Issues of language and competence in intercultural business contexts

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This paper explores some of the tension between language ability as a type of workplace competence and standardized language use in Malaysian business contexts, which are set against the backdrop of the globalized workplace. Standardized English language use is prioritized as a value-added skill, over contextualized or localized language use as authentic language ability, in these contexts which are natural sites of intercultural communication in multilingual, multiethnic Malaysia. It is contended that standardized English may not be able to compete with the authenticity of contextualized or localized language use for it is the latter that ensures that the work of the localized workplace gets done first before it can lay claim to the globalized economy. The tension between such authentic language use as innate ability and prescribed language use as skills can impinge on intercultural communication competence (ICC). Three studies that demonstrate such tension in the localized Malaysian and globalized business contexts are discussed following an examination of ICC in Anglo-American contexts.

Artikel ini menyelidiki ketegangan kebolehan berbahasa sebagai kecekapan di tempat bekerja, dan penggunaan bahasa *standard* dalam konteks perniagaan di Malaysia yang dibandingkan dengan tempat bekerja global. Penggunaan bahasa Inggeris *standard* yang dilihat sebagai kecekapan yang lebih bernilai, diutamakan berbanding penggunaan bahasa berkonteks dan tempatan sebagai kemampuan berbahasa yang sahih, di dalam konteks komunikasi antarbudaya di Malaysia yang terdiri dari pelbagai bahasa dan bangsa. Artikel ini dicadangkan bahawa bahasa Inggeris *standard* mungkin tidak dapat bersaing dengan penggunaan bahasa Inggeris berkonteks atau tempatan yang sahih. Ini adalah kerana penunaan bahasa berkonteks dan tempatan dapat memastikan bahawa segala urusan kerja di tempat bekerja tempatan akan diselesaikan terlebih dahulu sebelum kerja di tempat bekerja global akan dilakukan dan disiapkan. Ketegangan antara penggunaan bahasa yang sahih sebagai kebolehan semulajadi dan penggunaan bahasa yang disarankan akan memberi kesan terhadap kecekapan berkomunikasi antarbudaya. Tiga kajian yang menunjukkan ketegangan sedemikian dalam konteks perniagaan di Malaysia dan global akan dibincangkan setelah meneliti kecekapan berkomunikasi antarbudaya dalam konteks Anglo-Amerika.

Keywords: English; Malaysia; contextualized language use; intercultural communication competence

Introduction

In this paper I discuss some of the tension between language ability, as a type of workplace competence, and standardized language use in Malaysian business contexts,

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against the backdrop of the globalized workplace, in the prioritization of standardized English language use as a value-added skill over contextualized or localized language use as authentic language ability. The Malaysian business context is seen as a site of intercultural communication (IC) given Malaysia's multilingual and multiethnic diversity. I contend that standardized English may not be able to compete with the authenticity of contextualized or localized language use for it is the latter that ensures that the work of the localized workplace gets done first before it can lay claim to the globalized economy. Since language 'directly mediates every transaction' (Fantini, 2010, p. 270) it is the link in intercultural development that affects intercultural communication competence (ICC). Thus the tension between authentic language use as innate ability and prescribed language use as skills can impinge on ICC. I draw on three studies to illustrate this tension in localized Malaysian and globalized business contexts. First, I examine the notion of culture and how it operates in the intercultural nexus. Then I discuss how language contributes to ICC in intercultural business contexts in which ICC has to be understood in relation to what constitutes culture in the workplace. I then examine the claims made for models of ICC in Anglo-American contexts in relation to whether or not the impetus to be interculturally competent is a hegemonical preserve since research in these contexts leads the field. Their findings, which define and dominate knowledge production in the field, usually reflect Western cultural values. When these findings are extended to other intercultural contexts and situations, they come embedded with the same cultural values. Shi-Xu (2009) points out that the dominance of Western knowledge production and dissemination is the act of exercising the power of global communication.

Culture in the intercultural nexus

Although hugely problematic to define and reach consensus on, culture is an inextricable link in the intercultural nexus. While the intercultural is defined by differences rather than similarities, the locus of IC is not only the mediation between behaviours and world views among peoples of different languages and cultures, but it is also the dialogue between minority and dominant cultures along cleavages that may be present in any society (Kramsch, 1998, 2001) including that with a national language and culture. We not only need to problematise culture, but we also need to look at it less defensively as structure (Block, 2013) while affirming the self-agency of individuals to act for themselves and not merely as members of societies (Nair-Venugopal, 2003a, p. 18). Individuals may resist ascribed norms or prescribed meanings, patterns of behaviour, practices and attitudes of the societies they 'belong' to.

Nevertheless, whichever way we look culture continues to be predicted by provenance. The meanings of symbols and artefacts, ideas, beliefs, values and norms, as well as patterns of behaviour, practices and attitudes are shared and understood as objective reality (Kroeber & Kluckhohn, 1952; Spencer-Oatey, 2000). These are conventionally learned as part of primary socialization or enculturation or as 'a process of making and remaking collective sense of changing social facts' (Baumann, 1996, p. 189). Most of us carry much of this cultural knowledge in an emotional backpack as a fallback guide or interpretative framework for most of our lives. In the largely taken for granted view, culture shapes attitudes and priorities and deems what is acceptable or relevant to the community as 'ways of doing things' in a community as human activities (following Goodenough, 1994). To summarize, 'culture is a verb' (Street, 1993). It is that 'which needs to be known in order to operate reasonably effectively in a specific human environment' (Street, 1993, p. 38). Since language is integral to communication, 'ways of

speaking' (Hymes, 1974a, 1974b) also become 'ways of doing things' in the community. Hall once declared, 'culture is communication and communication is culture' (1959, p. 186).

Intercultural communication

Considering language in an intercultural context merits some discussion of the defining parameters of IC, because IC is communication that mediates 'cultures' and impacts on language use whichever way we understand 'cultures'. IC is frequently used interchangeably with cross-cultural communication to mean cross-country communication on the assumption that one can distinguish between the cultures of different societies. The USA led in the early work on IC because of its attempts to explain difference in its long history of assimilating diverse groups of immigrants as citizens, understanding its own natives and protecting its global strategic and military interests. These efforts were supported by its Foreign Service Institute, in which Edward Hall, who is credited with using the term 'IC', worked for about five years.

IC is not only bounded by political, geographical and social borders and boundaries, but it is also restrained by contextually dependent and relational situations. It therefore includes the discourse of the minorities within them, whether defined by localities or by 'other' cultures, or sub-fields within the margins of territories, communities and disciplines, respectively. And while the broadly defining metaphor of IC is that of staying within borders, rather than that of crossing them, it is also the discourse of the glocal, the cosmopolitan and the a-cultural, and of universal rather than of distinctive or particular applicability. It includes state and non-state players in a world of both porous and dissolving borders and boundaries. Thus in embracing these dichotomies, IC includes not only the interactive space between what is generally understood as distinct cultures, but also that within the interstices, i.e. the 'space' within smaller specific cultures, and across the larger distinct ones. Membership in the larger distinct cultures within or without the same society is not diminished relative to that in the smaller specific cultures. For example, academics, as members of specific professional cultures, will relate more to their counterparts from other cultures than they will to factory workers in their own, although they may share ethno-cultural values and traditions with the latter. This contrasts with the otherization and cultural reductionism of individuals when viewed only as members of 'national' cultures.

It is also in that 'space' within and across 'cultures' that social identities are negotiated and communicated (see Jenks, Bhatia, & Lou, 2013). Identity behaviour is implicated as ways of doing things that are typical or are influenced by some considerations of provenance, such as for example, race/ethnicity, religious affiliation and sexuality. They may be manifested as inequities too, as with regard to gender (Holmes, 2006; Ladegaard, 2011) or age/generation, sexuality and ability. In the workplace, these identities may have implications for IC if they are marked and affect job-related decisions. Thus it is important to understand what constitutes culture in the workplace in order to understand IC in the workplace, even if it is becoming rather difficult to identify 'cultural' identity, particularly in the globalized workplace.

Culture and IC in the workplace

The workplace quite apart from being a fundamental site of language contact and socialization, also operates as a microcosm of wider society and manifests culture both in

the fairly conventional sense, and as social categories, or as the 'small' cultures of 'any cohesive social grouping' (Holliday, 1999, p. 237). Culture in the workplace appears to operate on at least two levels. One is at the level of interpersonal and intercultural relations between individuals who belong to the 'large' and distinctive cultures of provenance, or to sub- and/or co-cultures as 'small' cultures. Sub-cultures may be seen as either the variable patterns of thought and behaviour of similar groups of people, or as onion skin like variations that 'deviate from the normative ideals of adult communities', or 'elements in ideological tension with … dominant large cultures' (Holliday, 1999, p. 239, citing Thornton, 1997; Gelder, 1997, respectively). In co-cultures, individuals share values and norms, beliefs and interests that distinguish them from those of the larger cultures but with whom they share common beliefs as groups within them. Women, or the aged, for example, may be viewed in all human societies as members of smaller cultures that cut across the large or 'meta' ones (Dahl, 2003).

Secondly, culture operates in the workplace at the level of interaction between individuals as members of the same organization. They subscribe to particular values and ways of doing things, as organizational culture that they share and simultaneously define through their collective behaviour. Although, as Holliday suggests, multinational organization cultures are small cultures (1999, p. 239), these organizational cultures become emblematic of regularization, standardization and normativity affecting a range of decisions including language choice and use. It is in these corporations that the commonalities of 'how to' cultural training are prevalent.

It is also in the multinational corporations and transnational conglomerates that expatriate staff and guest workers reconfigure the locational aspects of the workplace with the fluidity of working within the space and borderlessness of globalization. In challenging geographical borders and national boundaries and spaces, globalization allows for the emergence of a type of worker who subsists within the local spaces of borders and boundaries, yet works for globalized interests that also satisfy self-interests. These globalized interests naturally value competencies that mediate cultural differences. And intercultural communicative competence is valued from among the plethora of desirable workplace competencies that can range from new literacies to professional and communication competencies. But, as Dervin and Kuoppala (in press) note, intercultural competences are often polysemic and rely heavily on problematic concepts such as culture and identity, and not everyone agrees on what intercultural competences mean either.

IC has been very much associated with the mantras of national cultures and globalization. Hofstede (1980/2001; 1991/2005) was already a byword on the dimensions of national cultures from the 1990s onwards. Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner were also 'Riding (their) Waves of Culture in Understanding (in what was posited to be) Cultural Diversity in Business' (1997). Cultural sensitivity emerged as 'the ability to discriminate and experience relevant cultural differences' (Hammer, Bennett, & Wiseman, 2003, p. 422), as a predictor of intercultural competence. It has since been claimed (Plum, Achen, Dræby, & Jensen, 2008) that it is cultural intelligence, a combination of emotional drivers, cultural knowledge and practical methods, that can bridge differences in the (inter)cultural encounter as it can handle and prevent cultural conflict by synergizing differences.

National cultures (Hofstede 1980/2001, 1991/2005), the 'default' cultures that are synonymous with nation states, were based on conventional understandings of what constituted a nation's culture in the heydays of Anglo-American multinational proliferation. Such readings of culture might have served as early warning signals for reading the 'cultural other' and might have helped novices to globalized workplaces make some

sense of some of the unfamiliar and uncertain in their new environments. However, as homogenized representations of locality, they get in the way of understanding contextually dependent and relational situations in transnational workplaces that have since become increasingly globalized and cosmopolitan due to considerable demographic changes in the workforce.

Moreover, the face of the multinational/transnational corporation has changed somewhat from being almost wholly Anglo-American to increasingly Asian (China, Korea and Japan), Other-European (Scandinavian) and mixed. Predicting national cultures is not useful or reliable given rapid globalization. They have become 'imaginaries' (Dervin, Paatela-Nieminen, Kuoppala, & Riitaoja, 2012; Holliday, 1999). Similarities have become more important within the homogenizing impulse of globalization, while its obverse, glocalization, encapsulates the tension between the local and the global (Robertson, 1995). And in being both localized and globalized, i.e. glocalized, the transnational workplace may be seen as cosmopolitan space in its 'incorporation' of the global outsider within the insiderness of locality.

Workplace competence

Understanding workplace competence has to precede an understanding of ICC. Spitzberg and Changnon (2009) argue that the term *competence* is a contested conceptualization that has, for some time, been too loosely bandied about and variously equated with understanding, relationship development, satisfaction, effectiveness, appropriateness and adaptation, with each of these criteria defended or criticized elsewhere. It is also 'sometimes conceptually equated with a set of abilities or skills which is by far the most common approach and fits with the more normative semantic sense of the term' and 'at other times, a subjective evaluative impression' (p. 6). While competencies may be generally understood as a set of abilities or skills, workplace 'competencies' commonly refer to a set of desirable skills that are specific to particular jobs. Workplace competence is defined (Spencer & Spencer, 1993) as an underlying characteristic of an individual that is causally related to criterion-referenced effective, or superior performance, or both in a job or situation. The argument is that individuals can get and keep desired jobs, and find new ones if they possess the desired competencies of knowledge and skills, and personal attributes or dispositions (Hillage & Pollard, 1998). Thus, while the ability to use word processing software and other technologies as hands-on knowledge at work is considered basic workplace competence today, the ability to speak another language as ICC may be an additional skill. Many organizations establish the relationship between core competencies and employability skills, and integrate critical skills into work-based projects aligned to core competencies. Developed from the early 1980s, work-based competency is a methodology for describing desired performance commonly used in large companies and government agencies worldwide. It has been argued, however, that established methodologies have inherent strengths that can challenge the competence philosophy (Stewart & Hamlin, 1992).

Intercultural communication competence

Compounded by mondialization, increasing mobility and migration, ICC appears to have become an aspirational aspect of workplace competence. ICC is defined as:

> impression management that allows members of different cultural systems to be aware of their cultural identity and cultural differences, and to interact effectively and appropriately

> with each other in diverse contexts by agreeing on the meaning of diverse symbol systems, with the result of mutually satisfying relationships. (Kupka, 2008, p. 16)

Unarguably, the interaction will be deemed appropriate only if it does not significantly violate valued rules, norms and expectations, and considered effective if valued goals or rewards are attained.

Despite its applicability to the globalized workplace, a definition of ICC that can be applied across intercultural contexts globally appears unavailable. Kupka (2008), for instance, points out the limitations to his study (despite the promise it holds). What any one definition or model would do is, like many other so-called 'universal' standards, homogenize from a particular vantage point of dominance. In the workplace, it is likely to perpetuate Western/Anglo-American human resources (HR) managerial hegemony and ignore the potential capacity for transformational change in specific context dependent situations. As an example of dominant discourse, gross domestic product (GDP) is considered to be one of the 'traditional' markers of human progress despite concerns for some time about the adequacy of its figures to measure societal well-being. Its relevance as an indicator of economic performance and social progress of a nation is only now being reconsidered albeit by the leading economists, Stiglitz, Sen and Fitoussi (Newcombe, 2012) after being imposed for so long as a measure of economic, environmental and social sustainability.

Another example of dominance is how in the UK, the Western biomedical model exerts hegemony by subjugating traditional systems of medicine, such as Ayurveda, to Western biomedical practices. This robs Ayurveda of its status as a form of traditional medicine with its potential for autonomous transformation (Nair-Venugopal, 2012). So as a powerful legitimizing tool, Western scientific validation can either affirm or replace the authority of other traditions.

There are thus lessons to be learnt here for ICC too in the hope that 'experts' can 'decide what the components of the definition are' for ICC (Lapointe, 1994, p. 275). Although critical approaches have weakened such hopes, 'top intercultural scholars and academic administrators' were consulted to 'document consensus … on what constitutes intercultural competence and the best ways to measure this complex construct' (Deardorff, 2006, p. 242) in a claim that it is the first study to do so. However, although 'the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations based on one's intercultural knowledge, skills, and attitudes' (Deardorff, 2006, p. 247) may not be controversial, the list of components identified may be. It raises the usual contestable issues of culture and social categorization, and identity and power, despite the affirmation that it represents the first crucial step towards such measurement.

Some of the challenges of reaching consensus were made explicit in the Centre for Information for Language Teachers commissioned work undertaken by O'Regan and MacDonald (2007) on national occupational standards in intercultural working in the UK. Reaching consensus on most component skills, even from a defined multicultural perspective within the UK, was not straightforward (see MacDonald, O'Regan, & Witana, 2009) despite the articulation by the European Institute for Comparative Cultural Research of a concept of 'intercultural dialogue' within the European context of cultural diversity (*ERICarts*, 2008). Considering such difficulties in conceptualizing ICC, the challenge is to be able to apply any one definition or model of ICC reliably to every intercultural encounter. Even within a single area, region or country, each intercultural encounter is dependent on context and relations. The other challenge is 'whether multiple models of

competence should be developed in particular contexts with high levels of specificity' (Macdonald & O'Regan, 2012, p. 558).

Arasaratnam's (2009) avers that her model of ICC is one of the few that has been constructed entirely based on data from participants who represented multiple cultural perspectives, and which performs well in culturally diverse participant groups. The logic behind it is that a person who is competent in one intercultural exchange is intrinsically able to be competent in a different exchange. It is based on the findings of a previous study (Arasaratnam & Doerfel, 2005) in which participants from 15 different countries were asked to describe a competent intercultural communicator (among other tasks). The variables identified were empathy, intercultural experience/training, motivation, global attitude and good listening ability. The study claims that there are identifiable variables in a competent intercultural communicator that transcend cultural context and cultural identity of the perceiver. Culture and context remain intractable entities in the ICC nexus that exacerbate the problems of model application.

Language and ICC in intercultural business contexts

Language is more identifiable than culture and knowing additional languages is advantageous within the ethno-cultural diversity of the globalized workplace today. Before culture became the focus of contestation in IC, Clyne (1994) produced an account of the Australian workplace within an interactionist view of the relation between language and culture. That culture 'determines the areal networks promoting similarities in discourse patterns and expectations' (p. 204), may seem simplistic and even essentialist today. But, if 'linguistic competence plays a key role' (Byram, 1997, p. 34) in ICC, then the new and diverse cultural and linguistic contexts of the contemporary workplace must also value 'communicative competence' (Bachman, 1990; Canale & Swain, 1980; Hymes, 1968; Savignon, 1983) in a foreign language, alongside knowledge of information and communication technologies.

Ultimately, global economic competiveness depends on the effective use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) matched by high levels of literacy developed and maintained through the use of the Internet and other ICTs. However, even if certain kinds of knowledge that underlie the performance of particular tasks do not require linguistic ability, language remains a valuable resource in the new globalized economy (see Heller, 2003, 2005, 2010). Language may be only one of many competencies required to thrive in the workplace, but it is integral to ICC in the workplace, as the language–culture relationship is communicated through 'language at work', which entails a considerable amount of contextualized language use.

The Malaysian context

In Malaysia, linguistic diversity is complemented by multiethnic diversity. Although it is generally described as being multicultural, Malaysia is still very much a composite, plural society (see Milner, 2003; Ratnam, 1965) of communities living largely separate social lives, and for the most part peacefully, despite politically generated dissonance, misplaced nationalism and jingoism. Malaysian society is composed of a largely Malay Muslim native (*Bumiputra*) majority, Chinese (mainly) and Indian minorities and various smaller indigenous groups (*Pribumi*) speaking a polyglot of languages. Despite the linguistic diversity, global economic competitiveness is believed to rest on the pervasive ideology of the value-addedness of the English language as *the* language of employability in

Malaysian business (see Nair-Venugopal, 2013). Yet, the English language situation in Malaysia is largely that of a quasi-second language since Malay, as Bahasa Malaysia, the national language, is the main medium of instruction in national schools for countless Malaysians alongside Mandarin and Tamil in vernacular schools. However, its pluricultural diversity makes the Malaysian workplace an intercultural space in which, like any other workplace anywhere else, the social identities of individuals categorized as members of the sub- or co-cultures of age/generation, gender, ethnicity/race, religious affiliation, sexual orientation, etc. are negotiated and communicated in interactions that involve localized or contextualized language use.

Generally speaking, opportunities to enter workplace sites to research relevant subjects are, more often than not, difficult in Malaysia. Although there are research collaborations and consultancy work with universities, frequently when entry is gained into organizations, researchers tend to interact less with employees than with their employers. Access is usually only gained through negotiations with middle management. Approval is obtained from top management, so protocol is hardly breeched. Management tends to allow access to research proposals that suit institutional purposes and frequently research outcomes fit management expectations. Unsurprisingly then, Malaysian workplace literature abounds with the perceptions and expectations of stakeholders, gatekeepers and invariably senior management (Kaur & Chuah 2012; Kaur & Clarke, 2009; Moslehifar & Ibrahim, 2012; Muthiah, 2002, 2003; Ong, Leong, & Kaur, 2011; Sarudin, Mohd Noor, Zubairi, Tunku Ahmad, & Nordin, 2013; Wahi, O'Neill, & Chapman, 2011). The locus of much workplace research is on how to prepare graduates adequately in English for the workplace with employability skills that are invariably associated with communication skills. Very little, however, is available on how the daily grind of work is managed, given the less than desirable levels of English language skills frequently lamented by management, or even how, in many large business organizations, Malay is competing with English. When the attention of gatekeepers is drawn to this antinomy, it is argued that language is not as important as work-based/job-related knowledge. Nevertheless, there is no letting up on the desirability of English language skills, which are frequently and disadvantageously conflated with communicative skills for employability (Nair-Venugopal, 2013) as part of a national logic on economic global competitiveness.

This state of affairs perpetuates a cycle of disconnect between what is posited as relevant or appropriate language skills for the workplace rather than what actually matters for work-based competence. The mismatch between actual workplace language competence and taught language skills appears to be an iterative global phenomenon too that is not surprisingly reified by lucrative publishing in English Language Teaching/English as a Second Language/English for Specific Purposes (ELT/ESL/ESP). A lucrative global industry continues to capture world markets with publications on how to teach business English as *the* language of business, how to communicate interculturally or how to become interculturally competent in the classroom or training room, very much like making rats perform under laboratory conditions. These perspectives come mainly from the canonical centres of ELT/ESL/English as a Foreign Language (EFL)/ESP with a heavy reliance on feedback obtained from foreign students privileged to study abroad, rather than from an experiential understanding of the sociolinguistic movement on the ground. The periphery that is encroached is not always understood. Such practices are evident in the work on ICC too.

Evidence of language 'tension' in localized and globalized business contexts

I now discuss three previous studies (Nair-Venugopal, 2003b, 2006, 2009) that demonstrate this language 'tension'. Understanding language tension requires an understanding of the role of language as natural resource, i.e. as a way of talking or a type of organizational discourse (see Bargiela, 2005; Holmes & Stubbe, 2003) to get things done, as a rule of thumb criterion, rather than as a set of commodified skills that are prescribed. This is regardless of the size of the ethno-cultural space occupied *in situ* by interlocutors. A study (Crosling & Ward, 2002) in English speaking Australia found, for instance, that since workplace communication was mostly informal in nature, practice in making formal presentations alone was not sufficient preparation for business graduates.

The three studies identified for discussion on language 'tension' focus on the following aspects:

1. Interactions among Malaysians in a localized business context and between two businessmen in the globalized context of international trade as speakers of English as another language/lingua franca (Nair-Venugopal, 2003b);
2. Comparisons between Business English materials and contextualized language use (Nair-Venugopal, 2006); and
3. Organizational imperatives for training vis-à-vis trainer language choice (Nair-Venugopal, 2009).

The first study (Nair-Venugopal, 2003b) illustrates the phenomenon of intelligibility in English in localized and globalized intercultural business contexts. Two out of the three data examples discussed are taken from Malaysian business contexts while the third is an oft-quoted extract taken from Firth (1990) on negotiations in international commodity trading conducted via telephone. Both types of interactions demonstrate the different routes that communication can take in different contexts for different purposes and attest to how intelligibility, as comprehensibility, has to go beyond the 'good enough' English of pronunciation and accent in intercultural contexts of communication in English.

The first two examples (Nair-Venugopal, 2003b, pp. 42–43) showed that intelligibility is facilitated by the interlocutors' membership within the same speech community, that is, of Malaysian speakers of English. Drawn from Malaysian business contexts, they showed how trainer comprehensibility of trainees is facilitated by familiar social context, shared cultural background or schematic knowledge, insider awareness of linguistic norms and interactive engagement, with regard to the relevance of intelligibility in ICC. It is clearly the modalities of the localized variation of English, inclusive of the alternation of codes as individual sociolinguistic repertoires that interface ICC in these contexts.

The third example (Nair-Venugopal, 2003b, p. 44) is drawn from Firth (1990, p. 275). Here the interactions are between two businessmen, a Syrian and a Dane, as speakers of English as another language or lingua franca. Comprehensibility was neither facilitated nor impeded as members of the wider global community of speakers of English. It hinged more crucially on both as non-native speakers of English interacting with each other to somehow achieve a communicative breakthrough to successfully relay, receive and understand a message. Firth's well-known strategies of 'let it pass' and 'make it normal' appear to underpin successful interactions that are not only 'real, authentic, effective, expedient' (Firth, 1996). They are also contextually relevant and appropriate in what are quintessentially intercultural encounters, inclusive of the limitations in English language ability. Today the telephone can be replaced by the use of Skype and a webcam. They will reveal some paralinguistic features, such as facial expressions and some gestures.

These can alter the dynamics of the interactions into face-to-face communication, despite being mediated still by technology.

The language tension in the three data examples lay in the expectations regarding each interlocutor's English language ability to communicate in the intercultural encounter, and the use of available language resources for appropriate and effective communication. The study proved that, despite linguistic variability in English within and across countries, 'cultures' and contexts, individuals can interact effectively and appropriately with each other in diverse ethno-linguistic contexts to achieve mutually satisfying relationships. This has been defined as the characteristic outcome of ICC (Kupka, 2008, p. 16).

In the second study (Nair-Venugopal, 2006), the English in Business English materials produced by international publishing houses, mainly centred in the UK, was compared to that of the English in an interactional model of English that had already been identified for business contexts (Nair-Venugopal, 2000, 2001) in Malaysia in a previous large-scale study. A sampling of more than 30 of published materials in Business English revealed that most set out to teach grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation and communication skills that were posited as appropriate for business purposes. Speaking was ranked as the most important skill to develop with some practice provided in listening skills. The study showed that the prescribed language forms and patterns of speech and communication in the commercially produced texts and multimedia materials surveyed were clearly pretentious and stilted in the context of speaking English in Malaysian business contexts. The dissonance was particularly apparent because the interactional model of English identified for business contexts (Nair-Venugopal, 2000, 2001) operates as a functional model of interaction too. Such evidence counters the marketing mythologies of purportedly universal forms of language use in business contexts worldwide. The language of Business English is frequently that of register or specific content (as applicable to a particular job type or specialization), mixed with general-purpose language use in context.

This dissonance points to the dichotomy that exists between prescribed patterns of English usage (such as those available in the plethora of commercially produced materials), and those of contextualized language use in real-time Malaysian workplace interactions. To ignore it is to deny the pragmatic relevance of speaking English as one of the localized languages of business in Malaysian contexts. The following examples of 'signalling devices' used in presentations, taken from the sampling of publications studied, illustrate the discordance: 'Let me start by'; 'I'd like to begin by'; 'Let me turn now to'; 'Let's look at this in more detail'; 'I will deal with this later'; 'if I may, but for now'; 'I'd like to sum up now'. Instead of these it was 'okay' and 'right' that were used as signalling devices. They were also two of the most common discourse markers in the interactional model (see Nair-Venugopal, 2006). The interactional model, in fact, reflects the linguistic diversity of Malaysia in its sub-varieties of Malaysian English (ME), standard, colloquial and bazaar Malay, code-switches into Malay and English, code-mixes of English and Malay, formal and informal referents mixed with workplace register and ethnically distinctive ways of speaking as 'ethnolects' (Nair-Venugopal, 2000, 2001). Not least of all, it provides support for an indigenous response to a pervasive global ideology at work by exposing the gap between contextualized language use and prescribed usage in commercially produced texts. In representing language change and choice in Malaysian business contexts, it may be taken to be evidence of functional language use in the Malaysian workplace and provides an appropriate model for the development of authentic language materials as an alternative response.

It appears that the writers of the materials on Business English relied on a formulaic approach to ESL/EFL materials production based on the assumption that native speakers were the arbiters of the norms perpetuating some of the *World Englishes (WE)* debates on language hegemony. The business transactions contexts were almost exclusively within Anglophone speaker domains of control, even when the interlocutors were non-native speakers. Hardly any of the interactions were set in Singapore, for instance, which is viewed as one of the most globalized nations today. As for the assignments set in Jakarta, Indonesia, the key and top management figures were all white Caucasians and mainly male. This was true for the Japanese scenarios too. Ironically, if the texts were meant to simulate or reflect 'realistic' business contexts in Asia, they did succeed by reflecting Anglo-American monopoly of multinational and transnational businesses worldwide based on a 'new world order' of free market enterprise.

Furthermore in one of the texts that claims to be 'certified' as realistic business materials, one of the main protagonists in an 'assignment' is a Kuwaiti businessman. Yet, there is no mention of the prerequisite dietary label *halal* (permissible in Islam) in the 'assignment', which involves the import of poultry into Kuwaiti which is a Muslim country. This displays a clear lack of cultural knowledge of Kuwait. It constitutes a reality gap with regard to assumptions regarding local values and taboos, such as for instance, the prohibition against the consumption of non-*halal* meat (i.e. not slaughtered according to Islamic injunctions) in Muslim countries.

It does also appear that, while the producers of these materials had aspired for 'large' cultural changes for their users, they did not display in their pedagogical objectives, either relevant cultural knowledge or sensitivity, or the willingness, to modify their own cultural biases and communicative behaviour to suit those of the target users. Relevant knowledge or willingness would have demonstrated some 'cultural' awareness' at least as a dimension of the ICC they could have projected as the writers. Additionally, the claim that a certain type of language usage is 'the kind of standard business practice that *most* students of Business English are likely to encounter in their working environment' (Jones & Alexander, 1996, p. 6), does not demonstrate any tolerance for the high probability of ambiguity (or redundancy) in language use that some students will encounter and learn to cope with in such environments. More recent publications such as *The Business* by Macmillan (2009), and *Market Leader* by Pearson/Longman (2008) have introduced topics such as corporate image, risk management, managing conflict and investment, and drawn on authentic and authoritative content from *the Financial Times* and other media sources, respectively. Yet, cultural awareness, sensitivity or intelligence still appear to be in short supply.

Lastly, in the third study (Nair-Venugopal, 2009), actual language use of in-house trainers in a commercial bank was observed and the trainers subsequently interviewed. The aim was to find out if, in fact, the dominant organizational rhetoric on in-house language use matched that of the trainers' actual language use, and whether the institutional directives impinged on language ability (or 'ways of speaking') as a type of workplace competence vis-à-vis standardized English language use prescribed by management as de rigueur. The disconnect between institutional preaching and practice was clearly evident in the training sessions observed, despite the institutional directives on the use of standardized English. There was much evidence of contextualized language use in the form of the localized sub-varieties of ME, standard, colloquial and bazaar Malay, code-switches into Malay and English, code-mixes of English and Malay, formal and informal referents, workplace jargon and inevitably the ethnically distinctive ways of speaking as 'ethnolects' (Nair-Venugopal, 2000, 2001). The findings of this study have

since been compared to those of the large-scale one conducted in the 1990s for a longitudinal perspective on language choice in Malaysian business contexts, and they confirm those of the earlier study (see Nair-Venugopal, 2013).

Considering the global dispersion of English, it is still moot in ELT work to ask questions of ownership with regard to who decides for whom in matters of language teaching and learning as many writers within the *WE* paradigm have (see Canagarajah, 1999; Kumaravadivelu, 2003). Who or what has the authority to sanction and affirm particular traditions, and thereby their absorption into the fabric of societies, is a serious issue. Without pushing the envelope too much I think we should ask the same questions of ICC? Who decides for whom? This question has far greater salience for ICC than asking the same of ELT. ELT could at least lay claim to a cannon and a centre until the empire struck back. But ICC is premised on language and culture both of which imbue all of us as human beings, even if culture is less identifiable than language. Can lists of component skills and categories, and measurements of quotients and scales, lay claim to the knowledge of particular ramifications of cultural behaviour in specific context dependent situations? Whose values and norms will decide which perspective is more important in determining competence? Do some have greater claims to making these decisions than others? Is the impetus to be communicatively competent interculturally a hegemonical preserve? Not least of all, what would justify such dominance?

Conclusion

Much of the early literature, emanating as it did from Anglo-American sites, shows a clear cultural bias in attending to IC as a problem of understanding for Anglo-Americans as receivers. Although much of it (too long a list to cite here) is very impressive as formative work, it has been built on this perspective. Alternative views have since been developed (see Asante, Miike, & Yin, 2014). Miike argues that 'Non-Western cultures, more often than not, remain as peripheral targets of data analysis and rhetorical criticism and fail to become central resources of theoretical insight and humanistic inspiration' (2014, p. 116). In an era of global consciousness, such issues have become acute with cosmopolitanism as global political consciousness igniting the debates of global citizenship. Furthermore, in a mondialized world of much mobility and migration propelled by innovations in telecommunications, rapid transport systems and cheap travel, it may become difficult to identify an intercultural exchange based on what may be nebulous cultural identities. Indeed the notion of the 'cultural other' may become indefensible in a world that is being homogenized by popular forms of global consumption, through cultural diffusion, and the continuing localization and hybridization of language forms, such as the emergence of *Globish*, a variant subset of English, that claims to be a global means of simplified communication (see McCrum, 2010).

Generally speaking, one can be adjudged to be communicatively competent if one achieves the communication goal of successfully accomplishing a communicative task effectively and appropriately for such an accomplishment can be self-reported and evaluated. ICC, however, may depend on achieving much more. Following Fantini (2010, p. 271), it is perhaps the accomplishment of a task of mutual interest and benefit to two parties without much loss of understanding between them, while maintaining good relations, that points to successful ICC. Arasaratnam and Doerfel opine that 'regardless of one's internal capacity, being perceived as competent by a culturally different other in an intercultural interaction contributes significantly to favorable outcomes' for both participants (2005, p. 141). While this may ring true it would be useful to know who

decides what is perceived as 'competent' communication and who the 'cultural other' is. It may not be easy to identify one in a rapidly changing world of direct human contact and communication. The diffusion of small cultures across borders and boundaries, and the global consciousness of cosmopolitanism, will only serve to further fudge the large cultures of nation and race, and reinforce interculturality.

Arasaratnam suggests (2007, p. 71) that it would be helpful 'to start thinking of intercultural communication in terms of cultural distance and its effects on message construction/interpretation instead of thinking in terms of national/ethnic boundaries or … cultural taxonomies', and that it is necessary 'to incorporate a culture-general approach to instrument development and study design in intercultural research'. Although there is a general rejection of national cultures (see McSweeney, 2002; Paramasivam & Nair-Venugopal, 2012) as a model of cultural differences, a culture-general approach to instrument development may not be completely without issue either. Nevertheless, it is useful to consider 'how the advent of new technologies has influenced intercultural communication in a generation to which communicating with someone across the globe is mostly routine' (Arasaratnam, 2007, p. 72). We should also look at how language communicates in all its forms and variations (inclusive of technological mediation) across 'cultures', in addition to other means of communication.

Lastly, I would like to posit that any attempt at ICC should be recognized for what it is, as a worthy attempt, and commended for the effort it involves, in spite of the language differences and inadequacies at intercultural relations that will accompany 'cultural' differences. With specific reference to intercultural contexts in both localized and globalized workplaces, ICC does not necessarily translate into the use of a supra-global language like English for effective or appropriate IC to take place, nor does it have to be standardized for perceived communicative competence to be considered work-based competence.

Finally, without trivializing any of the impressive work and serious debates on ICC, I would like to suggest that it is in the interstices of much of the normative language use of institutional imperatives and contextualized language use that IC resonates with ICC, if it is defined as the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately. Long-standing ethnographic participant observation in the intercultural business contexts of the Malaysian workplace has only affirmed this for me.

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Disclosure statement

Notes on contributor

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Macmillan (2012), and 'Linguistic ideology and practice: Language, literacy and communication in a localized workplace context in relation to the globalized' in *Linguistics and Education* (2013).

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