Assessing English proficiency in the Expanding Circle

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The prevailing wisdom in English proficiency assessment has long been that the appropriate norms for Standard English usage around the world are those that are accepted and followed by educated native speakers of English. This assumption has led to the presumed international validity of English proficiency tests based solely on native-speaker, often American, norms.

Considerable research in recent years (e.g., Hill and Parry, 1994; Bamgbose, 1998; Jenkins, 2000; Lowenberg, 2000; Brutt-Griffler, 2002) has demonstrated that this assumption is no longer valid in Kachru’s (1985) Outer Circle countries, where English as a post-colonial legacy is widely used by large numbers of non-native speakers as a second, often official, language in a broad range of intranational domains. In these settings, widespread nativized innovations in the forms and functions of English have developed, many of which have become local norms for English proficiency testing.

However, by far the majority of the world’s English users live in the countries of Kachru’s (1985) Expanding Circle, where English is generally considered to function as a “foreign language” in largely international domains with few in-country uses, as in Bolivia, Chile, Greece, Turkey, Thailand, Indonesia, China, Japan, and Korea. The widespread assumption in these cases is that, with few in-country uses, little nativization occurs, and so the norms for English learning, use, and testing remain those of the native speakers in the Inner Circle.

This paper examines evidence that in many of these Expanding Circle settings, the norms for Standard English usage, teaching, and testing may not always be those of the Inner Circle. First, reference to recent research concerning the Expanding Circle nations indicates that in certain intranational and regional domains of language use in these countries, English actually functions as a second language, often with the development of nativized norms. Second, it is demonstrated that these Expanding Circle norms result from productive processes that also occur in the Inner Circle varieties and that also create normative differences between the Inner Circle varieties. Finally, the implications of these developments are examined for the validity of certain items in tests of Standard English proficiency that are based solely on Inner Circle norms.

Crystal (1997: 56) has observed that

the distinction between “second language” (L2) and “foreign language” use has less contemporary relevance than it formerly had. There is much more use of English nowadays in some countries of the Expanding Circle, where it is “only” a foreign language (as in Scandinavia and The Netherlands), than in some of the Outer Circle where it has traditionally held a special place.

Research by Berns (1992, 1995) and Loonen (1996) describes how such a phenomenon is occurring across Europe as a whole, with consequent development of non-native norms. In

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recent years, country-specific studies of intranational functions of English in Europe have been completed in Albania (Dushku, 1998), Germany (Berns, 1988; Hilgendorf, 1996), Hungary (Petzold and Berns, 2000), Poland (Griffin, 1997), the Netherlands (Ridder, 1995), Sweden (Berg, Hult, and King, 2001), and Switzerland (Davidson, 1995). Beyond Europe, similar trends in specific domains have been described in Brazil (Friedrich, 2000), Tunisia (Battenburg, 1996, 1997), Egypt (Schaub, 2000), Jordan (Mustafa, 1995), China (Cheng, 1992; Zhao and Campbell, 1995), Japan (Stanlaw, 2002), and Korea (Shim, 1994, 1999).

With regard to specific nativized features of English in the Expanding Circle, 20 years ago, in his foreword to the first edition of The Other Tongue, Charles Ferguson (1982: xvi–xvii) already noticed the emergence of what he called “continental” features of English.

Frequently conferences are conducted in English (and their proceedings published in English) when only a few of the participants are native speakers. At such conferences, the English spoken often shows features at variance with the English of England but shared by other speakers. Continental meanings of eventual and actual, continental uses of tenses, calques on French formulas of conference procedure, various details of pronunciation, and dozens of other features mark the English as an emerging continental norm. Native speakers of English attending the conference may find themselves using some of these features as the verbal interaction takes place.

Extending beyond Europe, a major source of innovation in the norms of Expanding Circle varieties, as occurs in the Outer Circle varieties (cf. Lowenberg, 2000), is the extension of certain innovative processes of morphology and syntax that are also very productive in, and frequently cause differences between, the Inner Circle varieties of English.

One of the most frequently occurring of these processes is the conversion to countability of certain uncountable nouns. This process, which Henry Widdowson (personal communication) has observed is restricted to specific lexical items and registers in each variety of English, results in the Korean English constructions in examples (1) and (2), taken from research conducted by Shim (1999: 252).

(1) Although it is a hard work, I enjoy it.

(2) An old man showed a great patience.

That this same process likewise causes differences in the norms between Inner Circle varieties is illustrated in examples (3) and (4).

(3) . . . iceberg lettuces are down in price and should be selling for between 35p and 55p, depending on size.
   (Daily Telegraph, August 9, 1985: 6, in Algeo, 1988: 7)

(4) Some small initial fall-off in attendances is unavoidable.

Lettuce and attendance, as seen in these examples, can be countable in British English, but they are always uncountable nouns in Standard American English.

Nativized norms in Expanding Circle varieties also occur in collocations involving prepositions. Example (5) is taken from a practice exercise in Adult English, a series of textbooks published in 2000 by the Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China for use in higher education EFL classes.

(5) Karaoke is very popular (with, among) young people.
   (Ministry of Education, PRC, 2000: 110)
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In this sentence, *among* is listed in the text as the only correct answer, though for most Americans, either *with* or *among* would be acceptable. However, once again, similar differences in the use of prepositions also occur between Inner Circle varieties, as demonstrated in (6) from a European EFL textbook incorporating the British usage of *in* in a locative construction which would require *on* in Standard American English.

(6) Man: I'm looking for the nearest post office.
Woman: There's one *in* St Andrews Street.

(*Focus*, p. 17. Zurich: Eurocentres. [EFL coursebook prepared in collaboration with the Council of Europe, no date.])

A third productive process that often results in differences between Expanding and Inner Circle varieties is the formation of phrasal verbs. Korean examples (7) and (8) include constructions that would be problematic for American readers or hearers.

(7) The older generation finds it difficult to *do with* young people.
(Shim, 1999: 251)

(8) Gardens *come on* life again.
(Shim, 1999: 251)

Yet these same Americans might have similar problems interpreting the British phrasal verb in (9).

(9) Options open to us are: . . . choosing to *miss out* a particular listing.
(Handout from presentation by British speaker at Annual TESOL Convention, March 1992)

As with assessing English proficiency in the Outer Circle, awareness of these types of morphological and syntactic divergence between normative features in Expanding Circle varieties of English and corresponding norms in the Inner Circle varieties is essential for evaluating non-native speakers’ proficiency in English in the world context. Since most speakers of Expanding Circle varieties acquire these varieties non-natively, examiners must try to distinguish *deficiencies* in the second language acquisition of English by these speakers (errors) from varietal *differences* in the speakers’ usage resulting from their having previously learned and used such non-native normative features as those discussed above. This is particularly significant in the case of high-stakes, norm-referenced tests that are administered and heavily relied upon in international settings.

The most widely administered of these tests, particularly in Korea, Japan, and China, is the Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC), which the Educational Testing Service (ETS) and, more recently, an ETS subsidiary have been administering worldwide since 1979. In its informational brochures, the TOEIC describes itself as “designed to test the English language as it is used internationally in business, commerce, and industry” (Educational Testing Service, 1990: 2). With over 1.5 million candidates currently sitting for it annually, a huge plurality of whom live in Korea, the TOEIC claims that it “has become the international standard for measuring English-language proficiency” (Educational Testing Service, 1992: 3).

However, as the following examples demonstrate, certain items in past tests have not reflected the above findings that normative features in Expanding Circle varieties sometimes diverge from Inner Circle norms. Examples (10) and (11) are items that appeared in two forms of the TOEIC that have been retired. The candidate’s task here is to identify the italicized word or phrase that is ungrammatical.

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(10) His proposal met with a lot of resistances.
    (Educational Testing Service, 1980: 27)

(11) The new equipments made in France will be the only items on sale this week.
    (Educational Testing Service, 1993: 9)

The segments that the TOEIC considers ungrammatical here are resistances and equipments. However, these constructions result from the same process yielding (1) through (4) above, from both Korean and British English.

Similar problematic TOEIC items involve prepositions, as in (12) and (13), from one of these retired versions of the TOEIC.

(12) If your shipment is not delivered _______ 24 hours, you can claim a full refund on the merchandise.
    (a) by (b) at (c) until (d) within

(13) We are so glad you could come. Welcome _______ Rome.
    (a) in (b) at (c) to (d) of

The correct answers are (d) within for item (12), and (c) to for (13). However, based on example (5) above, the thousands of Chinese who annually sit for the TOEIC might well choose different prepositions than those following American norms.

In conclusion, I would like to note that the description of nativized norms in the Expanding Circle varieties of English has only just begun. To date, extremely few linguistic features in specific Expanding Circle varieties have been determined to be actual norms on the basis of the still limited data that have been analyzed. Nevertheless, just as has been demonstrated for the Outer Circle varieties, the examples presented in this paper indicate that nativized norms are indeed developing in Expanding Circle speech communities. The existence of these norms casts serious doubt on the hitherto assumed validity of the Expanding Circle of certain item types in English proficiency tests that are based solely on Inner Circle norms, such as the TOEIC.

Further compromising the validity of Inner Circle-based test items is the observation by Braj Kachru (personal communication) and others that many students of English in the Expanding Circle now study English in Outer Circle settings, such as India, Singapore, and the Philippines. For example, during the session of intensive English instruction offered from April 22 to May 3, 2002, at the Center for Language Learning at De La Salle University in Manila, the Philippines, 152 students were enrolled. Of this total, 52 were from Korea, 44 were from the PRC, 16 were from Taiwan, and 12 were from Japan. Analysis of teaching and test materials from these settings (Lowenberg, 2000) indicates that many of these Expanding Circle learners are being taught English using Outer Circle norms for Standard English. When these learners return to their home countries and often become leaders in English language teaching there, they introduce many of these Outer Circle norms, which then become more widespread and influence Expanding Circle nativization. As a result, the sharp distinction between Outer Circle and Expanding Circle contexts, which has already been revisited above, becomes even more blurred.

Ultimately, as Crystal (1997: 130–2) has observed, with the spread of English as a truly global language, “an inevitable consequence of this development is that the language will become open to the winds of linguistic change in totally unpredictable ways.” What we are
finding is that this change is occurring just as dynamically in the Expanding Circle as in the Outer Circle. Given that by far the majority of the world’s English users now live in Expanding Circle settings, developers of proficiency tests in English as a world language will have to be ever more cognizant of this change.