World Englishes in Cross-cultural settings and Babel

Jerry F. Smith
Midwest Education Group, Chicago, USA
De La Salle University-Dasmarinas, Philippines

Abstract

This paper is meant to illuminate the possibility of how world Englishes within an international setting could become similar to the confusion encountered in the Bible record of the Tower of Babel. Presented here is the trend of world Englishes as a part of an English as an international language paradigm. The discussion then proceeds to address how individual world Englishes within international settings will limit rather than enhance efficient communication by showing examples of potential misunderstandings in the areas of grammar, phonetics, and lexis, between world English speakers. The point is raised that without a standard international form of English the biblical account in Genesis of the Tower of Babel will be replicated.

Keywords: ESL, EFL, English language teaching, English language learning, EIL, English as an International Language, World Englishes, Babel

Introduction

The Tower of Babel

Babel in the title of this paper is a reference to the events detailed in the Christian Bible from Genesis chapters six through nine. To summarize, not long after a great worldwide flood, God commanded mankind to spread out and replenish the earth. However, mankind, unified by one language, sought to build a tower reaching up into heaven instead. It was mankind's rebelliousness to a command by God to replenish the earth and spread out. However, God did not allow this endeavor to come to pass by confounding their unified language which interrupted the building process and they finally left off of building the tower separating instead into groups and eventually nations. These languages have continued on until modern times when English began to be the language of international communication on a global scale: another unifying language which is being used for international business, a common language of education, entertainment, international politics, and the like.

The relevance is that whether you believe the biblical account or not languages were confounded through a change in syntax, phonetics, and lexis as evidenced by these differences in languages around the world. Therefore, people could not understand each other and they left off their unified plan to build a tower that would reach heaven. Conversely, in order to function and

have communication today, a global community would need to have one language. That being the case, the stage has been set for English and it has spread throughout the world. Therefore, grammar, phonetics, and lexis, must also follow suit or we could return to the confounded languages after the Tower of Babel, and the accompanying inability to communicate effectively with one another to accomplish the very purposes for having a unified language.

The politics of English

Certain authors seem to apply a political theme to the subject of English language by using such terms as "imperialism" (Sharifian, 2009, p. 190), "Inner-Circle countries" and "Outer-Circle countries" (Sharifian, 2009, p. 3), and "power" (Sharifian & Jamarami, 2013, pp. 24, 163, 196). However, words such as these can be understood as expressing resentment, and lend support to Van Dijk's (2013) term "discursive rhetoric," aimed at opposition against a particular entity's influence in the global English community. Those who imply such ideas may be missing a fundamental point: That people of the world are learning English in order to function in an increasingly global environment, and that, more effectively. People just want to use the language to do what they need to do whether work, live, survive, or grow. English language learning is not about the right of certain cultures to own the language. It is about communication in today's global community where English is the accepted language of academics, industry, travel, and commerce. Why else does one whose mother tongue is not English seek to use the language of English if not to use it for one purpose or another beyond their own non-English-speaking culture?

This paper was not written to address the politics of English or anything relative to inner- or outer-circle countries. By quoting sources about this topic, I am attempting to point out that the subject of English as an international language is fuel for heated political dialogue where people see English as a political tool to maneuver into one circle or to possibly display hostility toward inner circle countries. Furthermore, I will not discuss the delimitations between *native-* and *non-native* English speakers in this paper. I simply want people to be aware of the potential for confusion amidst today's backdrop of World Englishes. And, having become aware of it, perhaps take steps toward more effective communication in such an environment. Finally, I have no intention here to discuss the details such as who has rights to the language of English for example. Every World English culture has their own English version, but outside of the culture, it will likely lead to confusion. I only want people to understand each other because if they can, if they are all on the same page of music so to speak through a Standard English (in international settings) we will be better able to communicate and avoid misinterpretations and or misunderstandings that might lead to failed communications and misunderstandings that can lead to heated debates or aggressive attitudes.

Whorf's ideas and World English paradigms
Much like Whorf's (1939, p. 12) ideas on behavior based on the linguistics of the Hopi Language as contrasted with SAE (Standard Average European) language: People may assume that because it is termed *World Englishes,* everyone is able to understand each other in cross-cultural communication. However, just because we say it is a World English does not mean it is always intelligible. Those who may think this way are forgetting the peculiar English of each culture that may not translate well into cross-cultural communication. My concept is that World Englishes do not necessarily tend toward a unifying language but rather the opposite: that World Englishes (WE) will lead toward confusion in international / intercultural settings.

Background for this Paper

This paper is limited to my thirteen-year experience as an English language teacher of people from countries such as the Philippines, South Korea, Vietnam, China, Brazil, Russia, Saudi Arabia, and some European cultures as well. I will use examples from observations and interactions with English language learners from various socio-economic backgrounds to lend support to the thrust of this paper while maintaining anonymity for the sake of preventing offense (as much as can be in a paper of this nature). This paper will broach on perceived comprehension and consider primarily a Filipino-English setting but also includes examples from my extended exposure to other cultures' languages such as Brazilian and Korean. The point is not so much *proving* anything but *presenting* an observation. Furthermore, this paper is directed toward creating a case for more questions and or dialogue to the end that an awareness might be facilitated regarding the potential for an environment of misunderstandings and perceived comprehension which has or will reduce intercultural communication in a WE environment. My question: Do World Englishes promote greater communication between cultures or do they engender confusion? It is my desire that this paper will be a step toward answering that question.

World Englishes

It has been suggested that ESL teachers consider the English culture of the learner when teaching ESL (Tarone, 2005) and to accept lapses in grammar, phonetics, or lexis as being part of the English language culture of that particular non-native speaker (Sharifian, 2009, Sharifian & Jamarami, 2013) without seeking to *fix* them. Indeed, what would they be *fixed* to? Yes, it is likely that in a multicultural English-speaking gathering, if the interlocutors' levels were advanced enough, surely they could work out meaning. But, is it something one is willing and or able to do in business settings or perhaps urgent care situations? In an effort to elaborate more on this part of the discussion, I must cite Sharifian (2009, p. 2) once again, a seemingly recognized proponent of English as an International Language (EIL) and WE:

> In general, we can say that English as an International Language refers to a paradigm for thinking, research and practice... EIL does not refer to

a particular variety of English... One of the central themes of EIL as a paradigm is its recognition of World Englishes, regardless of which circles they belong to … This means revising the notion of "proficiency" even for the English of native speakers. Canagarajah (2006, p. 233) maintains that, "in a context where we have to constantly shuttle between different varieties [of English] and communities, proficiency becomes complex ... one needs the capacity to negotiate diverse varieties to facilitate communication."

It is Sharifian's last statement that draws my attention: "in a context where we have to constantly shuttle between different varieties [of English] and communities, proficiency becomes complex… one needs the capacity to negotiate diverse varieties to facilitate communication."

This is the premise behind this paper: that using these *world Englishes* in a *one-language* environment of EIL will create a *Babel-like* phenomena where these Englishes will eventually become confusing to those outside of a particular English culture within the EIL paradigm. The result being as Canagarajah (2006, p. 233, cited in Sharifian, 2009, p. 2) points out, is that we have to constantly "shuttle" between varieties of Englishes. What Sharifian's comments do not point out, is that this *shuttling* lends itself to miscommunications and creates a necessity for a single, standardized English where all are more apt to understand and communicate more readily. Sharifian (2009, p. 4) provides an example from Australia, what he calls an "Inner-Circle" country where: English has its own "standard" dialect, and also Aboriginal people of Australia have their own English: A reference to "multidialectal competence," in order to understand new varieties of English. This is not only true in Australia but also increasingly throughout the world where intercultural competence needs to be viewed as a core element of proficiency in English when it is used for international communication.

Sharifian's comments here though aimed in the opposite direction support the conception in this paper of an approaching Babel-like phenomena and the need for a standardized English for global communications. Intercultural competence, a reference to accommodating cultural schema in the classroom is a noble idea certainly. More cultural awareness and sensitivity are needed among *native-speaking* English language teachers and people in general around the world. However, the question can be raised: How far do we take intercultural competence in English language teaching? Are English language teachers to incorporate *all* cultures into their teaching of a common, unifying language? Are *all* WEs to be accommodated in the classroom? Are English language students seeking to acquire English for use within their *own* culture or to interact with *other* cultures? If the former, then why learn English when they can pick it up from their own culture? If the latter, would there not be a benefit in a single, standardized English for people to communicate with others *outside* of their culture?

English proficiency tests and EIL

In fact, one of the *implied* arguments for standardized English proficiency tests such as IELTS, OPI, TOEIC, TOEFL and the like is to determine if a *non-native* speaker is capable of functioning or surviving in the English-speaking culture they desire to function in. The fact that millions of people both young and old are preparing for and taking these English proficiency tests (British Council 2016) is an indication that there indeed a perceived standard or acceptable form of English for each proficiency test maker. One writer even referred to it as "gold plating" (Graddol, 2006, p. 114, cited in Sharifian, 2009, p. 192) perhaps to suggest that these tests are big business which they may very well be.

Nevertheless, it is a standard form of English that is accepted, used, practiced, and readily comprehended by the residents of particular English-speaking locales and it is to these locales that many language learners want to be integrated into whether for business, travel, emigration, education, or other purposes. A simple Google search using the search words, "why do we have English proficiency tests" will reveal that top universities require certain levels of English language proficiency. According to the British Council, the joint owners of the IELTS, there were two million IELTS tests recorded in the year 2013 (International English Language Testing System [IELTS] n.d.).

In the text, "Imperialism of international tests: an EIL perspective," Khan (2009) discusses the belief that "high-stakes" (p. 193) tests such as the TOEFL are biased against individuals who may be proficient in using English for international communication but have not been exposed to certain nuances of an inner-circle variety of English. In the case of TOEFL, it is the Standard American English. But, the question is raised, what is this standard American English? Later in the same text, the term "hegemony" is used in reference to "inner-circle" countries (p. 191). Khan then goes on to discuss lexical and usage differences between AE (American English), BE (British English), and AusE (Australian English) found in the TOEFL (p. 193). The question is then asked: whose norms are to be imposed?

Standardized proficiency guidelines and EIL

In fact, proficiency guidelines determine English language levels based on a *norm:* the level of effort given to understand what the speaker is expressing in English to someone outside of their world English. An examination of an excerpt from the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL, 2012). Advanced Speaking Level Criteria, for example, shows: "Advanced-level speakers have sufficient control of basic structures and generic vocabulary to be understood by native speakers of the language, including those unaccustomed to non-native speech." An excerpt from the Intermediate level further reflects this thinking: "Intermediate-level speakers are understood by interlocutors who are accustomed to dealing with non-native

learners of the language." And an excerpt from the Novice level further indicates: "Novice-level speakers may be difficult to understand even by the most sympathetic interlocutors accustomed to non-native speech." Therefore, from the contrast between levels, these guidelines are obviously considering that there must be a *standard* English to be attained as the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines are "a description of what individuals can do with language in terms of speaking, writing, listening, and reading in real-world situations in a spontaneous and non-rehearsed context" (ACTFL, 2012 p. 1). We could also do the same examination with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Gostudylink, n.d.).

And now omes confusion

Perceived comprehension. Among English language speakers, there is what is also termed as "perceived comprehension" (Brewer, 2008). I have taken this a step further to integrate English in international settings where one believes he has understood what was communicated according to their own version of World English in an extra-cultural communication but where misunderstandings do take place. I have encountered this repeatedly over a period of thirteen years of English language teaching of various cultures where the ELL *thinks* he understood the term, expression, or instructions, goes on his way (e.g., to complete an assignment, follow instructions, or directions) but discover from the results or lack thereof that he did not in fact understand. If we translate this to a high stakes business meeting, urgent-care medical situation, or other high risk setting, the least amount of play of this nature can be allowed when communicating.

*Self-standardization.*Since this is the present situation that we find ourselves concerning WE, it would be unlikely that the English language will standardize itself within English cultures. People will stick with what they know. For example, Americans may commonly say the word *math* (Math, 2016) while in the United Kingdom the word *maths* is used (Maths, 2016). Syntactically speaking, it can be argued, how many maths are there normally: 1, 2, 3? The term maths is an English language culture variant of what Americans consider to be a non-count noun math. However, in the British English form, it is maths. Is the BE version wrong? The AE? No, we cannot say either is wrong because that is what has been accepted in each respective English language culture. However, could it lead to confusion between two people in an international setting? Alone, probably not. But, when compounded with other differences, confusion could arise. The solution would not be to change the English of one's culture but to provide a standardized English for all to use between cultures.

Confusion. Would the case referred to above create confusion between English speakers from different cultures? Not necessarily, but the confusion between

interlocutors may *compound* through a prolonged dialogue of this nature. We could also add to that the overall impression one might get when speaking with someone who does not use what one culture perceives as *acceptable grammar, i.e.* the way the receiver knows it to be (after significant time *studying* it). We can suggest numerous variables which could ultimately lead theoretically into the need for teachers to teach *another* common form of language apart from what we have found in English today. Where would it end? Fundamental differences in grammar, phonetics, and lexis left unattended will lead us to the need to learn *another* language in order to communicate between world English cultures. Minor points can compound into major points as will be briefly illustrated in the following paragraphs.

Grammar issues. This is not necessarily a reference to subtle issues such as using the word *more* with monosyllabic comparatives (e.g., more fresh as opposed to fresher). This of course is understandable in a conversation and would not necessarily detract comprehension of an utterance. But, what about the use of a *verb* instead of a *noun*? For example, in my interactions and observations with some Filipino English (FE) speakers I have heard the word *overpass* used as a *verb* to indicate that one has gone past a particular location such as in the statement, "He overpassed the house," whereas among other English language cultures (World Englishes) the word overpass is conventionally used as a noun (Overpass, 2016). Can we invent new words in an English culture? Certainly, yes, of course. History shows us that (National Council of Teachers of English [NCTE], 1974). Nevertheless, beyond the particular English culture could they/would they be clearly understood when speaking to someone outside of their own English culture? Would they *believe* themselves understood when a person who is not from that particular English culture *believes* that *they* have understood the message? So, at what point do we say that a standard is needed? Where does English comprehension end and a different language begin?

Another example from the perspective of adjective use, would be from the employer/applicant perspective. I have encountered in my role as a personnel manager continual references from Filipino applicants to being *undergraduates*. This was often understood by me as meaning that the applicants had completed a four-year undergraduate degree, in-line with a conventional definition of the word (Undergraduate, 2016). However, to my surprise, the overwhelming majority of the applicants meant that they had *not yet* finished college. The applicants were using the term *undergraduate* to mean *not yet graduated*. This in itself shows an interesting connection between linguistics and thought (Whorf, 1939) and where confusion could (and did) take place.

Other examples from my interactions and observations with Filipino teachers are the use of the causative verbs *let* versus *had* and the use of the verbs *lift* versus *carry*. Dictionary definitions of the words *let* and *had* give distinction as to their use in a sentence: *let* meaning to *allow or permit* (Let, 2016) while *had* infers *cause to* or *to direct someone* (Have, 2016, p. 16). For

example, a teacher, when speaking about her students, says something like "I let them read their textbook," with the meaning that she *directed* them to read their textbooks (e.g., as part of doing seatwork). However, someone from a different English language culture upon hearing this might (a) assume they understood the utterance perfectly as English words were used grammatically and in the right order, and (b) the nuance of the word *let* as expressing the *giving of permission* by the teacher which has further meaning as perhaps the students were asking for permission to read which point of fact, was not the case. So, already there is an element of misunderstanding. This confusion is further compounded when (c) the speaker believes that her message was perfectly understood, since after all, she was speaking English. But, the recipient of the utterance might believe that she was expressing that she *had* them read their textbook which was more or less a directive.

The possibilities for confusion are numerous. In an urgent care or other similarly crucial setting, a difference between *let* and *have* among people from different English language cultures could result in disastrous consequences. For example, a man who has an illness is told to rest. The doctor tells the wife *let him rest* which the wife understands as a *choice* rather than a *directive*. However, as was pointed out, what the doctor may have meant was he *must* rest or perhaps *have him rest,* a crucial part of the patient's recovery.

Another observation from FE is the use of the verb *carry* and the verb *lift* among English speakers. Use of the verbs *carry* and the use of *lift* are different than my own use (as well as that of texts and popular grammar that I have encountered in my English language teaching experience). I have heard on several occasions FE speakers use the term *carry* the couch for example meaning to *lift* the couch. From my own English culture, I understand *carry the couch* to mean *bear the couch*. Within the FE language culture, communication of this nature may be absolutely fine but what happens when this same English is carried to an international setting? Should I *lift* the box or *carry* the box for you?

Another example from a different World English includes the use of *in a few minutes* or *after a few minutes*. One well-known European linguistics speaker whose first language is not English mentioned in his lecture "I will tell you more about myself in a few minutes" and proceeded to talk about his background for a few minutes. However, the intended meaning as I understood him from my own understanding of his English statement was "I will tell you more about myself for a few minutes" but his actual meaning (for me) as I discovered later was "after a few minutes, I'll tell you more about myself." Clearly, this was an instance of confusion.

A final example: An ESL job ad written by a Korean employer stated that the applicant "must stay in Korea now for face to face interview." With a little effort we can decode this to mean that the applicant must be currently residing ("staying") in Korea. However, do we want to give such effort to understand intended meaning over longer discourse when it is an urgent need or in a business setting?

There are similar examples that can be found all around us but the evidence from these examples does help illustrate the confusion that could arise grammatically from everyone speaking their own version of English in an international or multicultural setting. Could *accurate* communication take place with multiple discrepancies between world Englishes? There could theoretically be a continual element of uncertainty in this kind of interaction between members of two different WE groups that may even lead to mistrust.

Phonetic issues. Certainly any ESL teacher who has had exposure for even relatively short periods of time to English language students will pick up on their pronunciation issues. However, accent alone is acceptable between English speakers as long as they can fairly well understand each other's *accents*. But, on a deeper level, from the area of phonetics, most teachers would likely be able to give examples of their students' issues such as: /p/ vs. /f/, /ɵ/ vs. /t/, /ð/ vs. /d/, /i:/ vs. /I/ and so on. We could point out the Asian English /r/ vs. /l/ conflicts or the FE /th/ vs. /t/ conflicts or the Brazilian English /r/ vs. /h/ conflicts. Did the man in the hospital *leave* or did he *live?* Should I call *Dan* or *Dawn?* Do I take *these* or *this*? It is likely without great debate that any ESL teacher reading this paper would have their own additions to this list. The idea however, is that phonetic issues with consonant sounds go beyond simple accent but involve the comprehensibility of certain words and can very well lead to miscommunication or confusion in an oral setting. Should we strive for a standard sound between cultures or simply rely on repetition of a polite *pardon*?

Lexical issues. Another step toward confusion among WEs could come in the form of the word *salvage*. In the Philippines, the word means to *kill* someone and dump their body in a canal ("13 English Words" n.d., p. 4), e.g., "He was salvaged last night." This must certainly seem strange to a foreign visitor who has an almost opposite understanding of this word which is to *recover* something (Salvage, 2016). Imagine two people using English in a friendly conversation and one says sadly "my friend was salvaged the other day." The other might think that the guy's friend was recovered from something and move on in confusion as to why the speaker was sad. Of course, the conversation might not end there but an illustration is made. Put this in a business setting where one says to another "we'll need to salvage this plan" meaning that we need to make some adjustments and recover it. However, the other person thinks "okay, he wants to scrap the plan" the direct opposite of the speaker's intended meaning so he goes on to give up or destroy the plan to the speaker's frustration. The receiver had *perceived understanding* while the speaker *believed* the receiver to have understood the word in the way he meant it. The potential for misunderstanding and or confusion is high with simply one word alone. When this is compounded in longer discourse, the potential is multiplied
The question comes to mind: is that what we want when we sit down to political negotiations, have medical concerns, prepare business plans, pursue

academic endeavors, conduct research, or have plain old conversations? More examples from FE include the use of the word *bottomless* as a reference to *refillable*, such as a refillable pitcher of Coke at a local fast food restaurant is termed *bottomless* or *CR* (Comfort Room) as a reference to a *restroom* (Rivera, 2012, Using Filipinisms, 2013), use of the word *overeat* to refer to vomiting (Chang-sup, 2014). These are only a few examples but the idea can be gleaned that unless there is an awareness between English cultures there will certainly be confusion in cross-cultural WE settings.

Ebonics. Another example of English as a *different* language is that of *Ebonics,* the speech of black Americans (Baron, 2000). Would other English speakers who have had the chance to converse or listen to it have difficulty understanding it? Would Ebonics be considered a separate language? Some might say that it is simply a dialect or creole (Baron, 2000, pp. 8-9) but can this dialect be used to converse with everyone in an international setting? Let us imagine that Ebonics were the recognized language of commerce and travel. Would the English speakers of the world need to take a course on Ebonics to function within the global community that uses Ebonics or would they be able to speak their own *version* of English and all would be well? A 1996 resolution by the Oakland School Board brought public attention to the term "Ebonics" and ruled that Ebonics is not English (Baron, 2000, p. 9). If we turn this to today's EIL paradigm and World Englishes we can see a similar stage being set.

Conclusion

Of course it makes sense for any culture to bend English to suit its needs within the context of their own culture. However, once we go outside of the English subcultures into an international setting, there appears to be potential for confusion. A need to facilitate ready comprehension as well as dispel any misunderstandings or confusion as it relates to grammar, phonetics, and or lexis. This has been a simplified presentation of an immediate but foreseeable concern. The linguist reader or the ESL teacher in the field should be familiar with supporting theories, research, and or experiences which correlate the information presented in this paper and as such be able to make an informed judgment of the problem presented.

Simple and limited illustrations have been given in this paper regarding English communication internationally via World Englishes. It can be argues that there is a need to have a base language. If each English community were to use their own language it could be interpreted differently than what the speaker intended as was demonstrated. When dealing with something that is an exact science, various interpretations may not be good enough. Imagine how difficult it might be to travel the world and need to know the *English* of each culture you visit. Would that not be the same as it was/has been when you had to learn the language of the country you were visiting? So, in today's climate of World Englishes, would one not also have to learn the English of

the culture they were visiting? It is clear that the answer is quickly becoming, yes. Therefore, although English is thought of as a unifying language a common language is still missing and the confusion at the Tower of Babel is still left to proliferate.

Somehow, we may be forgetting a fundamental point: that English is being learned by people in order to function and communicate in a growing global community where one language is more efficient. Proponents of World Englishes who are against an *imperialist* language owner are viewing English as a medium of or extension of political power. However, emotions and pride aside, English is a language and language is a tool for communication in order to accomplish basic individual and collective goals of survival. Perhaps I am somewhat naive and idealistic in my perceptions but nonetheless optimistic that this paper can at least initiate thinking and further questions regarding the confusion that could arise between World Englishes and the need for a standardized English in international/intercultural settings. I am in no way suggesting any particular World English for such a standardized English – that would be a different discussion. However, without a standard form of English, we may very well be continuing the confusion begun at the Tower of Babel.

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Note on Contributor

Jerry Smith is the manager and instructor of the 150-hour Professional TESOL Certificate Program (online – international / offline – Philippines) for Midwest Education Group LLC, Chicago, USA. Jerry holds a PhD Christian Education, an MA Teaching-English, an MBA Human Resources Mgt., a BS Occupational Education, and has also taken up studies in a PhD Language Education program at De La Salle University-Dasmariñas, Philippines. His research interests include world Englishes and perceived comprehension, teacher-student interaction, and education methods in churches. Email: jfrsmth@outlook.com