Kachru's Three Concentric Circles Model of English Language:

An Overview of Criticism & the Place of Kuwait in it

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Abstract

This paper attempts to examine in a descriptive way the pioneering model of "World Englishes" proposed by Kachru in the mid-1980s that allocates the presence of English into three concentric circles: The **Inner** Circle, the **Outer** Circle, and the **Expanding** Circle. The Inner Circle presents the countries where English is used as a native language and as a first language among people. These countries include the USA, the UK, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. The Outer Circle includes countries that have old historical British colonial relations and where English is commonly used in social life or the government sectors. Most of the countries that belong to this circle are former colonies of the British Empire, such as India, Malaysia, Singapore, Ghana, Kenya, and others. The usage of English in these countries is similar to what is known as English as a second language. The third circle, The Expanding Circle, includes countries that introduce English as a foreign language in schools and universities, mostly for communicating in English with the Inner and Outer Circles. Such countries include Turkey, Saudi Arabia, The Emirates, Japan, China, Korea, and others.

Since its first introduction in 1985, Kachru's Three Concentric Circles Model of English Language has occasioned a great debate. Many linguists considered it one of the most influential models for understanding the use of English in different countries. Some, on the other hand, including Kachru himself, criticized the model for its oversimplification and the unclear membership to the circles. In addition to an overview of criticism on Kachru's model based on different studies, this paper tries to locate the place of ELT in Kuwait among the three circles.

Keywords: applied linguistics, EFL, ESL, pedagogy, language and culture

1. Importance of the Study

English is now indispensable in all transnational aspects of life, including technology, commerce, telecommunications, medicine, and as a way of communication across cultures in many countries and regions. As Devrim & Bayyurt (2010) aptly state: "It is an undeniable fact that English has become a global lingua franca. It is the most commonly spoken foreign language, language of media, language of technology, and language of science." The globalization of English and the necessity of knowing English creates a great need for better understanding the relationship of the language and its native speakers' culture, and a great need for searching for the best possible ways to improve ESL, EFL, or EIL (English as an International Language) in the global world, including the Kuwaiti context.

2. Kachru's Three Concentric Circles Model

The revolutionary spread of English over the globe which took place over the last decades has created changes in the sociolinguistic profile of the language and provided new varieties of English. Nowadays, English is not only a tool of communication among native speakers but also a language institutionalised in many former British and American colonies, and a lingua franca used all around the world. This fact has resulted in a great concern of the classification of World Englishes, in addition to the need to familiarize English Language Teaching to its new status. One of the ways to understand and study this phonemon is according to Kachru's three concentric circles model.

Kachru's model was first introduced with the term "World Englishes" in 1985, opening the door for new ways of understanding the spread of the English language throughout the world. Kachru (1985) described the distribution

of English in relation to three concentric circles: the **Inner** Circle, the **Outer** Circle, and the **Expanding** Circle (see Figure 1). These circles signify "the type of spread, the pattern of acquisition, and the functional domains in which English langue is used across cultures and languages" (Kachru 1985:p12). The Inner Circle presents the countries where English is the primary language and is used in daily life and government institutions, such as the United States of America, the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. The Outer Circle includes countries that have British colonial ties, and English is widely used in social life or in the government sector. Most of the countries that belong to this circle are former colonies of the British Empire, such as India, Malaysia, Singapore, Ghana, Kenya, and others. The use of English in these countries is English as a second language.

Finally, the Expanding Circle includes countries that introduce English as a foreign language in education, mainly for the purpose of communicating in English with the Inner and Outer Circles. Such countries include Turkey, Saudi Arabia, The Emirates, Japan, China, Korea, and others.

Although Kachru's model presents a valuable contribution regarding English language in the world for language researchers, it has been criticized by many of them, such as Modiano (1999), Bruthiaux (2003), Mollin (2006), and Berns (1995) in addition to Kachru himself for its oversimplification and the unclear membership to the circles. Graddol (1997), for example, believes that the location of the native countries in the Inner Circle represents a drawback of the model since it considers the countries in the Inner Circle as the perfect place for the correctness of the language and English language teachers but he also mentions the privileges of NS countries as the providers of English language goods and services.

Having the same opinion, Modiano (1999) thinks that relating the ownership of the language to the countries in the Inner Circle is an underachievement of the model and represents a kind of linguistic imperialism that Kachru tried to avoid. In other words, to Modiano, it " re-establishes the notion that the language is the property of specific groups, and that correct usage is determined by experts who speak a prestige variety" (p. 24). Another researcher who criticized the model is Mollin (2006) who thinks that Kachru's three concentric circles did offer a useful categorization for English in the world but failed to present the rise of English as a Lingua Franca among the speakers of the Outer Circle and the Expanding Circle.

At first, Kachru's model seemed to pigeonhole the ownership of English by establishing rigid borders between language users. While these borders were based on the relationship between the colonial power and former colonies, it established differences in the use of English between countries that share a colonial history and yet belong to different circles in Kachru's model. That is the case of Ghana, Tanzania, Zambia, and Kenya, which are classified as belonging to the Outer Circle, while Zimbabwe belongs to Expanding Circle, despite sharing the linguistic landscape with the above countries in terms of the status of English and national linguistic policies.

Secondly, Kachru's model tends to focus on native speaker fluency as international English, if not a model for international communication in English. However, this can be challenged by the growing number of researchers who problematize the idea of native user's ownership of English. In this respect, Widdowson (1998) argues, "How English develops in the world is no business whatever of native speakers in the United States, United Kingdom or anywhere else. It is not a possession which they lease out to others, while still retaining the freehold. Other people actually own it" (pp. 244–245). This conception leads to the World Englishes phenomenon that works against the concept of standardized norms, which are driven by the native user's fluency.

If a language is not subject to ownership but is rather to be learned and used, the ownership of English bears global features. It is not the native speakers' monopoly that they can decide to keep or pass on to others. This could relate to what Kachru (2005) says in his later publication entitled *Whose English is it? Asian Englishes: Beyond the Canon*. Currently, there is a significant growing call for accepting variations from native standards as norms in non-native Englishes (Seidlhofer & Jenkins, 2003, 2006; Risager, 2006). Jenkins (2006) strongly believes that some deviations from native norms in English as lingua franca users should be reinterpreted as signs of creativity (p. 35).

Furthermore, talking about the manner in which Kachru's Inner Circle defines a native linguistic competence as the panacea for the native speakers' fluency, Seidlhofer (2006) talks about how a trans-dialectal approach is enrichment (p. 47) and Jenkins (2002) advocates for tolerance for linguistic diversity and pluricentric approach (p. 35).

Finally, by taking this three concentric circles model as a model for analyzing the status of English in the world, one would wonder whether relying of the Inner Cycle as a model for international communication calls into question the efforts of those L2 users from the Outer Circle and Expanding Circle who do their best and succeed in attaining near-native fluency and near-native level of accuracy.

Bruthiaux (2003) argues that Kachru's three concentric circles model is too limited because it *is* "a primarily nation-based model which draws on specific historical events and which correlates poorly with current sociolinguistic data" (p.161).

Such shortcomings and drawbacks made other researchers suggest new models that, in their point of view, better reflect the present status of the spread and usage of the English language and, most importantly, conceal great differences between countries in the same circle.

Rampton (1990), for example, proposes the idea of replacing the concept of nativeness with one of competence and supports using the notion expert speaker, rather than a native speaker to show proficient users of the language. In other words, Rampton thinks that being a native speaker doesn't make the person competent in English, especially if he /she becomes involved in TEFL or TESL. On the contrary, an Indian language expert could be more competent than an ignorant native speaker and play a very useful role in the field of TESL or TEFL.

With similar guidelines, Modiano (1999) presents a centripetal circles model in which the inner circle is not formed by native speakers of English, but by excellent communicators of English as an International Language (EIL). He excludes from the inner circle native speakers of English who have "excessive regional accents and dialects" and who are incapable of changing to EIL when the context needs it, as he feels that they are not competent communicators in an international context. He places such native speakers of regional dialects into the second circle with non-native speakers who speak internationally incomprehensible indigenized varieties.
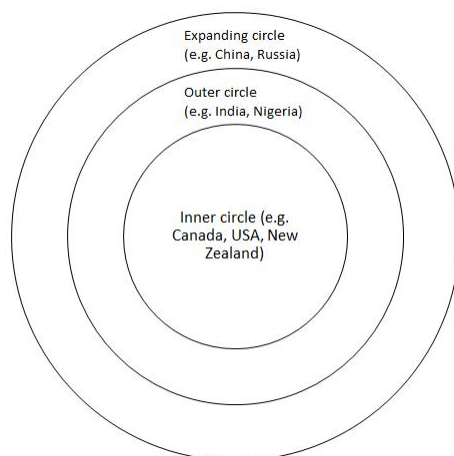

Figure 1. Kachru's three concentric circles model (1985)

3. The Place of Kuwait in Kachru's Model

The researcher thinks it is very important to describe the history of EFL in Kuwait and how it is introduced in order to accurately allocate the country in Kachru's Three Concentric Circles Model of English Language.In this respect, the State of Kuwait puts a great emphasis and unique importance on English Language Education at all school levels. Teaching English starts from grade 1 in public schools till grade 12 which is the last grade of the governmental school ladder. English then continues throughout higher education; at Kuwait University or PAAET where the language of instruction is English in all faculties and colleges.

But since Kuwait has a very different and distinct culture from the English native speakers' cultures and because of social, religious and political reasons, English language text books in public schools are all developed locally to reflect the Kuwaiti culture and express daily life events in Kuwait. The reason for developing local textbooks according to the researcher's long experience in TEFL is to provide students with culturally appropriate learning materials. Appropriateness here is determined by the Kuwaiti members of the curriculum development committee in the Ministry of Education.

In other words, the two cultures, the host (Kuwaiti) and the foreign might have different beliefs and perception of many daily life events. Issues like dating and dancing are not to be presented in classrooms in Kuwaiti schools. Since some of the foreign reading texts in the market might include such issues, the only solution that Kuwait found is to develop its own textbooks.

To end up with, because English language in the country is taught as a foreign language for the purpose of communicating with people from other countries because all Kuwaitis use their Arabic language to communicate and in the official government sectors, Kuwait is placed in the Expanding Circle.

4. Conclusion

Despite some fierce criticism related to its simplistic approach of classifying and pigeonholing English language speakers into circles that often lacks a clear rationale, Kachru's three concentric circles model is still considered among researchers and educators as an invaluable contribution regarding the spread and development of the English language worldwide.

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