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Globalisation and developing metacultural competence in learning English as an International Language

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Abstract

In its journey across the *globe*, English has become increasingly *localised* by many communities of speakers around the world, adopting it to encode and express their cultural conceptualisations, a process which may be called *glocalisation* of the language.

The glocalisation of English and the dynamics of increased contact between people from different cultural backgrounds, or *transcultural mobility*, call for new notions of 'competence' to be applied to successful intercultural communication. In this paper, I focus on the notion of *metacultural competence*, from the perspective of Cultural Linguistics, and explain how such competence can be developed as part of learning English as an International Language (EIL). Cultural Linguistics is a discipline with multidisciplinary origins exploring the relationship between language, culture, and conceptualisation. The analytical tools of Cultural Linguistics are conceptual structures such as *cultural schemas*, *cultural categories*, and *cultural metaphors*, collectively referred to as *cultural conceptualisations*. The paper provides examples of cultural conceptualisations from Chinese English and Hong Kong English. It also explores different aspects of metacultural competence. Metacultural competence enables interlocutors to consciously engage in successfully communicating and negotiating their cultural conceptualisations during intercultural communication. I argue that EIL curricula should provide opportunities for learners to develop this competence and expose them to the conceptual variation that characterises the English language in today's globalised world. Exposure to a variety of cultural conceptualisations in learning an L2 is likely to expand a learner's conceptual horizon, where one can become familiar with, and even have the option of internalising, new systems of conceptualising experience.

Keywords: English as an International Language; Globalisation and language; Cultural Linguistics; Cultural conceptualisations; Metacultural competence

Introduction

The last two decades have witnessed the development of an ever more complex relationship between the English language and globalisation. Graddol (1997) argues that economic globalisation has encouraged the global spread of English, while the global spread of English has also encouraged globalisation. In a more recent publication, he goes on to observe that "English is now redefining national and individual identities worldwide, shifting political fault lines, creating new global patterns of wealth and

social exclusion, and suggesting new notions of human rights and responsibilities of citizenship” (Graddol 2006, 12).

Increasingly, as globalisation and the new technology continue to bring people from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds closer together, the default form of communication in everyday life for many people is becoming instances of *intercultural* communication. This phenomenon has attracted a significant degree of scholarly attention, leading to various proposals for the ‘competencies’ that are now required for successful intercultural communication. In particular in the area of foreign language education, scholars have realised that the main goal in teaching languages should shift away from its focus on the development of native-speaker competence towards more realistic competencies to facilitate communication between speakers from a wide range of cultural backgrounds.

Around two billion people are now using English around the world and English has an official role in more than 70 countries and territories (Crystal 1997). More than 80% of communication English in the world is now between so-called “non-native” speakers of the language. Graddol (2006, 87) observes that “an inexorable trend in the use of global English is that fewer interactions now involve a native-speaker.” The majority of international travels are from non-English speaking countries to non-English speaking countries, requiring the use of an international language, which is in most cases English. The globalisation of English and its rapid use among communities of speakers around the world has led the localisation of the language and the development of many varieties of English, a process that may be referred to as the *glocalisation* of English (Sharifian 2010), and it continues to do so. One of the implications of this development is for the concept of “native speaker”. Now people who were traditionally considered to be non-native speakers of English are in many cases native speakers of the newly developed, localised varieties, such as Chinese English, Hong Kong English, Japanese English, etc.

Some people learn other languages as their L1 and move to an English speaking country after some years, for example as teenagers, and in time come to use English very competently and as a dominant language of communication. For such speakers, self-identification either as native speaker or not may relate more to their perception of identity rather than on a linguistic ground (e.g., Brutt-Griffler and Samimy 2001). Also, in countries such as Singapore, India, and Malaysia, some people use English as the main language of communication, even at home, and in fact in the available literature of World Englishes these speakers are considered as native speakers of English (e.g., Kirkpatrick 2007). It is also worth noting that in many contexts that have traditionally been considered as English as a Foreign Language (EFL), exposure to English and resources available for learning English were limited. However, now thanks to the new technology and satellite, learners have at their disposal access to many sources for exposure to learning and interacting with other speakers in English, which has significant implication for their development of fluency and competency in English.

But only part of the complexity of the concept of ‘native speaker’ is due to the increase in the number of non-native speakers. New technology has also in some ways influenced the ways in which competence in the use of language is viewed. For example, when it comes to what Crystal (2001) calls *netspeak*, it is not just the knowledge of the language but expertise in the use of the technology that determines one’s level of

competence in the use of language. Pasfield-Neofitou (2012), for example, refers to the concept of *digital natives* in association with those who have gained advanced levels of technological skills and who, therefore, prove to be more competent communicators in cyber contexts.

The observations made so far in this section make native-speaker models of English Language Teaching (ELT) rather irrelevant in the globalised era of learning English for international communication, where the majority of communication is between non-native speakers of English and where as Graddol (2006, 110) puts it “Global [spread of] English has led to a crisis of terminology. The distinctions between ‘native speaker’, ‘second-language speaker’, and ‘foreign-language user’ have become blurred”. Observations such as the ones made in this section overall leads Graddol (2006, 11) to maintain that English is now “a new phenomenon, and if it represents any kind of triumph it is probably not a cause for celebration by native speakers”. The observations made so far in this section have provoked questioning of the main objectives in teaching English as an L2. In fact, the paradigm of English as an International Language (EIL) has emerged as a response to these demographic, and consequential structural changes in the use of English as a world language (e.g., Alsagoff et al. 2012; Matsuda 2012; McKay 2002; Sharifian 2009). For EIL, the main aim of language teaching is to facilitate the development of skills and competencies to prepare learners for engaging in intercultural communication with speakers from a wide range of cultural backgrounds. In the following section, the paper presents some background on the various notions of ‘competence’ that have been proposed in relation to learning and teaching foreign languages.

‘Competence’ in foreign language education

During the 1980s, a number of applied linguists found the notion of *communicative competence*, as defined by Hymes (1972), beneficial in ELT (e.g., Canale and Swain 1980). Hymes’ proposal for communicative competence was a reaction against Chomsky’s notion of ‘linguistic competence’, and the distinction he made between linguistic ‘competence’ and linguistic ‘performance’. For Hymes, Chomsky’s view of linguistic competence was too narrow because it ignored the sociocultural features that define appropriate language use. Hymes argued that knowledge of language not only includes knowledge of language structure, but also knowledge of how to *use* language *appropriately* depending on who we are communicating with, about what, and in what context. Hymes called this revised view of the knowledge of language competence *communicative competence*. In ELT, those who borrowed Hymes’ notion of communicative competence and set it up as the main aim in language teaching, viewed ‘competence’ as the competence of the native speakers of English. That is, norms of appropriate language use that lie at the heart of the communicative competence L2 learners of English were encouraged to acquire were the norms associated with native speaker varieties of English, mainly idealised versions of American English and British English (e.g., Coperias Aguilar 2008).

By the 21st century, a number of scholars saw that since communication in today’s world has become ever more intercultural and multicultural in nature, speakers, both native speakers and non-native speakers, need intercultural communication skills.

Thus, some scholars in the area of foreign language education became frustrated with the limitations with the native-speaker models of language teaching, and their narrow view of communicative competence. Several proposals have emerged in the last two decades suggesting more appropriate competencies. Michael Byram proposed the more inclusive notion of ‘intercultural communicative competence’ (ICC) (e.g., Byram 1997). For Byram (2000, 10), ICC involves the following five elements:

- Attitudes: curiosity and openness, readiness to suspend disbelief about other cultures and belief about one’s own.
- Knowledge: of social groups and their products and practices in one’s own and in one’s interlocutor’s country, and of the general processes of societal and individual interaction.
- Skills of interpreting and relating: ability to interpret a document or event from another culture, to explain it and relate it to documents from one’s own.
- Skills of discovery and interaction: ability to acquire new knowledge of a culture and cultural practices and the ability to operate knowledge, attitudes and skills under the constraints of real-time communication and interaction.
- Critical cultural awareness/political education: an ability to evaluate critically and on the basis of explicit criteria perspectives, practices and products in one’s own and other cultures and countries.

Clearly, Byram’s conception of ICC is very comprehensive and has the strength of recognising that success in intercultural communication requires a combination of attitudes, knowledge, skills, and critical awareness. I argue that often developing the right attitude towards ‘others’ and ‘other cultures’ is the most essential requirement for cross-cultural understanding and sympathy. It is necessary for smooth communication, but at the same time it is perhaps the most difficult to acquire. Despite its comprehensive approach, Byram’s model requires a great deal of fine-tuning in terms of the content of each component as well as suggestions for how each could be developed.

Another approach to competency in relation to learning English as an L2 has been proposed by Canagarajah (2006, 233), called *multidialectal competence*. Canagarajah notes the significant diversification of English, particularly the development of more and more varieties of English in recent decades. He reminds us that the notion of ‘proficiency’ and its assessment are much more complex in the postmodern era of communication. “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”, which to some extent involves what he calls “multidialectal competence”, part of which is “passive competence to understand new varieties [of English]”.

It should be noted here that it is not just the frequency of occurrence of intercultural communication that is growing fast. The nature of intercultural communication is also being influenced by the new “waves”, such as migration and human mobility associated with employment opportunities, as well as large scale movement of asylum seekers to other countries. For example, in many contexts intercultural communication is becoming multilingual. Interlocutors may share more than the knowledge of just one language

and thus use two or more languages together (e.g., House and Rehbein 2004). In such contexts, code-switching becomes a prevalent phenomenon.

Kramsch (2008) notes a particular competency that is associated with language learning in multilingual contexts, which she calls 'symbolic competence'. She describes symbolic competence as follows:

Social actors in multilingual settings, even if they are non-native speakers of the languages they use, seem to activate more than a communicative competence that would enable them to communicate accurately, effectively and appropriately with one another. They seem to display a particularly acute ability to play with various linguistic codes and with the various spatial and temporal resonances of these codes (400).

As mentioned above in this article, the heightened degree of contact between people from around the globe has led to an increase in multilingualism, and symbolic competence is a result of frequent contact between interlocutors speaking multiple languages in multilingual contexts. However, globalisation and the resultant increase in *transcultural mobility*, as well as the rapid growth in the use of international languages, such as English, have had another significant effect: the use of a common language by many speech communities to express and negotiate various systems of *cultural conceptualisations*, both for local and international communication. This phenomenon calls for another competency, which I call *metacultural competence*. The following section will provide background on cultural conceptualisations from the perspective of Cultural Linguistics.

Cultural Linguistics and cultural conceptualisations

Cultural Linguistics is a sub-branch of linguistics with a multidisciplinary origin which explores the relationship between language, culture, and conceptualisation (Palmer 1996; Sharifian 2011). The study of the relationship between language and conceptualisation gathered momentum with the development of cognitive linguistics during the 1980s. Cultural Linguistics shares with Cognitive Linguistics the view that language is grounded in human conceptual faculties but places a stronger emphasis on the cultural construction of the conceptualisations that serve as the basis for particularly the semantic and pragmatic components of language.

Cultural Linguistics views culture as a cognitive system, a view shared by cognitive anthropologists. It also views language as closely linked to culture. This view has its roots in several traditions in linguistic anthropology, including Boasian linguistics, ethnosemantics, and ethnography of speaking (for an extended discussion see Palmer 1996). By drawing on several disciplines including complexity science and distributed cognition, Cultural Linguistics has extended its theoretical basis, in particular the development of the notion of *cultural cognition* (Sharifian 2011) in recent years. The analytical tools of Cultural Linguistics are conceptual structures such as "cultural schema" (or cultural model), "cultural category" (including "cultural prototype"), and "cultural metaphor". I have referred to these collectively as *cultural conceptualisations* (Sharifian 2003, 2008, 2011).

Cultural schemas are conceptual structures (or pools of knowledge *heterogeneously* shared by the members of a cultural group) that are culturally constructed and that

upon which we draw when we communicate. They enable us to interpret and communicate knowledge, which is often and inescapably culturally mediated, as well as cultural experiences. Often the use of one word evokes knowledge and experiences that have a cultural basis in members of a speech community, and this serves as the basis for a significant degree of assumed shared understanding and inference. However, cultural schemas are not equally shared by members of a cultural group, and are constantly negotiated and renegotiated by the members across time and space. Thus, it is not possible to predict someone's behaviour or their understanding of a message based on knowledge of cultural schemas as people internalise cultural schemas differently as they grow up among a cultural group.

Also, it is to be noted that an individual's repertoire of conceptualisations may consist of the ones that are associated with their L1, or those they have access to as a result of living in particular cultural environments, or those developed from interacting with speakers from other cultures. The view of cultural conceptualisations presented here is a reaction to the essentialist views of culture which tend to stereotype people based on their cultural norms. The discussion presented in this paper explores language in relation to cultural conceptualisations and acknowledges that neither the knowledge of language nor cultural conceptualisations are unified across a speech community.

Cultural categories are those cognitive categories that have a cultural basis. Categorisation is one of the basic human cognitive processes and plays an important role in our cognitive development from early childhood. The human mind classifies objects, events, and experiences into categories based on similarities and differences, and we tend to take these categories for granted as we grow up (e.g., Mark et al. 1999). Although categorisation in early life tends to be rather idiosyncratic, that is, anything round may be categorised as a ball by a child, culture and language soon take over and guide us in our categorisation processes. Not only culture, through language, determines what categories we have available at our disposal, it also presents us with certain *prototypes* for those categories. For example, not only do we learn that a certain kind of food is categorised as 'snack', but we also learn what are the prototypical foods that usually come to mind when we think of the word 'snack'.

Cultural conceptual metaphors are conceptual metaphors that have a root in cultural systems such as ethnomedical traditions, religion, and the like. Conceptual metaphors are defined as cognitive structures that allow us to understand one conceptual domain in terms of another (e.g., Lakoff and Johnson 1980). In varieties of English such as American English and British English, expressions such as 'saving time' and 'spending time' reflect conceptualisations of time as a commodity. Recent research in Cultural Linguistics has revealed that many conceptual metaphors originate from certain cultural basis. For example, some conceptual metaphors that use the human body as the source domain, such as heart as the seat of emotion, reflected in expressions such as 'my heart goes out to him', appear to have their origin in ethno-medical and other cultural traditions (e.g., Sharifian et al. 2008; Yu 2009).

Many features of human languages instantiate cultural conceptualisations. Inherent within the system of every language are categories, schemas, conceptual metaphors, and propensities for certain perspectives that reflect the cultural cognitions of those who have spoken the language from its beginnings. In particular, cultural conceptualisations feed into the semantic and pragmatic levels of meaning, providing speakers

with pools of meaning which are to some extent shared across the community of speakers. In the following section, I present examples of cultural conceptualisations from Chinese English (also known as China English) and Hong Kong English and then go on to explore the notion of metacultural competence. It is to be noted that an attempt to characterise cultural conceptualisations that are encoded in language should not be interpreted as describing *people*, or stereotyping members of a cultural group. Cultural conceptualisations go beyond the level of individual members, in the sense that their existence is at the collective level of a group. As mentioned earlier, an individual's cognitive pool of conceptualisations depends on their factors such as life experiences. Globalisation, for example, and people's increasing experience of interculturality are leading to more and more contact between individuals who have access to different systems of cultural conceptualisations. Human mobility and living cross-culturally have increasingly led to individuals who have internalised elements from various systems of cultural conceptualisations.

Some cultural conceptualisations in Chinese English and Hong Kong English

As discussed earlier, the global spread of English has also entailed some demographic changes in the use of the language. It is now widely adopted as a means of communication by communities of speakers that have traditionally been identified as non-native speakers of the language. As mentioned earlier, this has led to further diversification and *glocalisation* of the language and the development of more world Englishes (Kachru 1986). In this section, I provide examples of the glocalisation of English in Chinese English and Hong Kong English.

The words 'relation', 'relationship', 'connection', and 'networking' are often used in Chinese English and Hong Kong English to refer to the Chinese cultural schema of *guanxi*. Many scholars have noticed the absence of the exact equivalent of the concept of *guanxi* in English and have offered various descriptions and definitions for it (e.g., Luo 2007; Farh et al. 1998). The schema relates to the complex dynamics of a particular type of interpersonal relationship in China. Luo (2007, 2) explains *guanxi* as follows:

The Chinese word "*guanxi*" refers to the concept of drawing on connections in order to secure favors in personal relations. It forms an intricate, pervasive relational network which the Chinese cultivate energetically, subtly, and imaginatively. It contains mutual obligations, assurances, and understanding, and governs Chinese attitudes towards long-term social and business relations.

Guanxi lies at the heart of life for many Chinese people to the extent that Luo (2007, 2) maintains that Chinese people "have turned *guanxi* into a calculated science". Luo (2007, 3) even refers to *guanxiology*, a cross-disciplinary field of research that explores the formation, process, and the outcome of *guanxi*. *Guanxi* underlies many other concepts in Chinese and is closely interwoven with many other cultural schemas, such as that the Chinese cultural schema of *mianzi* 'face' (see Lee et al. 2001). For example, Lee et al. (2001, 55) maintain that "the underlying motives for reciprocal behaviours in *guanxi* is face saving". A thorough treatment of the cultural schema of *guanxi* falls beyond the scope of this paper, but this brief explication should suffice in giving an

example of cultural schema in an emerging variety of English. Further research is needed to explore the instantiations of the cultural schema of *guanxi* and its relevant schemas in Chinese English.

An example of cultural category in Chinese English and Hong Kong English is the use of the expression 'moon cake', which refers to a sweet cake in the shape of the moon which is filled with ingredients such as sesame seeds, beans, and duck eggs. There are many variants of moon cake made with different ingredients, with regional variations in taste and recipe. This cake is usually served during the mid-autumn festival, which is celebrated on the 15th of the eight lunar month, when the moon is supposed to be bright and full. There are different views about this festival, but according to one, it is a traditional harvest festival associated with worshiping and watching the moon. Some ingredients of moon cake represent certain aspects of the festival. For example, the yolk used in the moon cake represents the full moon. Eating moon cakes during the festival was traditionally associated with offerings to the Moon Goddess, but in modern days "people eat moon cakes to express their homesickness and love for their family members, and their hope for a bumper harvest and a happy life, as the moon cake symbolizes family reunion" (online source)^a. Moon cakes are nowadays offered as presents to colleagues, family members, and friends.

Another example of a cultural category from Chinese English and Hong Kong English is 'lucky money', which refers to paper money that is placed inside red envelopes and given as gifts, particularly to children, during social and family occasions, such as the New Year^b. The envelope is red, a colour symbolising luck in Chinese culture which is also associated with fire as one of the traditional Five Elements in Chinese culture. In this capacity, it is believed to repel evil. There are certain cultural elements surrounding the gift of red envelopes. For example, the amount of money in the envelope should be dividable by two, because odd digits are associated with funerals. Sometimes, the lucky money and the red envelope are used metaphorically to refer to a bribe, associated with the underlying conceptualisation of a bribe is a gift (Cummings and Wolf 2011).

Another metaphor from Hong Kong English is the use of the expression "golden rice bowl" to refer to a secure high-paying job. This metaphor is based on the conceptualisation of a job is a food container (Cummings and Wolf 2011). In Hong Kong, the common cultural food is rice, which is usually served in a bowl and thus the use of "golden rice bowl" reflects a cultural artefact. The examples presented here should suffice to shed light on the notion of 'cultural conceptualisations'. Lastly in this section, I reiterate that cultural conceptualisations are not equally shared by members of a speech community, and thus not everyone in Hong Kong shares the conceptualisations discussed in this section equally. Against this backdrop, the paper now focuses on exploring the notion of 'metacultural competence'.

Metacultural competence

As I mentioned earlier, I use the term 'metacultural competence' to refer to a competence that enables interlocutors to communicate and negotiate their cultural conceptualisations during the process of intercultural communication. An important element of metacultural competence is *conceptual variation awareness*, or the awareness that one and the same language could be used by different speech communities to encode and express their

respective cultural conceptualisations. As shown in the previous sections, communities of Chinese speakers in China and Hong Kong have used English words to encode their cultural conceptualisations.

Metacultural competence goes beyond the matter of awareness and involves the ability to use certain strategies, such as *conceptual explication strategy*, which is a conscious effort made on the part of interlocutors to clarify relevant conceptualisations with which they think other interlocutors may not be familiar. For example, Chinese English speakers may elaborate on the cultural schema of *guanxi* after they use English words such as 'relationship' if they are unsure their interlocutors are familiar with this Chinese cultural schema.

An important aspect of metacultural competence is that it enables interlocutors to *negotiate* intercultural meanings through the use of *conceptual negotiation strategies*. This would be reflected, for example, in seeking conceptual clarification when one feels that there might be more behind the use of a certain expression than is immediately apparent. An active gesture of interest in learning about other interlocutors' cultural conceptualisations is an important factor in successful negotiation and communication of cultural conceptualisations and eventually in developing metacultural competence. It should be added that work on the notion of metacultural competence is still in its infancy and much more exploration and data analysis are needed to enrich this notion.

Metacultural competence and learning EIL

What is learning English as an International Language? Learning EIL refers to learning the fact that English is a pluricentric language which is now used across the globe by many speech communities that have adopted English and adapted it to express their characteristic communicative needs. In this sense, learning EIL requires exposure to the diversity that characterises the language at various levels, from the sound system to the deeper levels of semantic and pragmatic meanings that are entrenched cultural conceptualisations. This is in particular desirable for students with more advanced language proficiency, as at that stage exposure to diversity is less likely to cause confusion. This view of learning English may sound inconvenient to some teachers since it may demand effort on their part to expose their learners to more than one variety of English. However, such activities ensure that learners are exposed to the sociolinguistic reality of the use of English in today's globalised world. Moreover, exposure to a variety of cultural conceptualisations in learning an L2 is likely to expand a learner's conceptual horizon, where one can become familiar with, and even have the option of internalising, new systems of conceptualising experience.

In summary, learning EIL is no longer learning English as a language of its traditional native speakers, but a language for intercultural communication between speakers from various cultural backgrounds. The implications of this observation for ELT are paramount. For example, rather than spending a great deal of time training learners in gaining a particular accent, the emphasis should now be placed on intelligibility as well as developing intercultural communication skills. This is where the notion of *metacultural competence* becomes of pivotal importance. As discussed earlier, metacultural competence enables individuals to participate with flexibility in intercultural communication and effectively articulate and negotiate their cultural

conceptualisations. Thus, ELT curricula should provide learners with opportunities to develop metacultural competence. To begin with, as discussed earlier, learners need to develop an awareness of *conceptual variation* that currently characterises the global use of English by many speech communities. ELT materials should include lessons about cultural conceptualisations associated with different varieties of English, such as the ones presented in this paper. Learners may also be provided with chances where they learn conceptual explication and conceptual negotiation strategies during naturally occurring communicative interactions. In this context, the cultural backgrounds of learners become assets and resources enabling them to reflect on their cultural conceptualisations, while allowing them to learn the necessary skills to explicate and negotiate them with speakers from other cultural backgrounds.

It should be noted here that one corollary of English bringing people from various cultural backgrounds closer together to communicate their cultural conceptualisations is the development of intercultural conceptualisations, or blending elements from already established cultural conceptualisations. This area requires much further research.

Concluding remarks

This paper observes that globalisation and the continued spread of English add to the complex interculturality of interactions between speakers. This produces an increase in conceptual variation associated with the increasing diversification of English. It argues, thus, that ELT curricula should aim at developing competencies in learners that enable them to achieve success in intercultural communication with speakers from various cultural backgrounds. The paper explores metacultural competence as a key competence that enables interlocutors to communicate and negotiate their cultural conceptualisations. It is argued that one way in which ELT curricula can expose learners to the sociocultural reality and the diversity that characterises the English language today is to present students with examples of cultural conceptualisations from multiple varieties of English. ELT pedagogy should also involve creating natural opportunities for learners to engage in reflecting and explicating their cultural conceptualisations. Although this proposal is at a very preliminary stage, I hope the arguments and the analyses presented in this paper make a convincing case for the changes and the adjustments that need to be made in order to teach *English as an International Language*.

Endnotes

^a<http://www.chinafacttours.com/facts/festivals/mid-autumn-festival.html>

^bhttp://www.infobarrel.com/The_Red_Envelope_-_A_Traditional_Chinese_Gift

Competing interest

The author declares that I have no competing interests.

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