International Business Communication in English in Asia: The Road Ahead

A Response to Dr. Joo-Seng Tan's Keynote Address
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I feel deeply honored to have been invited to be the panelist responding to Dr. Tan's Keynote address on international business communication in English in Asia: The Road Ahead. Dr. Tan has provided a clear and comprehensive overview of how to guide new research on international business communication in English in Asia. He has also identified issues and specific areas for discussion and exploration. In his address, he covered three major themes including: Initiating New Research; Building Multidisciplinary Communities of Practices; and Creating a Vision of the Future. In this article, I will discuss these three themes one by one.

Theme 1: Initiating New Research

In Theme 1, Dr. Tan establishes a need to initiate new research on using English in Asia due to its growing significance and value. He also asserts that the new research agenda for international business communication in English in Asia is to identify new research areas and use new research methods that are multi-factor, multi-level and that embrace longitudinal studies. I cannot agree with him more.

His remarks coincide with Kachru's framework (see Figure 1) in that Kachru's findings reveal that the number of people speaking English as a second or foreign language for various purposes is much larger than the combined global populations of native-English speakers. In Kachru's terms, the total number of outer and expanding circles of English speakers is much larger than that of the inner circle of native-English speakers, with India and China representing approximately 70% of total number of the outer and expanding circle populations. This hard data shows that English has become a very important language in Asia.
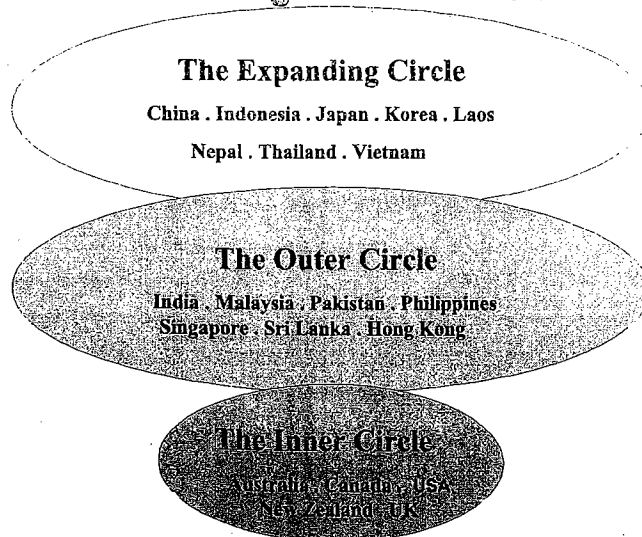

Figure 1: Adaptation from Kachru, B. (1997). Three Concentric Circles of Asian Englishes, p. 213

Throughout Asia, English is the working language for intra-national (Honna, 2005) and international communication in many parts of Asia Pacific Region. For example, in Hong Kong and Singapore, English is the language of government, education, and business. In Hong Kong English is one of the two official languages, a medium of instruction in higher education and business language. This status can be seen in many bilingual advertisements claiming that if there are any discrepancies, the interpretation should be based on the English version of the document.

So, what does this tell us? We need Asia focus research. The use of English in Asia is different from that in European business contexts. Generally, business people in Asia enter the business world without full English proficiency — the exceptions are Singapore and Malaysia. This establishes the need for a new research area that examines how to enhance the communication efficacy between individuals who possess varying degrees of English language proficiency and who speak with various accents and sentence structures (what I call English with variations). This means that when initiating new research, we will not only need a structure to guide future research but also research with an Asia focus that is specifically geared towards meeting the needs of the Asian way of using English for International Business Communication.

Field research needs to be done on the communication situations that business people face in the real world. For example, very recently I started a consulting project for a large Chinese telecommunication firm where I was commissioned to design a curriculum of English for International Business Communication for a group of 40 international managers who would be posted all over the world after training. The prior training of these managers was focused on general English and they had been taught by English teachers who do not have technical background.

The challenge is how to transform these managers in such a way that they will be able to interactively take part in social and business environments. Clearly, learning English for general purposes does not fulfill their needs when it comes to discussing company products or giving suggestions to clients (see Du-Babcock, 2007).

My consulting work and associated research is to determine the level and areas of competency these managers need as well as when and where to provide them with translating assistance. My recommendation is that their language training be directed towards developing communicative competence in their professional areas and providing them with translation support where needed.

This consulting project is an example of researching the actual communication that international managers and professionals are engaged in and using the findings to generate theory and theoretical frameworks.

In responding to Tan's point on the new research methods, I absolutely agree that new research methods should encompass quantitative, qualitative, and longitudinal approaches. While qualitative research identifies key variables and provides rich data that can lead to the development of new theoretical frameworks, the quantitative research methods systematically measure identified variables and test and operationalize theoretical frameworks. As for longitudinal research, it allows validation of findings over time. In deed, the use of both qualitative and quantitative approaches is not new; however, I see the potential problem lies in adopting quantitative research methods too early, i.e. before the research areas are identified.

Aside from adapting quantitative and qualitative approaches, longitudinal ethnographic research should also be encouraged. Through the use of longitudinal ethnographic research, researchers will be able to trace the development of business communication processes of international mangers. Taking my current research project as an example, the research method will be longitudinal and ethnographic in nature and take place before the quantitative survey comes into play. Also, this research design is such that I will be able to trace how the English language is used in the Chinese-speaking expatriate managers' daily business operations and how long it takes these expatriate managers to become effective English communicators in international business contexts.

Let me sum up my response to Theme 1 of Dr. Tan's address. As the world of business continues to globalize, and economic development in Asia becomes increasingly important, it is indispensable that English becomes the medium of communication in Asia between individuals possessing varying degrees of language proficiency.

As such, the role of Asian English is of growing importance and so the focus of research should be on how to enhance the communication efficacy of individuals who speak limited English or who are partial bilinguals (see also Babcock & Du-Babcock, 2001). The research also needs to re-examine the alternatives such as enhancing interlocutor's professional genres and strategies of actively interacting in international business contexts (See also Bhatia, 2004; Du-Babcock, 2007).

Theme 2: Building Multidisciplinary Communities of Practices

I now turn to the second theme of building multidisciplinary communities of practices (CoPs). Dr. Tan has identified and laid out very well the need for building multidisciplinary CoPs.

Here I would like to focus on the Association for Business Communication as I am a member of the organization. ABC is a well established 72-year-old American organization and is a good base because the membership of ABC consists of both academic and business practitioners. How we can take advantage of ABC as a community of practice?

International Association for Business Communication (IABC) is another well established international business communication association, targeting mainly business practitioners from various functional areas (e.g., PR, advertising, and marketing communication). IABC not only concentrates on the field practices, but also provides research funding to commission academia to conduct B-C related research in various fields.

Japan Business Communication Association has also been long established and has contributed to the development of business communication in Japan including language policy in business contexts for the Japanese government (see also Kameda, 2000).

Here I would like to call for more collaboration between these three communities of practices at their association levels. These organizations play a central role in activities through journals (e.g., *Journal of Business Communication and Business Communication Quarterly* published by Association for Business Communication), conferences (e.g., ABC's national, regional conventions and what JABC has been doing). Through these activities, more dialogues can be exchanged. Together, these organizations can serve as a learning community that provides a formal platform to allow members to collaborate in research projects and share good teaching practices.

I also see a need to extend CoPs at teaching level so as to bring together people from different disciplines and across cultures. The advancements in technology make virtual CoPs feasible which in turn will enhance intercultural interactions between individuals from all over the world.

Here I give an example of CoPs project to illustrate how information communication technology (ICT) enabled me to teach courses (e.g. Cross-cultural Organizational Communication) which incorporated an intercultural component and enriched my teaching and research for international business communication.

For the past five years, I have collaborated with a few of US-based universities to conduct a semester-long project where my Hong Kong students teamed up with US students to jointly (a) Collect data on business practices in their respective industries and environments, (b) Exchange field research data in email documents, and (c) Hold videoconferences to jointly decide and negotiate what business practices could be transferable or non-transferable. Through the use and support of ICT, both Hong Kong and US students successfully engaged in a joint research project and communicated virtually but in real time.

The nature of a project like this builds upon what Tan calls "Community of Practices". This is also in line with what I perceive as the optimal goal of the future development of international business communication namely the integration and collaboration in that we not only adapt new knowledge from other disciplines (in Tan's adaptative CoPs) which most of us are practicing, but also move towards what he calls "Inventive CoPs" which open participation for all disciplines and across all cultures.

Theme 3: Creating a Vision of the Future

In creating a vision of the future, the third theme in Tan's address, we need to build upon the past and present and react to new challenges and opportunities in the future. In this increasingly globalized and multidisciplinary communication environment, we need to introduce new business communication theoretical frameworks and build upon multidisciplinary CoPs while continually taking into account the fundamentals of effective international business communication. Our challenges in the future are to learn how to communicate effectively in encoding and decoding messages with interactants possessing varying degrees of language competency, and how to use and choose among communication media to enhance virtual CoPs. The framework of international business communication that has been developed in the past and present periods should now be used as the platform from which to extend and enrich our future research.

To conclude how I envision the future and the road ahead of us in the international business communication in Asia,

I would like to use a "Sushi roll" analogy. The sushi roll originated and was invented in Japan and has since been adapted by various countries. On the web-site, you can easily find over 200 ways of making sushi rolls. People around the globe adapt this traditional Japanese food to fit their local taste by merging local and international ingredients (such as sea urchin, cucumber, seaweed etc). Consequently, the sushi roll can be adapted into various forms depending on the source availability and local taste while still being identified as a sushi roll.

Likewise, business communication should be seen as a universal or global product but one that needs to be reshaped to be in line with Asian (or Japanese, or local) practices and environment factors. Thus, the new research needs not only to be tailored to the uniqueness of Asian languages and business environments, but also fitted to the changing global and multidisciplinary communication environment.

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