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"We Were Willing to Try Again and Make it Understandable for both Parties": Working across Geographical Borders to Dispel Language Misconceptions

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Abstract

This chapter presents a transnational collaboration designed to address the native speaker mindset that was often observed to dominate the thinking of teacher candidates at two universities: one in the UK and the other in China. The participants were tasked with talking to one another- individually or in groups- about life as a university student in their respective countries. Prior to the activity, both groups of participants were noted to share a similar concern around whether they would be intelligible to their interlocutors. The post-activity written reflections from the teacher candidates index the beginnings of an ideological shift. Owing to their first-hand experience of conversing with collaborators from a different geographical context, the participants, it seems, received exposure to the plurilithic nature of English, and thereby reflected on the fallacy behind perceiving language as an entity that can be compartmentalised. Furthermore, the reflective reports suggest how this realisation furthered the teacher candidates' understanding that misapprehensions that can occur due to this dynamic nature of language can be overcome through a change in mindset and accommodating language behaviour.

Background and Description

Native speakerism (Holliday, 2006) is amongst the many dominant ideologies which propagate inequity in TESOL from discriminatory practices in recruitment and assessment to materials development (Fang & Ren, 2018). The native speaker ideology which stems largely from the historical association of England with modern day English (Cameron & Galloway, 2019), identifies and idealizes those who are traditionally classed as native English

(henceforth NE) speakers to be the absolutely 'correct' users of the language. Discussing its repercussions, Wicaksono (2013) reports how NE undergraduates in one UK university considered 'non-native' speakers of the language to be "wholly responsible for intelligibility" (p.241). What's more, tertiary-level educational establishments, in countries like China, perceive NE as a benchmark of language competence (Galloway, 2013). Placing NE speakers as authoritarians of the language in this manner, index the misconstrued conceptualisation of the language itself: as a monolithic entity, overlooking the hybridity and fluidity that are inherent to English and all living languages (Hall et al., 2011).

Based on the premise that the aforementioned language ideologies should change within ELT before macro-level changes can take place (Cameron & Galloway, 2019), endeavours to raise teacher awareness on the pluricentricity of English are on-going (Hall et al., 2011). Thus, teacher training is vital not only "in shaping their own attitudes" but also those of their students (Cameron & Galloway, 2019, p.152). With this postulation in mind, we, the authors of this chapter, designed and implemented a collaborative activity for pre-service teachers (henceforth PSTs) at our respective universities (York St John University, henceforth, YSJU) in the UK and (Suzhou University of Science and Technology, henceforth, SUST) in Mainland China. The foci of the activity were to offer PSTs first-hand experience and exposure to the plurilithic nature of English and the understanding that intelligibility can be achieved through accommodating language practices from all interlocutors, be that 'native' or 'non-native'.

The UK PSTs self-identified as monolinguals and used English as their first language. They had the opportunity to complete the CELTA, awarded by Cambridge Assessment English, for free during their undergraduate degree. Some also volunteered on a community outreach programme, and worked with English as an Additional Language pupils at a local school. The Chinese counterparts used English as a foreign language and were first

language users of Mandarin Chinese. They were sophomores on the BA in English language teaching, designed for teacher candidates in China. In their respective programs, the PSTs took a course on *World Englishes* which was taught by us.

Whilst discussions with our PSTs around World Englishes and pedagogical implications were always lively, these conversations were also insightful as their thinking often indexed a strong inclination towards native speakerism. This came as no surprise to us for they had come through education systems which endorsed prescriptive approaches to language learning and use. So, the belief that there were clear-cut 'correct' and 'incorrect' uses for a given language was firmly established in their minds. Furthermore, during class discussions the YSJU and SUST students would often associate themselves with the 'native' and 'non-native' labels, respectively. So, to help them see past these socially-constructed and flawed views about English that they had grown up hearing and, in some cases, believing, we developed the task described below.

The activity comprised two stages. First, the PSTs audio-recorded a Skype/QQ conversation with their overseas collaborators around the topic of life as a university student (see Step 1 in Appendix). To kick start this stage, we exchanged our PSTs' email addresses and placed them in groups. Using the email addresses, the PSTs then arranged to call each other. Identifying lexical, grammatical and/or phonological features in their conversation partners' Englishes that either fell in line with or differed from a 'standard' Anglo-American model they were familiar with, was the second step (see Step 2 in Appendix). On completing this two-tier activity, the PSTs reflected on their experiences by responding to two questions:

1) What do you think you learnt from the collaborative activity?
2) What, if any, were the challenges you faced in carrying out the task?

The YSJU PSTs answered the questions via SurveyMonkey whilst the SUST PSTs submitted an 800-word report reflecting on the task. Drawing on these responses, we reflect next on the actual implementation of the activity, its challenges and advantages.

Reflections from the field

"Will they understand us?" A cause for concern? At a time when visual and/or text-based communication especially on the Internet and social networking sites (e.g, Instagram, Facebook and others) is gaining in popularity, spoken interactions are becoming much less desirable. It was therefore a given that our activity which entails not just speaking but also speaking with strangers from overseas would cause a certain level of anxiety amongst the PSTs. So, to help them feel more at ease, we made every effort to place each PST with a home student and allow them to work in pairs. Despite the pairings, one concern continued to be raised by PSTs as follows: "will they understand us?". This concern was triggered by the PSTs (self-)imposing the 'native' and 'non-native' labels on themselves: by considering themselves to be either more or less proficient in English than the other. And as expected and as explained in the ensuing paragraphs, engaging in the activity assuaged their concerns and allowed them to recognise what truly matters when using English for transnational communication.

This task allows PSTs to consolidate their book knowledge on the plurilithic nature of English via authentic interactions. During stage 1 of the activity (Appendix), the PSTs were exposed to Englishes that varied lexically, grammatically and phonologically from their own and from text-book Anglo-American models. Even though the weekly reading and the lecture input had made them aware of the prevalence of such variations, it was their conversation partners' Englishes that allowed them to experience them, for themselves. So, it appears that this contact helped them to recognise language as a complex entity. For example,

one YSJU PST reflected *"I had the expectation that I would easily pick up variation in lexical, grammatical and phonological differences but I think I will have to dig deeper"*. By adopting the word 'easily', the participant essentially admits to their erred thinking during the pre-activity phase. Prior to the activity, the PSTs had all read about how Englishes reflect the diverse sociolinguistic landscapes they operate in: merely, perhaps, as a statement in the literature. However, when they came across actual examples during their conversations that resonated with this statement, it seems that they revisited and reflected on its validity and more importantly its complexity. So, in their post-activity writing, they were seen to approach English critically as a plurilithic entity, comparing and contrasting their observations against pertinent scholarship.

The activity enables PSTs to look beyond varieties and consider English as a 'fluid construct' instead (Galloway & Rose, 2015, p.131). As previously mentioned, the PSTs' writing suggests how they had expected –prior to the activity– to be able to systematically match the linguistic features in their conversation partners' Englishes against the structures documented in World Englishes research. What they encountered instead, was by no means fixed like the native and non-native models on paper; it was transient. The comment *"... some of the (YSJU PSTs') uses are totally different from what we have been taught..."* from a SUST PST sums this up well, suggesting the moment of realisation that language is fluid and variable.

Responding to variation with accommodating language practices and speaking intelligibly. It was previously mentioned that real-life conversations rarely mirror the ways in which languages are modelled within text books. So, when the PSTs came across the variations in English in the form of new and/or unfamiliar lexical, phonological and grammatical features during the conversation, there were moments of hesitation and silence. They however, reacted swiftly to make the conversations viable and found themselves asking

questions, relying on clarifications and adjusting their own utterances from time to time. For example, in the feedback, some wrote about words like ‘module’ and ‘major’ that had prompted them to ask for clarifications from their conversation partners. Others claimed how their accents seemed to cause some perplexity and confusion amongst their interlocutors. But, as one YSJU PST reported, they were all “willing to try again and make it understandable for both parties” and “impressed” each other with their adaptability. And another concluded that the activity had offered them “an element of practicality” which they hoped would “aid communication with others in the future”. Whilst these comments reflect their realisation that language accommodation in itself is a joint endeavour, they further highlight the willingness, at both ends, to accept variation in English.

The activity encourages a shift in opinion. Consequently, it seems to us that the PSTs not only receive exposure to variations in English through this activity but are also propelled into a shift in opinion that speaking intelligibly rather than trying to stand by “traditional standards” (Rose & Galloway, 2019, p.8) is what ultimately matters. Echoing this observation, is the next comment by a YSJ PST who claims the activity “altered my perspectives on the English language at a global level”.

Therefore, it seems that this international collaboration allows teacher candidates to look beyond the misconstrued yet deep-seated perspectives surrounding language and its users. For teacher candidates who do not come from social and educational backgrounds that reflect the lingua-cultural heterogeneity that is a feature in many real-world contexts, collaborations such as ours can provide invaluable insights. They can enable participants to experience English as it operates outside the confines of the classroom, giving them an awareness beyond book knowledge that they can then share with their own language learners. Consequently, we conclude that this activity “endorses the diversity of English and validates

speakers of non-native English as authentic users of the language" (Rose & Galloway, 2019, p.165).

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Appendix

Step 1

- In w/c date/month/year, hold a Skype/QQ conversation with your collaborators from Suzhou University of Science and Technology, China/York St John University, UK.

i. Contact your collaborators by email and introduce yourselves.

ii. Discuss the best software to use for the call.

iii. Organise a mutually convenient time for the call.

- The discussion should be centred around the topic of **life as a university student**.

i. For this purpose, you will need to develop 8-10 questions that you can use during the conversation. Some areas that you can develop questions around are university courses, facilities, student housing and extra-curricular activities.

- As you will need to audio-record the conversation, you are encouraged to obtain an electronically signed consent form from your Chinese/ UK collaborators.

Step 2

- Using the conversational data, write 1000 words on the 'phonological, lexical or grammatical features you observe in the English (es) used by your overseas collaborator(s). To do so, respond to the following questions:

    i. How similar or different are your conversation partners' Englishes from the 'standard' Anglo-American models you are familiar with?

ii. How similar or different are your conversation partners' Englishes from the British English/Chinese English 'varieties' presented in World Englishes textbooks and research?

iii. How similar or different are your conversation partners' Englishes from your own?