

English as a Lingua Franca in the Information Age: Insights into Its Role in Promoting Global Citizens and Creating New Definitions of the Self

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Abstract

This research paper will explore whether learning and communicating in English allows learners to adopt new multiple identities and participate in new frameworks of communication and communities on a global scale. As such, this research paper will analyse whether English has become a medium through which learners could find new means for self-expression and self-identification, and integrate themselves more deeply in new frameworks of cooperation that operate on local, regional and global scales. In light of this, I will try to determine whether English as a lingua franca online allows for opportunities for civic engagement, social action and, lastly and most importantly, the extension of the self. I will, therefore, examine the intertwined and inter-dependent relationship between contemporary language and culture and discuss the role of English in fostering the development and the promotion of global citizens in the new information age.

My aim is to conduct a case-study of a selected group of advanced students at the university level and determine if while communicating in English, they establish and participate in various communities possessing shared goals, interests and practices that allow them to drive social action and find new means for individual expression, self-identification and communicate issues of daily life.

Keywords: culture, identity, self, lingua franca

List of Abbreviations/Acronyms

First/Native language (L1)

Second language/Foreign language/New language (L2)

Introduction

I have always believed that language and culture are two inseparable entities. In my opinion, language is a reflection of culture or people's system of beliefs, thoughts and values. Thus, I believe that people's beliefs, cultural rituals and practices are incorporated and transcended in the process of how people speak and communicate with one another. In this regard, I would claim that language is reflection of culture and through investigating and researching one's language; one could also arrive at a clear understanding of the cognate culture(s).

Nowadays, English is considered as the lingua franca among peoples and nations all over the world. English language is the medium through which we communicate on a daily basis and knowing English, therefore, can open up a whole new world of opportunities to establish contacts and exchange information with people all over the world. English language has become a tool for socialization and the means that enable individuals, societies and cultures to interact, co-exist and cooperate with one another in a constantly changing world. English, thus, has created new frameworks for cooperation and integration among peoples and nations in the age of globalization.

The main purpose of this article is to assess the role of English in terms of bringing people closer to one another or bridging the cultural gap that divides peoples and societies all over the world. In other words, my intention is to assess the role of English in transforming cultural boundaries or creating a multi-cultural society

based on shared goals and interests. In this regard, I am interested to examine the extent to which English as a lingua franca promotes multi-cultural awareness and understanding among peoples and nations in today's globalized world. Put simply, I am trying to investigate the extent to which English has transformed itself from merely a medium of communication into an agent and phenomenon of global cultural awareness.

Objectives

In particular, I will seek to determine the extent to which the use of English has enabled individuals to establish online communities that unify like-minded individuals who share common goals and interests. In this regard, my intention will be to examine whether the use of English has enabled individuals to become members and participants in expansive online communities that operate on a global scale independent of the constraints of time and space. In light of this, I will explore the transformational power of English in terms of its ability to create a common cultural space for people to interact and drive social action by uniting their efforts and agenda(s). It is my intention, therefore, to determine what role English plays in the internationalization of world society in today's rapidly changing world.

My second objective is to examine the role of English on creating new perceptions of the self. In this regard, my objective is to examine the role of English on creating new perceptions of identity or sense(s) of belonging for those who use it. My intention, therefore, is to investigate the extent to which using English enables individuals to adopt new social roles and divergent thoughts, actions and behaviors from those associated with usage of their native language/mother tongue (L1). In other words, I will investigate whether the use of English has an impact on people's behaviour and whether people respond and react differently when having to function in a new/different socio-cultural setting, using English as the new language (L2) or the medium of communication. Thus, I will try and examine the implications of using L2 on people's behaviour.

Last, but not least, I will investigate the implications of using English on self-perception after extensive use of a language. In this regard, I am interested in observing whether people feel that their behaviors, perceptions, and points of view have changed due to extensive use of the L2. I will examine whether people feel that their identity has been transformed and they have changed after experiencing adjustments and transformations when using the new language in a new socio-cultural context. In other words, I will try and determine whether people's speech or language behavior in the L2 is a reflection of how their behavior and thinking might have changed.

Conceptual Framework

I believe that a conceptual model that highlights the inter-dependent and inter-twined relationship between language and culture is the so-called "integrative motivation" model. I believe that the integrative motivation model accurately explains how and why one feels the need to learn a foreign language and be an engaged member of the culture and traditions of the target language's community.

As I have said earlier, I believe that language and culture are inseparable and inter-dependent or they share a reciprocal dependency. In light of this, the language-culture inter-dependent relationship is the essence of what integrative motivation means.

According to Gardner, integrative motivation refers to the willingness of the individual to integrate more closely with the culture of the new language and build stronger social bonds with its speakers by using their language (Dornyei, 2001, p.54). Again, I believe that this is a very effective strategy for learning and identifying with a foreign language and it reveals why people are eager to learn English. It also reveals why people try to use the language as a tool to become more culturally aware and be open to other people's cultures more.

Again, I have always believed that language use is a reflection of culture, a mirror of people's beliefs, attitudes, values, social norms, faith and culture; the things people are familiar with, accustomed to and principles they live by. As Brown (1986, p.45) puts it, cultural patterns, customs, ways of life and world views are "expressed" and "reflected in language". Andrews (1998, p.106) goes a step further to suggest that language and culture could be even thought of as "synonyms".

Hall (2002, p.12) highlights this inter-dependent and mutual relationship by saying that the meaning of language does not simply reside in a system of linguistic resources that are removed from their local contexts of use and community of users. Instead, he argues that the meaning of language is located in the "dialogic relationship" between the present and the historical, between the individual and the social. In a similar way, Kramsch (1998, p.77) notes that language is the most "sensitive indicator" of the relationship that exists between an individual and a given social group.

Language and culture are, in my opinion, mutually inclusive and inter-dependent, and learning a new language is, therefore, like learning a new culture, a new world, a new system of beliefs, and a "new way of doing things" invented by humans. That is why I believe that when people learn a foreign language, they live and experience the new culture when speaking the new language.

Research Methodology

1. Populations or Samples Design

The participants in this research included mostly advanced students at the university level, whose English was sufficiently developed to elaborate on most of the issues and points raised throughout the survey. They were selected based on their proficiency in English rather than on any other factors, such as gender, scores or performance in English etc. In total sample was composed of ten participants.

2. Measurement and Data Collection Design

Initially, I planned to distribute questionnaires to the participants, but since the topic was quite open-ended, I eventually decided to conduct the research via interviews. I utilized the questionnaires during interviews, but I an interview format allowed explanation and elaboration on some of the topics or issues if needed. Indeed, this practice proved to be successful since I had to explain key topics such as identity, self-awareness and others more thoroughly; interviews made doing so convenient. In total, I asked ten questions, all of which were open-ended and addressed key issues such, as identity transformation, cultural awareness and understanding, and how they have been shaped by the extensive use of English. I allowed students to provide their own examples of each of those topics instead of offering suggestions on how I understand those topics.

3. Analytical Design

The findings have been categorized whenever there are consistencies, recurring patterns and similarities among students' responses. In other words, the procedure I have adopted is a "key word" analysis, generating categories from the statements made by the respondents. Whenever the answers were consistent, separate categories were created. Thus, students' answers have been grouped into categories if again they conveyed similar meaning(s).

Results

The findings suggest that the use of English among participants has led to deeper cultural awareness and understanding and, in particular, awareness of other people's cultures, their beliefs and cultural practices. Most of the participants claimed that the use of English has facilitated the process of them building new social relationships and communities of shared goal and interests online. Participants gave various examples of how the use of the L2 has made them become more aware of other peoples and cultures on a world-wide basis. For

example, a student revealed that through using and having to interact in English with a friend far away (Dubai), the participant has had the chance to learn more about art, dancing and entertainment typical for that foreign country.

Another student revealed that learning and being exposed to a series of English idioms, she has built an understanding of how people's values and thinking have been incorporated and expressed through language and, herewith, through the use of English idioms and sayings (proverbs). She added that by observing how people communicate and interact in English as in movies and in real life, she has come to an understanding of what they value in life; how they think and how their behaviour is expressed or becomes apparent through language. She also elaborated on the fact that greetings in English are more informal than Thai and they, thus, reflect the Western idea of social relationships that are based on age or social status far less as they are among Thais: another aspect of culture.

Most of the participants felt that their behaviour and identity have changed due to the extensive use of the L2. They expressed that using English has had an impact on their behaviour, perceptions and how they are seeing themselves after all. For example, a number of students quoted that using English has made them become more open-minded, social, communicative, flexible and more tolerant and responsive to a wider variety of opinions, viewpoints, cultural practices and beliefs. Another student quoted that using English has made them more adjustable, friendlier and again willing to open themselves more to a wider variety of opinions and viewpoints. It stems therefore, that using the L2 has had serious implications on people's behavior and identity and how these people perceive identities have changed due to extensive use of the L2.

Conclusion and Discussion

The responses gathered from the survey revealed that the use of English has enabled learners to participate in new frameworks of communication and communities of practice on a world-wide basis. Thus, the research revealed that the use of L2, enabled by various multi-media technologies, has helped promote participants' deeper cultural awareness and understanding of the other and, in particular, understanding of other cultures, what people value in life and what their systems of beliefs are.

Moreover, the findings suggest that English has become a medium through which learners could find new means for self-expression and self-identification, and integrate themselves more deeply in new frameworks of cooperation that operate on a global basis. Thus, the research revealed that English as a lingua franca that allows opportunities for civic engagement, social action and, most importantly, the extension of the self. Most of the participants felt that their behavior and identity have changed due to the extensive use of the L2. They expressed that using English has influenced the way they behaved and interacted with others. They also shared that their perceptions, including that of the self, have changed due to the extensive use of English.

Conclusion and Discussion

As a matter of fact, at times it was quite difficult to conduct this research due to the fact that the research topic was open-ended and the inter-relationship between language and culture was difficult to examine. For example, issues of identity cannot be defined and measured numerically and the researcher is left only with the option of soliciting descriptive data from respondents. Thus, a limitation of this research is the fact that it is an open-ended research topic that could only be measured or researched qualitatively.

I believe that further research could go in more depth, for example, of how one's behavior changes from L1 to L2. In this regard, one could conduct a comparative study of how one tends to speak in L1 and then how their language behavior might be subject to change in the L2 as they have to speak and act in a manner to accommodate a different socio-cultural setting. A study of this kind I believe could tell us insight into how people's social roles change as they have to perform in the new language, and thus what implications these changes have on one's identity or how people see themselves when they have to perform in a new socio-cultural setting using the L2.

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