

Learner Corpora: In Aid of Englishes as Lingua Franca for Intercultural Communication

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Under increased globalization English is now considered the lingua franca (ELF) of choice in intercultural communication. The language is often referred to as World/Global Englishes, categorised by Kachru (1996) as inner (L1), outer (L2) and expanding (English as a Foreign Language: EFL) circle varieties of English. It is especially growing as an ELF in the expanding circle with, for example, 200 to 350 million people in China studying English (Gu, 2009). Not surprising that non-native English speakers are outnumbering native-English speakers, and thus they contribute to the language's future form and shape as an international lingua franca.

However, a direct complication from English pluralizing into many varieties is the confusion what English to learn, teach and communicate with as 'standard' speech in intercultural communication. Corpus linguistics can be applied to help resolve some complications.

Corpus linguistics, a study of only a few committed linguists in the 1950s, has more recently led to the growth and diversification of corpora that now provide a solid base for comparing the varieties of English (Granger, 2003). Learner corpora have commonly been used to reveal consistent errors and language elements the learner finds challenging. Every nationality, every language level is represented in Learner corpora and this provides an unprecedented insight into learner English. The expansion of English (Kachru's outer and expanding circles) has also spurred the building of learner English corpora, such as the Longman Learner's Corpora (LLC) and the International Corpus of Learner English (ICLE).

It is argued that an appropriate benchmark should be the effective and fluent use of English in intercultural communication rather than accuracy and precision. This paper advances this argument that learner corpora represent substantially more: they can raise awareness of patterns that are mutually intelligible in intercultural settings, provide emerging patterns of common usage of English speakers outside the inner circle, and show that English is dynamic rather than static in nature. Accordingly, the author advocates the teaching of ELF based on a critical pedagogy that raises awareness of the fact that intercultural communication entails a two-way interaction in which no speaker is assigned dominant status. The potential contribution of learner corpora to advance this pedagogy is explained and illustrated by a review of findings from research and incorporating a small learner corpus for teaching purposes.

References

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