

Non-native English Students' Linguistic and Cultural Challenges in Australia

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Abstract

This paper looks into the effect of use of international English on non-native students' dignity in Australian academic and social contexts. The study was undertaken through in-depth interviews with 28 participants from 13 countries. The results partly revealed that there was neither speech convergence nor culture convergence between non-native and native speakers. When native speakers linguistically converged towards non-native speakers, it appeared to backfire as mocking behavior. There was an expectation that host tutors, lecturers and classmates would adjust their speech to a level accommodating non-native speakers, but they did not. Failure to effectively converge linguistically and culturally led to failure in intergroup communication. The failure concomitantly affected participants' self-worth, motivation and identity in a way that diminished their dignity and motivation, impinging on their identity.

Key Words: International Students, Academic and Social Context, Dignity, Non-Native English Speaker

English is the most powerful international *lingua franca*, a language of globalization, a great economic and political source of power and a contributing factor to the growth of intercultural communication in the global context (Hatos, 2006; Tsuda, 2008). Its status has created a rich English language teaching (ELT) industry, which has opened up employment opportunities for both native and non-native speakers of English. As well, the rise of English has motivated non-native speakers to study the language at home and/or abroad in order to acquire fluency and utilize these English language skills as effectively as they can in the globalized professional world. Of the English-speaking countries, Australia ranks the third largest provider of international education after the US and the UK (Novera, 2004).

According to Australian Education International (2011), 240,644 international students were enrolled in the Australian Higher Education Sector. Generally, when these international students enter a new social environment, they are taking an intercultural crossing journey, which can be difficult and challenging because it involves coping with unfamiliarity and anxiety. They may find many cultural differences between their host country and their home countries (Gu & Maley, 2008). If they cannot adjust themselves to the differences in such a disorienting environment, they will experience culture shock (Sussman, 2000). Adjustment during an initial transitional stage appears to be a primary and challenging issue for them when coming to an English-speaking country (Bigg, 2003). Language competence is predicted as having a strong impact on international students' post-arrival adaptation (Andrade, 2006). This is not just because the

host language is not their mother tongue. It also follows from the different approaches to language learning pedagogy, where a more traditional focus on grammatical rules and usage (Sawir, 2005), rather than on using the language for real communicative purposes, may not equip them well for their new environment. Given that language and culture are intertwined, the more their first language and culture differ from the host's, the more difficulty they have in coping with academic and social life.

In Australia, international students in general have difficulty understanding Australian English (AE) which leads them to feel psychologically distant from the host society and encounter language shock (Tananuraksakul, 2009b). In consequence, they lose confidence (Sawir, 2005) and tend to become confused, embarrassed or lost which tends to hinder their focus and undermine the energy required to learn a second language (Holliday, Hyde & Kullman, 2004). Eventually, they may feel deprived of opportunities to use their mother tongue, partly risking their sense of intrinsic dignity and self-worth (Tsuda, 2000; Tananuraksakul & Hall, 2011).

Tsuda (2000) particularly reveals his own personal experiences as a non-native-English-speaking professor of International Communication in English-speaking settings where he experienced more than minor inconveniences; he felt his personal sense of human dignity suffer as a result of language challenges. Non-native speakers consider English language learning as a vehicle for a sense of accomplishment (Crystal, 2003) and a source of their dignity (Tananuraksakul, 2009a) and



no previous studies appear to have been undertaken on the connection between language proficiency and feelings of human dignity in an intercultural and foreign language learning context. The primary objective of this paper is therefore to look into the effect of use of international English on non-native students' dignity in Australian academic and social contexts.

Definition of Dignity in the Present Context

Dignity is a complex concept to define due to its abstraction and culturally contextual base. No previous studies have been undertaken on human dignity in an intercultural and foreign language learning context. The Macmillan English Dictionary for Advanced Learners (2002) defines dignity as "respect that other people have for you or that you have for yourself" (p. 385), which reflects individuals' feelings of self-worth or self-respect. In organization studies, Bolton (2007) proposes dimensions of a dignity framework, which describes distinctive features of dignity in work and at work. Features of dignity in work are autonomy, job satisfaction, meaningful work, respect, learning and development. Features of dignity at work relate to well-being, just reward, voice, security and equal opportunity.

Dignity in the current study, however, is defined based on Tananuraksakul's and Hall's (2011) study into non-native English students' self-worth or self-respect. It is related to how they personally feel when they communicate in English inside and outside the classroom, based on perceptions of how well they have learned English and projected this learning in communicative acts with culturally different others. If they perceive a success in communication, they feel dignified in themselves and gain self-worth, and conversely, if they experience a failure to communicate with culturally different others, they feel a loss of dignity in themselves and a lowering in their sense of intrinsic self-worth. How they respond to feelings of diminished dignity or present themselves to culturally different others during social interactions depends upon their own perceptions, standards and goals.

Pertinent Literature Review

When speakers of English from different cultural and linguistic groups come into contact through the use of English, their language and speech behavior during interactions are important because they are markers of group membership and individual identity (Shepard, Giles & Le Poire, 2001). How individuals use their language and speech behavior when they engage in a con-

versation can show differences in social status, enforce role or norm-specific behavior as well as define in-group or out-group boundaries (Gallois, Ogay & Giles, 2005). In this intergroup communication, if interlocutors (people one socially interacts with) are not willing to accommodate or adjust their language and speech behavior towards one another, successful communication is unlikely to occur. There is no mutual understanding and their message becomes unintelligible because they do not pronounce words synchronically. This phenomenon is relevant to what Smith and Nelson (2006) term "intelligibility", which refers to word and utterance recognition.

Of all speakers of English from the Expanding Circle, almost one-third of speakers from the twenty-five non-native English countries of the European Union (EU) think that they can manage to converse confidently in English with culturally different others (Anderman & Rogers, 2005). Speakers from Scandinavia and the Netherlands particularly demonstrate higher levels of fluency than speakers from other countries (Crystal, 2003). This is partly because English is increasingly used as a lingua franca in the EU. However, when interlocutors from other countries in this particular Circle communicate with each other via the medium of English, their intergroup communication is more likely to break down because of their different levels of English competence and/or pronunciation-based misunderstanding. Jenkins (2002) found that "certain pronunciation deviations particularly in consonant sounds, vowel length and the placing of tonic stress" (p. 91) caused a non-native English communicator's pronunciation to lack mutual intelligibility to a non-native English interlocutor. Nevertheless, if interlocutors come from countries within the same regions, communication may appear to be more intelligible. An example is revealed in Deterding's and Kirkpatrick's (2006) study that English as a lingua franca (ELF) used among people from ASEAN countries had some non-standard features of pronunciation in common which enhanced intelligibility.

Despite the fact that learners of English in the Expanding Circle have studied for years and their standardized English test has returned a high proficiency level, studies (e.g., Bamford et al., 2002; Kiley, 2003) reveal that the language requirement for tertiary admission in English-speaking countries cannot ensure that non-native English students possess the necessary native-like communication skills or acquire native-like receptive ability. In part, this is because variations in their English pronunciation are characterized by

the influence of their mother tongue. Their interactive speech is described as language interference (Ellis, 1999) or “Interlanguage Talk” (Jenkins, 2000), meaning language phonological transfer from their mother tongue to English language usage. While interlocutors engage in the Talk, Jenkins (2000) suggests that it is imperative for speakers to develop the ability to adjust their pronunciation based on the communicative situation they are in. They must accommodate towards their listeners. At the same time, listeners must learn to deal with a certain amount of mother tongue transfer and adjust expectations regarding target pronunciation. Deterding and Kirkpatrick (2006) further recommend that it is essential for interlocutors to be aware of not only when they need to adjust their own speech but also how to adjust the speech successfully.

The notion of accommodation was initially theorized by Howard Giles (1973) and modified as communication accommodation theory. Accommodation describes the ways and extent to which each individual employs a particular strategic behavior to negotiate social distance (Shepard, Giles & Le Poire, 2001). Convergence, divergence and maintaining are typical accommodation strategies (Giles & Coupland, 1991). A convergent strategy reflects an individual’s social integration or identification with others. In contrast, a divergent strategy reflects individuals’ social disintegration or distance from others by accentuating differences in speech and non-verbal features between them and others. When individuals persist in maintaining their original speech style irrespective of that of their interlocutors, it is referred to as maintenance, which is similar to divergence in its neglect of accommodation. To some extent, the maintaining strategy signals significant social connection. For example, an Australian may maintain their own original accented speech when communicating with their family and friends (Kirkpatrick, 2007), signaling a close relationship or shared social and cultural belonging. The same person may modify his or her speech when talking to out-group members to achieve a communicative goal.

When interlocutors linguistically converge in the same direction as their interaction partners, their behaviour patterns become synchronous (Shepard, Giles & Le Poire, 2001), leading to a construct of intelligibility in an international communication context (Jenkins, 2000). Accents, dialects, idioms (Moise & Bourhis, 1994), speech rates, pauses, utterance lengths and phonological variants (Burt, 2005) can be modified by interlocutors to display their convergence. It may be assumed that native English people have more ability to converge their speech pattern for accommodation

purposes than non-native English people.

Convergence, however, can backfire because it can appear as mocking behavior (Thornborrow, 2004), in particular when native English people converge on non-native English people. And if convergence is anticipated due to regulated rules and social norms, and there is no synchronous verbal and nonverbal behavior, such communication is negatively interpreted as expectancy violation (Burgoon & Hubbard, 2005). The power distance between interlocutors enjoying both high and low social status culturally influences these violations (Burgoon, 1995).

Methodology

A qualitative research approach by means of one-on-one interviews was employed for data collection between 2008 and 2009. The approach was appropriate for the study because it was not concerned with measurement but with exploring students’ personal lived experiences in relation to their communication in English and their personal security in the Australian context (Johnson & Christensen, 2008).

Participants

The target group of participants was international male and female students with non-native English and diverse cultural backgrounds, enrolled in a Master’s Degree Program. A condition of the selection of participants was that they must have neither studied nor completed a diploma or a degree in countries (including their own) where English was used as a medium of communication and instruction. In order to try to maintain a measure of consistency, the research was restricted to Master’s Degree students, since the different levels of maturity between undergraduate and postgraduate students would have introduced an additional variable. The duration of Master’s Degree Programs varies between one year, a year and a half, and two years.

A small number of 28 postgraduate students from non-native English backgrounds (China, Czech Republic, Colombia, India, Indonesia, Korea, Japan, Mexico, Peru, Slovakia, Sweden, Thailand and Vietnam) were recruited on a voluntary basis in response to an advertisement at an internationally recognized university in Sydney. Participants were enrolled in a variety of different Master’s Degree Programs. Their adequate English proficiency manifested in their admission to the university. Of the 28 participants, 9 were male and 19 were female. Their ages ranged from 22 to 48. All were assigned pseudonyms in order to ensure their anonymity. Most were undertaking one-year postgraduate programs,



some were studying for a double degree, which involved a combination of coursework and research and thus took longer than one year. Some had joined an exchange program, which only required six months on site at the Australian university. At the time of this study, the participants had been studying at the University for various length of time. Fifteen had just started their programs, and five had one or more semesters left before completing their programs. Five participants were due to graduate having passed all of their exams. Three participants aimed to finish their exchange program in the next semester.

Procedures

Prior to each interview, the interviewer introduced herself and explained the aims of the study including the definition of the key concept. Equivalent of the concept of “dignity” were found and verified with bilingual speakers in each of the native languages of the interviewees. During each interview, which took about half an hour, notes were taken in preference to tape recording the conversation so as to create an informal atmosphere. Each student was asked to recall his or her experiences in communicating in English inside and outside the classroom. The data were validated by each student within a week after the interviews. First, each interview was re-created from the notes and emailed to the participant for validation. All correspondence at this stage was electronic. Three participants suggested minor changes and the documents were then revised accordingly. The validated data were then analyzed and categorized by means of highlighting keywords/phrases with different colors. The following are examples of the structured interview questions: Have you had any cultural and linguistic barriers inside and outside the classroom? If yes, when and what are those? How did you feel when you faced the barriers? Did the feeling(s) you have affect your dignity? How and why?

Summary of Findings

All students experienced English language barriers in understanding Australians at the beginning of their study at the university because they were not accustomed to this variety of English. While Anna (Slovakian), Nadia (Czech) and Lam (Vietnamese) were more familiar with British English (BrE), the rest were used to American English (AmE) as they studied it at school in their homeland and were influenced through popular culture. Additionally, some students experienced difficulty in comprehending other varieties of English. Upon their arrival in Australia

for the purpose of postgraduate study, the participants were unable, despite their demonstrated English-language competence, to ‘meaningfully, appropriately and effectively’ use English as a medium of communication (Ochs 1996 cited in Kramsch 2002); nor could they negotiate their ‘intercultural identity’ (Kim, 2001) successfully. They could neither recognise nor comprehend the different varieties of ‘World Englishes’ (Bolton, 2006). Peng (Chinese) and Joo (Korean) expected their Australian tutors, lecturers and classmates to empathize with them and adjust their speech accordingly (Jenkins, 2003). Yet, the Australian interlocutors in almost all cases did not do this, whether through lack of awareness or through a deliberate decision not to change their normal communication styles. By displaying more convergent behavior, especially speaking with a clearer accent, using less local slang (Burt, 2005) and modifying their speech rate, pauses, utterance length and phonological variants, the Australian interlocutors would have been able to make their communication more effective for their international colleagues. The fact that they did not adopt a more convergent approach suggests that Australians tend to be ‘speech maintainers’, speaking English with their ‘own original speech style’ (Shepard, Giles & Le Poire, 2001). They make little or no effort to make lectures and class discussions easier for non-native-speaker students to understand. Perhaps, it is because they are more focused on projecting their own persona or identity rather than on communicating with culturally and linguistically different others (Kirpatrick, 2007) or on incorporating such a communication style into their instruction. The Australians’ speech behaviour is thus interpreted negatively by international students as ‘expectancy violation’ (Burgoon & Hubbard, 2005) although there is no situational norm in the present context that requires lecturers and others to adjust their speech to accommodate international students. These Australian lecturers fail to be ‘mindful to communicate competently’ with their sojourning international students (Ting-Toomey, 2005). This being the case, the participants felt uneasy and unmotivated to participate in classroom activities. Peng and Joo felt that this ‘non-mindful’ behavior and the maintaining speech style contributed to their feelings of insecurity regarding their identities because these features impinged on their ability to engage in classroom discussions. Out of the twenty-eight participants, seven did not feel comfortable asking Australians to repeat what they said, nor did they feel comfortable being asked by Australians to repeat themselves. For example,

Neil (Indonesian) described: “during my first two months my Australian classmates did not understand my English, missed the points I wanted to make and asked me to say it again...then I became silent in the class.”

Kim (Korean) expressed “I remembered my first day at the university...an administrative officer kept asking me the same questions”. Jib (Thai) considered “repetition a bad experience” while Jose (Mexican) thought “it was not pleasant to try to understand what his Australian friends and housemates and asked them to repeat the same question what?”. Fong said “I actually felt too embarrassed to ask my European classmates to repeat what they said in class”. Cathy (Swede) “felt stupid to ask someone on the phone to repeat something and if I asked three times and I still could not understand, I would say something like never mind”. Gai (Thai), working part-time at a Thai restaurant, rarely understood her customers there because “they spoke with an unfamiliar accent and I couldn’t get their orders on the phone. I repeatedly asked them to spell some words such as their address and names”. Regardless of the repetition she asked for, she reported that she was not discouraged. In fact, she determined to try harder to understand AE.

Regarding scenarios like those mentioned above, Bradac and Giles (2005) suggest that they demonstrate no mutual speech convergence in their two-way interaction with native speakers. This also suggests that it is not simple for non-native-speaker students to be converging speakers or to speak English in a way that will accommodate Australians in general, as accommodation in one direction only puts all the onus on the non-native speaker. Furthermore, repetition constructs a perception of linguistic inability and identity negotiation incompetence which lowers affect. Gai, however, claimed that repetition for her as a speaker gave her ‘self-concept-related motivation’ (Dörnyei & Clément, 2001) to develop her language ability rather than ‘cripple herself with inferiority’ (Kim, 2009), so it must be concluded that asking for and receiving requests for repetition, while they may be powerful demotivating contributors, are not in themselves an inevitable cause of demotivation as long as participants have the emotional and communicative mechanisms for coping with these difficulties.

Native speakers in unfamiliar communicative contexts may find themselves experiencing similar emotions, but the feeling among foreign-language users that they may be to blame for insufficient prior learning constitutes an additional emotional hurdle to be overcome. Anna who shared university accommo-

modation with four American students perceived her interaction with these housemates as an obstacle. She said: “they spoke quickly using slang and engaging in small talk about topics I was unfamiliar with...TV programs, food and the US study system...I felt excluded and unaccepted by the group...they didn’t seem to care about how I felt.”

It appeared that Anna lacked the required ‘cultural schema’ (Ozyaka, 2001; Lustig & Koester, 2006). She also felt that her American housemates ignored her, suggesting that they did not culturally converge their communicative behaviour, by for example framing their culturally-specific talk in such a way that mutual understanding would become possible (Kincaid, 1988). Anna subsequently experienced ‘identity-freezing’ (Imahori & Cupach, 2005), lacking the motivation to socialise with her US housemates.

Such cultural and linguistic barriers witnessed in these and other comments from study participants reflect the symbolic relations of power and identity (Norton, 2000) between native-English speakers and the participants, in that the former were linguistically influential over the latter. In one sense, the power relations also reflect the identity exclusivity of the former, which constructed native speaker groups as ‘us’ and non-native speaker groups as ‘them’, thus compounding ‘the identity insecurity’ of the latter (Kim, 2009). In another sense, these power relations can be seen as an outgrowth of ethnocentrism and stereotyping, both of which created barriers in the present context (Jandt, 2004). The cultural and linguistic forms the participants had acquired were not adequate to function effectively in Australia. Furthermore, the process of their English acquisition impinged on the processes of both their progress towards becoming socially competent members (Schieffelin & Ochs, 1986) of the society and their ‘identity negotiations’ (Ting-Toomey, 2005) with culturally different others.

The unfamiliar linguistic and cultural landscape confronting the international students from non-native backgrounds arriving in Australia resulted in a failure to establish intergroup communication, which in turn affected participants’ self-worth, motivation and identity. The unintelligibility and ineffective use of English psychologically affected them in a way that challenged their speaking and being understood. This led them to feel distant, not only from native-speaker groups (Schumann, 1986) but also from other non-native-speaker groups with stronger English skills. This effect appeared to inhibit their acculturation and personal development. However, twelve participants were not as affected by unintelligibility because



they appeared to adopt a positive attitude and determination to improve which helped them negotiate their activities with culturally different others (Kim, 2009). Take Nelcy's case as an example. She said:

I feel confident in myself and my English...I feel comfortable to use English to make friends with culturally different others...I am able to make a good friend with a Korean classmate...it doesn't matter if we could understand each other completely...what matters is her good personality.

This quote clearly shows that Nelcy had high confidence, which promoted her competence in intergroup communication in intercultural situations as she dismissed her encounter with unintelligibility, felt comfortable and was able to successfully negotiate her relational and cultural identities (Imahori & Cupach, 2005) with a Korean classmate. Furthermore, she was able to manage her identities effectively even though she did not totally understand her classmate's English because she employed appropriate facework strategies, considering the personality of her interactant instead of anticipating language barriers and constantly checking mutual understanding. This approach affectively and integratively motivated her (Dörnyei & Clément, 2001) both to use English as a medium of communication to 'mindfully negotiate shared identity meanings' (Ting-Toomey, 2005) and ultimately make good friends.

Although Lam felt disadvantaged and stressed during her study, and Gai felt frustrated dealing with local customers at her casual work, both maintained their dignity because the former eventually managed to adapt herself to pace of study at her host university and the latter considered her casual work experiences to be unimportant. Natalie (Colombian), Fernando (Peru), Tik (Thai) and Toa (Chinese) felt no loss of dignity, since their personal traits affectively and integratively motivated them to respond positively to the issue of unintelligibility. Keiko (Japanese) felt dignified in the belief that it was normal for a 48-year-old student like herself to have limited language learning ability. Tom (Swede), Anna and Jose perceived no attack on their dignity, seeing the application of the term dignity as an unnecessarily serious way of measuring their intrinsic self-worth. Joo (Korean) felt dignified because of her confidence in the subject matters. The above analysis suggests that positive attitudes, affective/integrative motivation and personal traits influence perceptions of dignity and self-worth when communicating in English with culturally different others.

Thirteen participants felt that their feelings of dignity had suffered as a result of their language chal-

lenges. For Nadia, it was because native speakers did not understand her English and laughed at the way she pronounced some words. Yao felt empathetic for those interacting with her, pressurizing her to be an effective intercultural communicator. Abdul (Indian) feared that he could become an object of ridicule in the eyes of the locals. He noticed that some local interlocutors did appear to be adopting some elements of his speech, but he interpreted this less as helpful and sympathetic speech convergence and more like what Thornborrow (2004) calls 'mocking behavior'.

The loss of dignity was attributed variously to Shin's (Chinese) past educational background and English teaching career in his home country as he thought that he would have no problems since he used to study and teach English, Cathy's (Swede) feeling of stupidity at not understanding an Australian joke, Nok's (Thai) discouragement comparing herself with her Thai colleagues, Peng's (Chinese) feeling pressurized to study AE, Ying's (Chinese) shame, Mau's (Chinese) depression and social exclusion, Jib's (Thai) feeling of being an outsider, Dui's (Thai) inability to compete with Australian-born Chinese, Kim's unrealistic expectations based on her results on a recognized English test and Wai's feelings of pressure and challenge by a course convener. Factors influencing these participants' loss of dignity reflect their values and perceived loss of face suggesting that lack of dignity affected the participants' intercultural identity negotiations.

Participants who experienced linguistic and cultural barriers brought discomfort upon themselves and reacted in different ways. For example, four participants stopped sharing their ideas during class discussions. One participant opted to only queue at a window where a bank teller of a Middle Eastern appearance was on duty, and only chose to shop in an Asian supermarket where he could culturally identify himself with the shop assistants. Instead of resorting to silence, one male participant deliberately responded by saying 'what?' while one female said 'never mind' and another requested her customers to spell their names and addresses. The analysis concludes that intergroup communication in the present context is complex due not only to the different levels of English used and to accented speech but also to diverse cultural backgrounds. These differences, along with other communicative barriers, appear to include factors affecting the process of communication between non-native speakers and native speakers. Intergroup communication between people from non-native and native English

speakers is more complex than when native speakers communicate with each other. The native-to-native communication process ends with making sense of the world based upon shared cultural worldviews. Asymmetrical communication ends with being silent, changing the subject, pretending to understand, saying things that hopefully will be appropriate, making clarification, repeating and/or negotiating new intercultural identities.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study explored how use of international English impacted non-native students in Australian academic and social contexts. The study has a number of limitations in that it was restricted to a small sample of 28 non-native English students and a qualitative research method. Researchers also did not establish a control group of native speakers to examine whether at least some of the cultural and communicative issues might arise in a similar way as part of the transition from undergraduate to postgraduate studies. The study does, however, give some indication of the effect of perceived language competency and culturally complex communications on non-native students' sense of dignity and self-worth during the early stages of their studies in Australia.

The outcomes suggest that the participants from 13 countries encountered similar experiences of problematic intelligibility with culturally different others, following the transition from their home countries to Australia. There was a tendency to ascribe the difficulties to unfamiliarity with the Australian variety of English. Although they were successfully admitted to the Australian university because they passed the required standardized English test, they all, without exception, experienced linguistic and cultural barriers. These barriers lowered and/or diminished their feelings of intrinsic self-worth and as well as their motivation to participate in the classroom and the host society, since English was deemed an important vehicle for academic, economic and social achievement as well as a source of dignity. However, positive attitudes towards the world around them, integrative/affective motivation and positive personal traits can neutralize negative perceptions of self-worth when encountering cultural and linguistic barriers.

Factors primarily contributing to the lack of mutual intelligibility were related to speech and cultural accommodation. On the one hand, the host nationals, such as conveners, tutors, university administrative staff and classmates, did not linguistically accommo-

date non-native speakers with whom they came into contact. The US nationals mentioned in one case similarly did not culturally accommodate their non-native housemate. On the other hand, non-native speakers were not yet able to adjust their way of speaking to accommodate the host nationals. This phenomenon suggests that it is very challenging for non-native students to adjust their academic and social lives in the present context because they have to cope with linguistic and cultural 'nonaccommodation'. Thus, it is appropriate to recommend that there is a need for both groups to be conscious of this issue. In particular, the host nationals may need to consciously adjust their own speech to an accommodating style appropriate to the varied cultural and linguistic backgrounds of their students.

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