

Language Testing from the Perspectives of World Englishes and English as a Lingua Franca

FUJIWARA, Yasuhiro, Faculty of Foreign Studies, Meijo University

Abstract

This research note examines how perspectives of World Englishes and English as a lingua franca can be applied to English-language testing, with specific focus on English-language teaching in Japan. On the one hand, World Englishes, a field of sociolinguistics, respects the diversity of Englishes and evaluators; on the other hand, English as a lingua franca, a field of discourse analysis and pragmatics, assesses the ability to achieve an assigned task while accommodating to and communicating with others using various strategies.

Keywords: World Englishes, varieties of English, raters, English as a lingua franca, task achievement, strategic competence, accommodation skills

1. Introduction

English is used internationally in a variety of contexts, not only by native English speakers but also by English users with different first languages and cultures. Until now, the evaluation of the proficiency of English learners has been carried out with reference to the “idealized” native speaker norm. So-called “native speakers” have been held as the “ultimate model” in all linguistic aspects, including pronunciation, vocabulary, expressions, grammar, discourse structures, speech acts, and gestures. In particular, large-scale English proficiency tests still tend to regard only the English of native speakers as “correct” and any non-native-speaker characteristics as “incorrect” (Jenkins & Leung, 2019). Given how English is used in this globalized world, however, it is clear that the language is not limited to English speakers such as Americans and British.

In view of the diversity of English and its use, we need to examine the objectives of English education. If English is taught not as a language used in the US or the UK, but as an “international language,” how should learners’ language proficiency be evaluated? This research note describes how perspectives of World Englishes (WE) and English as a lingua franca (ELF) can be applied to English-language testing, with specific focus on English language teaching (ELT) in Japan.

2. World Englishes Approach

World Englishes, a field of sociolinguistics, respects the diversity of Englishes and evaluators.

2.1. Reception

Second language users of English often speak English with accents influenced by their first languages, such as Japanese, German, and Vietnamese. Given that the phonological traits of the first language are, in nearly all cases, transferred to the second language to a certain degree, the skill of understanding various accents of English, rather than only those of British or American speakers, should be regarded as essential (Hino, 2005; Canagarajah, 2006).

The audio materials used at secondary schools in Japan, however, are recorded predominantly in American English. According to research into secondary school textbooks published in 2002 and 2016 (Kawashima, 2009, 2018), 80% to 90% of the English speakers in their audio materials were from the US. A similar tendency has been found in junior high school textbooks (see the review of Kawashima, 2009). In line with this situation, nearly all the listening tests at the secondary-school level, as a matter of course, have used American English. In language teaching, it is thought that focusing on a single “standard” avoids confusion on the part of students, but this approach is inadequate for our “global society,” in which numerous varieties of English are spoken.

What can be done to correct this clear bias toward American English? One solution is not to limit listening tests to only American English but to include a variety of Englishes. Learners would need to become familiar with various Englishes other than American. For example, teaching materials based on the WE approach are available, such as *Indian English, Listening Practice* (Enokizono, 2012). Speakers of different varieties of English can now be heard on video distribution websites. It is also a good idea to work with an increasing number of English teachers from non-English speaking countries, such as those from the Philippines, to create original listening materials.

Starting in the 2020 school year, the listening component of the national standardized university entrance exams is supposed to include Englishes spoken by non-native speakers as well as by native speakers (National Center for University Entrance Examinations, 2019). The two pilot tests used the Englishes of American, British, and Japanese speakers. Future English listening tests are expected to include a wider variety of English voices.

2.2. Production

Acknowledging different varieties of English will hopefully lead to a positive attitude toward learners' own Englishes. In teaching English as an international language, the criteria for pronunciation should be "intelligibility" instead of "native-likeness." If a learner's performance on a speaking test, for example, is at an intelligible level, an L1 accent should not be penalized. We should be aware that it is quite natural that the accent of the first language is reflected in the second language. So-called "Katakana English" (English with a heavy accent of Japanese) may be unintelligible in some international contexts, but as long as the learner's accent is at an internationally acceptable level, there is no reason to evaluate it negatively.

In fact, acceptance of various accents in L2 English is a global movement, with a considerable impact on the field of language testing. The Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) iBT speaking test measures how comprehensible learners' performances are without evaluating them by native-speaker norms (ETS, 2014; Harding & McNamara, 2018). In the first edition of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR; Council of Europe, 2001), which has a great influence on English education in Japan, clearly indicated its stance that the goals of language learners are not to be approximate to so-called "native speakers." In the companion volume of the CEFR (Council of Europe, 2018), all the references to "nativeness" and anything related to the concept were completely removed. For example, "native speakers" was replaced with "speakers of the target language."

It has been found that when ordinary L1 and L2 English speakers evaluate learners' performance, a non-native-like accent is not very problematic (Sato & McNamara, 2018). In addition, it has been pointed out that in ELF conversations, where L2 English users are communicating in English, the frequent use of linking and omission in phonology, which is typical of native speakers, rather reduces comprehensibility (e.g., Jenkins, 2000; Hino, 2018).

It may be only Japanese people who worry about Japanese-influenced accents in English pronunciation. In English education from the perspective of WE, it is much better to focus on other features that can have a significant impact on success in international communication.

2.3. Raters

The WE approach recommends not only using multiple varieties of English on the tests, but also hiring English users from a variety of backgrounds as examiners. Even the

TOEFL and the International English Language Testing System (IELTS), which were once critiqued as being too centered on native-speaker English (Jenkins & Leung, 2019), have recently started to employ non-native English speakers as evaluators (Matsuda, 2019; Sadeghpour & Sharfian, 2019). In comparison with tests relying solely on L1 native speakers, speaking and writing tests that include L2 users with different lingua-cultural backgrounds as raters will have greater validity in the current world, where English is used by native and non-native speakers of English.

Previous studies have shown that the lingua-cultural backgrounds of L2 users will perhaps have some influence on their evaluation behaviors (Harding & McNamara, 2018). For example, it has been reported that Filipino raters are more severe than native speakers in the evaluation of overall performances (Hato et al., 2018) and that Singaporean raters who have used English as their main language since childhood may be stricter in evaluating pronunciation (Shintani, Saito & Koizumi, 2017). It is not at all surprising that there will be some discrepancies in evaluation depending on the raters' lingua-cultural backgrounds (Negishi, 2017), as they have used English for different purposes with different people and experienced different Englishes in their lives. To minimize discrepancies and make evaluations as consistent as possible, it is necessary to train evaluators and make mutual concessions.

In my opinion, fluidity and compromise of the evaluation of learners shows how English is used as a lingua franca in the world. As already mentioned, English speakers have diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds, and intelligibility of pronunciations and comprehensibility of expressions inevitably differ from rater to rater. This testing practice of the WE approach is therefore much more valid than testing with native-English-speaking raters alone. In the real world, speakers of various Englishes evaluate English communication skills on various axes.

3. English as a Lingua Franca Approach

English as a lingua franca, a field of discourse analysis and pragmatics, assesses the ability to achieve an assigned task while accommodating to and communicating with others in an effective way using various strategies.

3.1. Laypersons' judgment of communicative competence in L2

According to Professor Emeritus Tim McNamara of the University of Melbourne, one of the authorities on language testing, "to date no tests of English as a lingua franca exist" (McNamara, 2018, p. 13). While mentioning a pessimistic view of the feasibility

of ELF tests, he states that “they are perfectly feasible, and...the problem of their absence is essentially a political one” (ibid). McNamara and his colleagues also provided insightful comments concerning what ELF tests should be, and some of them will be briefly introduced below.

Sato and McNamara (2018) noticed that theories of L2 communicative competence and language testing have not incorporated the perspectives of laypersons; that is, ordinary L1 or L2 users of a language. In other words, applied linguists and “experts” of language tests have developed models of communicative competence and evaluation methods, but they have not considered the opinions of general English users, especially non-native speakers of English, who are actually “the ultimate arbiters of L2 speakers’ oral performance” (Sato & McNamara, 2018, p. 1). The researchers asked a variety of English speakers (L1s: English, French, Spanish, Chinese, Japanese, and so forth), who had not been trained in linguistics or as language teachers, to evaluate the speech of English learners by watching video recordings of their performances. As a result, the evaluation included not only accuracy and fluency, which are emphasized in general language tests, but also the following factors:

- Overall communicative success (message conveyance, comprehensibility of messages)
- Content (content elaboration, coherence, relevance to the topic, etc.)
- Interaction (questions, responses, listening, backchannels, consideration for others, etc.)
- Non-verbal behaviors (hand gestures, eye contact, facial expressions, etc.)
- Composure/attitude (confidence, calmness, willingness to communicate, etc.)

These may be similar to the points to which we naturally pay attention when we communicate in any language. These are probably the essence of successful communication, and they are, to a significant degree, common to people and languages throughout the world.

Of course, language characteristics are important. Linguistic features such as pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar are vital factors because they directly affect communication and its success. However, previous research has revealed that ELF communication places much more emphasis on psycholinguistic fluency rather than linguistic accuracy (Sato & McNamara, 2018, p. 11). When we use language, we do not correct others’ linguistic errors. As many scholars in WE, and ELF have pointed out

(e.g., Hino, 2018), fluid communication cannot be evaluated only by fixed norms in theory.

3.2. Task achievement

Language testing informed by ELF evaluates the success of task achievement. More specifically, it focuses on whether and how a given task has been achieved rather than what language forms are used. In recent literature on ELF-informed testing, “task achievement” has often been mentioned as an essential factor to evaluate (Fujiwara, 2017; Hato et al., 2018; Harding & McNamara, 2018; Kouvdou & Tsagari, 2018). Rather than “accuracy” based on a native speaker norm, the question is how adequately a task has been achieved through two-way interactions by appropriate linguistic or non-linguistic means.

This shift from accuracy to task achievement is also seen in language testing in general, particularly communication-oriented performance testing and testing in task-based language teaching (Harding & McNamara, 2018; Kouvdou & Tsagari, 2018). In performance- and task-based tests, test takers are given a task that includes a context and a real-life purpose of language use. They are then evaluated on their success or failure in completing the task rather than on the linguistic characteristics of their utterances. It is noteworthy that task-based language teaching, which has been drawing increased attention in recent years, is seeking a test format in the same direction as ELF, with the focus on task achievement rather than linguistic features.

3.3. Strategic competence

Effective use of various communication strategies is required to communicate with L2 speakers with different lingua-cultural backgrounds and proficiency levels (Seidlhofer, 2011). In a narrow sense in language education, communication strategies are a means that learners use to achieve successful communication by compensating for a lack of knowledge and ability in a second language; in a broad sense, it includes all the strategies to facilitate communication. For example, if a learner does not know the word “amphibian,” he or she would paraphrase it as “an animal that can live on land and in water.” Another example is if a learner does not understand what his or her interlocutor is talking about, he or she can request a clarification: “What did you say?” Other examples include the use of gestures or facial expressions to show one’s level of understanding, and some learners might resort to their first language to make themselves understood.

The assessment of strategic competence (the skill of using communication strategies in an appropriate manner) is still in development compared to the assessment of linguistic characteristics (Agawa & Sato, 2005). As the model of “communicative language ability” of Bachman (1990) shows, strategic skills are involved in all aspects of language use, and so it is difficult to evaluate only those skills. In recent ELF literature, however, one possible way to evaluate strategic competence has been proposed: a checklist of communication strategies for in-class observation (Kouvduu & Tsagari, 2018). Exchanges in ELF contexts frequently require participants to check whether they understand each other well (Cogo & House, 2018). This can be achieved by repeating oneself (repetition) or by repeating what the other person says (comprehension check). In this method, such strategies in interactions can be observed and then recorded on a checklist.

What may raise controversy in this method, however, is that the use of L1 and other languages and the omission of the third-person singular *-s*, for example, which are regarded as negative in English education, can be positively evaluated. In terms of ELF-informed teaching practice, however, it may be acceptable to evaluate such features in a positive way. Japanese students are said to be often silent, being afraid of making mistakes, especially in the beginner's class. Taking this method, teachers in such a classroom may be able to make a difference.

The idea of evaluating the use of L1 and other languages positively is supported by some ELF scholars such as Jennifer Jenkins and Elana Shohamy (Jenkins, 2015; Shohamy, 2018). ELF users are plurilinguals by nature. In fact, it is quite natural for them to use their repertoires of languages to communicate with others in ELF situations. Jenkins, who has been one of the leading scholars in ELF research, advocates the need to conduct research and language teaching from a multilingual perspective, rather than focusing only on English. She has proposed another field of ELF called “English as a multilingua franca” (Jenkins, 2015). All recent views on language ability, including the CEFR referred to in the Courses of Study in Japan and the multi-competence advocated by Cook (2007), include the mother tongue as an essential component (Fujiwara, 2014). The monolingual approach, which forbids the use of L1 in classrooms where English is used, should be revisited and reconsidered, because communication in ELF situations is actually achieved in various other languages as well.

3.4. Accommodation skills

One form of test from the perspectives of WE and ELF mentioned above is the computer-based speaking test developed by the Kyoto Institute of Technology (Hato et al., 2018). The characters on screen include not only L1 English speakers such as American or British people, but also L2 English users whose mother tongues are languages such as Malaysian, Japanese, Italian, and Portuguese. The interactions between ELF users are used in the test as in the listening material. The test examiners are L1 users and L2 users (such as Japanese and Filipinos), taking into account the diversity of English users. The evaluation is not concerned with how close the learner's grammar and pronunciation are to native speakers' English, but about the degree of task achievement. This test design enables the examiners to evaluate the use of communication strategies to compensate for language deficiencies and to achieve the task. This is a noteworthy effort to evaluate English use in this current globalized world.

However, performances on a computer-based test are inherently different from those with real people. Interacting with people requires the ability to adjust one's own speech to accommodate to the interlocutor's speech (accommodation skills). As the developers of the computer-based ELF test point out (Hato et al., 2018), however, interview-based testing, in which test takers interact directly with others, poses problems of practicality (time and cost efficiency), especially in large-scale tests. However, negotiating meaning and coordinating speech in ELF interactions should be taken into account in ELF testing, which would emphasize the dynamic nature of interactions.

English as a lingua franca also requires users to acquire "the ability to cope with communication with people whose English proficiency, traditionally defined, is better than yours and worse than yours" (McNamara, 2018, p. 17). This perspective has not been considered in language tests that have been solely based on so-called "native speakers." Communication strategies are used to compensate for one's own language knowledge and skills, but we should be aware that they may also be used to compensate for a lack of the interlocutor's language knowledge and skills. For example, if the other person does not understand the word "amphibian," the speaker may paraphrase it so that the interlocutor understands. The ability to compromise with such interlocutors and the ability to coordinate interactions (accommodations skills) are required.

4. Conclusion

This research note summarized how research perspectives of WE and ELF can be applied to English-language testing, with specific focus on English language teaching in Japan. On the one hand, WE promotes the diversity of Englishes and evaluators; on the other hand, ELF, focusing less on native-speaker accuracy, measures the ability to achieve an assigned task while accommodating to interlocutors with various communication strategies.

Language testing that takes into account WE and ELF has been under discussion for a long time, but in terms of evaluation, the traditional norms of “native speakers” have still remained pervasive, and thus WE- and ELF-informed testing is still a developing area (Harding & McNamara, 2018). However, the social status of ELF will continue to have an impact on English-language testing as well as English language teaching. The reality of English that learners will face in the future world cannot be ignored (Matsuda, 2019).

Note

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