners have diversified

how they teach English so as to help prepare students to negotiate and accommodate diverse Englishes with distinct sociocultural norms, whereby the assets of *flexibility* and *adaptation* to distinct linguistic and sociocultural norms are facilitated by familiarity with English language diversity and the introduction of diverse Englishes (Canagarajah, 2007; McKay, 2009). Much of the adoption of an EIL paradigm challenges inner-circle dominance and privilege, as it aims to foster *global communicative competence*, which Besnier (2013) describes as including the “micro-politics of each interactional moment; the politics of local social structures; and the macro-politics of the global condition” (p. 464). English is recognized as a communicative tool that belongs to all who use the language, rather than owned or controlled by its “native” speakers, in line with English as a lingua franca (ELF) studies (Dewey, 2007; Mauranen, 2003).

A focus on local English aids less proficient students in integrating and succeeding in their academic classes (Matsuda, 2003; Matsuda & Friedrich, 2011). For students with stronger proficiencies who have progressed in their English studies, conversely, EIL course work offers the opportunity to discuss the power dynamics of English use (Canagarajah, 1999), which we have chosen to address in this course through the constructs of inner-circle privilege and the NSM.

We have adopted the following valuable pedagogical suggestions from work done by Matsuda (2003), Matsuda and Friedrich (2011), and McKay (2003, 2009) in the design of our course:

1. Avoid applying the NSM in class discussion and student evaluations, focusing instead on global communicative competence;
2. Choose EIL-oriented materials that represent EIL users;
3. Include a variety of cultural materials that draw on source (student) and international cultures;
4. Discuss language pragmatics in a pluralistic manner that allows space for learner identity;
5. Use the diversity present in the classroom and routinely mix students so that they interact with individuals with backgrounds different from their own.

Through a careful examination of the previously mentioned research and pedagogical suggestions, we composed the following research questions to guide our action research:

1. What were students' opinions regarding the NSM and inner-circle privilege as revealed during our World Englishes course?
2. What were the challenges and/or benefits of studying EIL in our World Englishes course?

Methodology

We taught the course, *Exploring World Englishes*, in Spring Quarter 2013. It was an elective for international students at a California university and was offered on a pass/no-pass basis. The seven students who took the course were highly motivated and interested in developing their English abilities without having to worry about excessive homework or grades. Of the seven students, five were undergraduate exchange students who attended the university for one school year or less, from Spain, China, Hong Kong, and South Korea, and two were postgraduate scholars from Brazil who conducted research at the university for one school year.

The course consisted of a structured and communicative exploration of the concentric circles of English (Kachru, 1985). Each week's two-hour class session emphasized a different regional variety, beginning with a focus on local English and then moving from inner- (the US, the United Kingdom, and Australia), to outer- (India and the Philippines), to expanding-circle Englishes (Argentina), focusing on phonology, positioning, and the expansion of English within these contexts. Through the discussion of video clips in these varieties, weekly in-class writing reflections, and a final oral presentation about the use and status of English in students' home countries, the course aimed to develop comprehension, writing, and speaking skills.

In addition to concentrating on language development, we were also interested in exploring students' opinions regarding the NSM, inner-circle privilege, and the benefits and challenges our course might present. To explore these issues, we conducted eight weeks of action research (Auerbach, 1992) using a mixed-methods approach. Quantitative data consisted of pre- and post- accent-recognition quizzes designed to explore the potential benefits and/or challenges presented by the course, through determining whether accent recognition improved over the eight weeks. Considering our small class size, it was not meant to provide generalizable results. Qualitative data consisted of a background questionnaire, student writing reflections, recordings of group discussions, an exit questionnaire, and course evaluations. These data were triangulated and analyzed using top-down analysis and deductive coding based on the research questions (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999) to explore students' opinions during the course.

Findings

Research question 1 aimed to explore students' opinions regarding the NSM and inner-circle privilege in our World Englishes course. Students' perceptions regarding the NSM were captured in written reflections (weeks 2 and 5), during a recorded group discussion (week 3), and through the exit questionnaire (week 8). Students' opinions regarding inner-circle privilege were collected through the exit questionnaire.

Students first wrote about the NSM during the second week of class, in which they revealed that their native languages greatly affect their English. One student expanded upon this, saying, "I don't have a negative view of other English learners but I kind of do of my own accent and I guess it's because we all want to sound like a native speaker because that's the 'perfect' accent."¹ During class discussion the following week, we asked students why they might describe a native speaker's accent as "perfect." One student responded, saying the native speaker is the "base for which we compare ... because I want that people understand me ... so as close to the base case I think I will be more understandable." In other words, this student believed that the native speaker should be the "base" for comparison of nonnative accents because the more similar a foreign accent to a native speaker accent, the more understandable one's speech.

These opinions continued to develop throughout the course. In week 5, students revisited the topic, explaining whether or not they believed they should attempt to sound "nativelike." This time, opinions on the issue were more varied. One student stated that being intelligible was the most important thing but she still wanted to sound "nativelike." Two students explained that what mattered most to them was being understandable. Three students expressed that they wanted to be intelligible and that speaking in a "nativelike" way was the path to achieving this goal. Finally, one student clearly stated that she wanted to sound "nativelike" because English is not her first language, and she claimed that "as a learner of English I have to try to follow their rule in English."

The exit questionnaire elicited students' opinions at the end of the course regarding EIL and asked students whether their opinions had been influenced by the course. In these questionnaires, students were asked to "agree" or "disagree" with ideological statements on global English. With respect to the NSM, all seven students "disagreed" with the statement that "the only correct way to speak English is to sound like a native speaker," with five stating that the course had influenced their opinion. "After seeing all the different Englishes around the world, my opinion about this has changed," said one student. Another

said, "I learned from this course that people in each region have their own accents. As long as the English they speak is understandable, that will be fine." Five students agreed and two disagreed with the statement that "to be the strongest English speaker possible, it is better to focus on studying only 'native' English, rather than study diverse Englishes." Three who agreed reported that studying diverse Englishes can be confusing, while two others who agreed complicated their answer in some fashion: "I thought I don't have to know diverse Englishes. However, I realized diverse Englishes can help me to understand native English better." Two students, one who agreed and one who disagreed, focused on the fact that it is important to focus on only one variety when beginning to study English. Another who disagreed stated that "the better you understand different kind of English, the better you can communicate."

In the exit questionnaire questions regarding inner-circle privilege, five students indicated that they disagreed with the statement "American and British English are better varieties than Indian English, Israeli English, Filipino English, etc." One student indicated that the course influenced her opinion on this matter, saying, "This class made me realize that there are a lot of other countries where English is also their native language and that it is equally valid." Additionally, six students agreed with the statement "Every country has the right to own their own type of English, instead of modeling their English on American/British English."

The second research question concerned the benefits and challenges that the students might have experienced during our EIL course, as captured in student writing reflections, course evaluations, and responses to the exit questionnaires. In writing reflection 2, many students stated that it was easier to understand English learners from their own countries and harder to understand learners from other countries. Across writing reflections, a number of students stated they did not have familiarity with English varieties besides "standard" American/British English. In relation to these notions, the results from the pre- and post- accent-recognition quizzes show that students significantly improved their ability to recognize different English accents (Indian, Chinese, Israeli English, etc.), with a mean improvement of 2.6 points out of 10 possible points (two-group *t*-test, 95% CI, $p = 0.018$). This suggests that the course may have helped to better familiarize students with diverse Englishes.

A variety of opinions regarding learning about and practicing different varieties of English emerged in anonymous course evaluations. One student noted feeling "more comfortable with my local accent" as a result of the course, as "everyone has their own accent." One stu-

dent stated that learning how English is adapted in different countries was the most useful part of the course, and another said that learning about dialects of the US was the most useful. In contrast, another student said that learning the differences between American English pronunciation and other varieties of English was the least enjoyable part of the course because he or she was unable to perceive the differences among various pronunciations, and yet another stated that “practicing English accents of non-native speakers” was the least useful.

According to the exit questionnaires, the majority of students found benefits in the area of accent positioning, citing the course as influencing their opinions, particularly in criticizing the NSM. Responses were more complicated concerning the study of diverse Englishes, with three students describing this approach as “confusing,” and four others speaking favorably to some degree about this topic.

Discussion

Considering that the course helped most of our students realize that having an accent in English is acceptable, we believe that it successfully challenged students to reconsider the NSM. Likewise, the fact that the majority of our students indicated that the course influenced their opinion that inner-circle English is not better than other Englishes and that each country has the right to its own English (Dewey, 2007; Mauranen, 2003) suggests that the course successfully challenged students’ ideas about inner-circle privilege. Thus, the data from our action research suggest that not only did EIL course work offer our students the opportunity to critically discuss the NSM and inner-circle privilege (Canagarajah, 1999), but it also influenced students’ opinions regarding these issues.

Student feedback was very important in this action research because courses such as Exploring World Englishes defy the typical expectations of internationals studying in the inner circle. As we saw in the results pertaining to research question 2, many students found aspects of the course relating to EIL accent positioning and exposure to diverse Englishes as strong benefits of the course. However, given comments about the challenges of studying diverse Englishes, instructors might benefit their students most by introducing EIL-oriented course work and diverse Englishes later in student trajectories. In this way, students could reap the benefits of a course such as Exploring World Englishes and be appropriately challenged. A number of our less proficient students suggested that studying diverse Englishes could be confusing, with more proficient students in general supporting the study of diverse Englishes, despite the challenges it poses.

Conclusions

The present study investigates students' opinions regarding the NSM and inner-circle privilege within our World Englishes course and the challenges and benefits our course yielded. Findings indicate that the course encouraged students to contemplate what it means to be a user of English in both local and global contexts. At the end of the course, students not only reported feeling more comfortable with having an "accent" in English, but they also were able to problematize the concept of there being only one "correct" way to speak the language. Additionally, students improved their ability to recognize different English varieties. Several students determined that such a task could be challenging but ultimately valuable, for as one student stated, "The better you understand different kind of English, the better you can communicate."

Receiving such learner feedback on the value of studying EIL was encouraging for us as instructors, considering that before teaching the course, we expected that a potential challenge of teaching EIL in an inner-circle context might relate to the utility (or lack thereof) that international students attribute to the study of diverse Englishes. With this in mind, at the end of the course we asked students about their goals with respect to future English use. Students reported their long-term use of English in very international terms: "get a job in international companies," "relationships with foreigners," and "know people all over the world," saying that they see themselves using the language with "native" and "nonnative" speakers alike in the future. It is our hope as instructors that this EIL course has helped to prepare our students for English use in these future international contexts as they confront diverse English varieties, norms, and cultures. As graduate student instructors we have explored the intersections of internationalization, diverse Englishes, and ELT in designing and teaching our course, and we hope that by sharing this experience with other ELT practitioners, similar courses might be more readily available to a greater number of international students in the future.

Authors

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Note

¹Quotations from students have not been adjusted, maintaining original orthographic and grammatical choices.

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