

English Language Research

In conversation with Okim Kang part 1 - transcript

Speaker 1 0:01

So hello everyone, and welcome to our in conversation with research sessions where experts from the British Council team engage with leading international academics and scholars to discuss their research in language, teaching, learning and assessment. My name is Dr Sheryl Cooke, and I'm part of English Language Research at the British Council today, I'm pleased to welcome Professor Okim Kang, an applied linguist at Northern Arizona University, to discuss her research titled equality, diversity and inclusion: different varieties of accents in Aptis English listening tests. Okim, let's start with some questions about the broader context of your study and what led you to focus on this area. Why the interest in Global English in the context of language assessment?

Speaker 2 0:55

Thank you, Sheryl, and thank you for this opportunity as well. The question about, why are we interested in Global Englishes? I mean, it's inevitable to think that English has evolved globally and internationally. Therefore our English norms have been shifting as well. So now we know that there are far more non-native speakers than native speakers. So inevitably, language testing practitioners or language test takers or even testing agencies have to think about some global issues, and just like my project, topic, fairness, EDI issues or even localizations. All of these topics are coming up, and we end up thinking about those, and we try to incorporate Global English, English perspectives into language assessment and all that. But more specifically, let's even think about constructs, right? So people try to redefine the construct of language proficiency, I think so

Speaker 1 2:08

So by construct, you mean like the ability, right, that is being measured?

Speaker 2 2:12

Yes, I would say construct, English proficiency as a construct, right? In the past, probably we are more familiar with 1996 Bachman and Palmer's, you know, proficiency definitions, which will say language proficiency is the ability to use language effectively to accomplish some kind of communicative tasks in a authentic context, so in some kind of context, right? But then now English is a global language, therefore we might have to say language proficiency is the ability to communicate effectively in international context or in global context. So this basically means that we need to think about how we assess

language and that basically have to reflect the construct that we are thinking about. So that also brings up this new issues about Global Englishes. And also, I would say this issue is a lot of a hot topic nowadays, but in reality, the practice is quite challenging. I mean, it's easier said than done. These kind of changes can create the tension between that standard English and the real world communicative practices. I mean, I'm sure you get to see that issues as well. You know, large scale test, we've been historically using this native speaker norms. But then now again, we have to think about the non native speakers, like what they are using, especially for their communicative purpose. When we are using native speaker norms, it's easy, because you have one norms for grammar, vocabularies and pronunciations. But now there are so many norms to think about,

Speaker 1 4:08

So that's much more difficult.

Speaker 2 4:10

Yeah, that starts with the complications, and then we have to think about the feasibility of all of these, you know, features that we have to use. So the complexity happens and our confusion happens, and we don't know which norms to use, and that also brings up to our practices. So let's say we have many different norms, which means we have to rethink the rubrics that we are using. Right? We have to train our raters, experts for scoring. We also need to re design the tasks in the test, just like, you know, I've been arguing that we have to include different accents, you know, listening passages. So this is part of the task design or test design, so it brings up a lot of follow up efforts that we need to think about. And also, when it comes to, let's say accents or listening passages. I mean, I'm especially interested in intelligibility, speech intelligibility. But then now we have to think about the global intelligibility, mutual intelligibility. So these are the new terms that we get to hear nowadays, right? Because, again, intelligibility is not just the one single sided construct anymore. Then it is more broad in a sense that global intelligibility is a whole different thing. So maybe we shouldn't penalise some of the features. They're not like native speakers' norms anymore. Then we have to think about more of the successful global communicative features. So again, the plural aspects of this approach creates quite a bit of complexities in our practices, I think, and it also brings up some ethical responsibilities.

Speaker 1 6:18

For example?

Speaker 2 6:18

So let's say how we make the test fair, right? Test can be fair for everyone if we give everyone equal opportunities, but then, once again, if we introduce accents, it's good to address this ecological validity by incorporating the reality of the real life communications. But then, how many accents can we include in the test? Perhaps some people end up having some benefits out of it, because you know me originally as a Korean native speaker, let's say I'm taking a high stake English proficiency test, and I end up having a Korean accent, and I might have a little more benefit. I mean, this is a little bit more complicated, but

we end up having some ethical risk, issues that we have to resolve. Overall, I'm sure there are many things which I will talk about again later to think about, but the whole idea that the world is changing and these issues of global English is evolving, then we have to think about how we can accommodate these changes more effectively and more responsibly.

Speaker 1 6:19

Yeah, I agree that it's something really, really important to think about for those very reasons. Just to note on terminology, because you've been referring to global Englishes, you mentioned communicate in an international context. In some of the writing that I've done about this topic, I've often used the term English as a lingua franca, or ELF others have used English as an international language is another one, EIL, do you see all of these as being one and the same. Or how do you see them relating to each other, these different?

Speaker 2 6:35

I know. I mean, in fact, I was at AAAL this March, and I attended a Galloway, I mean, Nicolas and Heath rose there, I think it was a colloquium. Then I asked this question explicitly as well, and I've been doing some research myself and trying to better understand, yes, it is very confusing. We have English as a lingua franca, English as an international language. We also have world Englishes,

Speaker 1 8:56

Yeah, yeah.

Speaker 2 8:57

And then global Englishes. So I would say, and I was confirmed at the conference by Nicola and Heath as well, that Global Englishes is a much more a broader term, I would say, is more of the umbrella term, that reflects the diversity of the English use worldwide. That's why I tend to use Global Englishes more practically and more commonly nowadays than some other terms. So because the Global English use is an umbrella term, it tends to include or embrace world Englishes and English as a lingua franca, English as an international language, so that it gives us more of the functional convenience, I would say, and it focuses on how English varieties across different regions, different countries can be shaped by various contexts and various identities. So I would say that's how we can use Global Englishes whereas English as a lingua franca, it refers more specifically to English used as a common means, is more of the communication means,

Speaker 2 10:29

Like a tool.

Speaker 2 10:30

amongst first languages. So everybody uses English, right? But it's an as a tool, as a contact language

Speaker 1 10:45

In the lingua franca sense, right?

Speaker 2 10:47

Yeah, in the lingua franca sense. So it's doesn't have to involve just the native speakers, but it really involves everybody. And it emphasises a function, rather than forms, because it's a common tool,

Speaker 1 11:05

yeah, right, it's a good distinction function versus form.

Speaker 2 11:08

And then I would say they focus on more of the pragmatic strategies, accommodations, functional norms, some of that part, and they definitely argue for international competence and all that. But then English as an international language, I think it's more about how English plays a role in this context. So is the role of English as a medium of international communication. So I would say English as a lingua franca, English as an international language, is somewhat similar, but people tend to use, "oh, English as an international language". That basically means English plays a role as an international language itself, rather than it's just the lingua franca tool, that's how. And then I also noticed a lot of teachers, they tend to use that English as an international language more for teaching, instructing or pedagogical purpose.

Speaker 1 12:19

Yeah. Yeah,

Speaker 2 12:20

yeah. So that I would say, but then world Englishes, I mean, we are more familiar with, and I used to use that term all the time. It's more of the pluralized varieties of...

Speaker 1 12:33

Yeah. And it's linked to identities, different identities, right?

Speaker 2 12:37

Right. Indian English, it involves more of a social linguistic context, and very nativized, localised, very specific forms, so that it that English is used in that specific communities, right? So, like you said, Indian English and Hong Kong English, Nigerian English,

Speaker 1 13:07

yeah, exactly, very, very strongly linked to people's identity, sociolinguistic. To move on and get a little bit closer to where your study is situated, specifically, and that's around pronunciation. And pronunciation is often realised in spoken English as accent, and it's probably the most noticeable variable between speakers from not only different language backgrounds, but also different geographical regions. For example, here in the UK, one person from one part of the country can sound very different to someone from another part, as it is in the States as well, I'm sure, and also even socio economic backgrounds. And as we've just mentioned, you know, identity plays a part, particularly with accent. People sometimes don't want to lose their accents because they identify with that particular accent, and it's very difficult to change your accent if you're learning a language, if you're not a young child learning a language, but if you're a bit older. So it's very, very difficult to alter this. So I was wondering, in terms of people who are learning English, spending a lot of time and money to try to get their accent closer to whatever native speaker variety they want to get closer to. What's your view on this, and should they be doing and spending all this time and money doing this?

Speaker 2 14:36

I know. I mean, I spent my whole lifetime thinking about this topic actually. I used to have a very heavy accent myself, and that gave me this specific motivation. I mean, like you said, accent is a part of who we are, right? Therefore, everyone has an accent. It's hard to say. We have to get rid of something. Therefore, I've been saying we have to help learners to develop the intelligible speech, rather than trying to get rid of their own accent and be like native speaker. So we need to help learners to develop their certain strategies for effective pronunciation, intelligible speech, and helping listeners also adapt to these diverse accents. So I've been also doing some research on listener training and all that. But yes, accent plays a powerful role in shaping listeners perception of speakers' competence, sometimes speakers' credibility, speakers' social identity, depending on whether speaker has an accent or not. People believe and trust that information or don't trust that information. So this is a huge topic, but I would say while accent is the most salient marker distinguishing speakers by language background, it is often, I would say, over emphasised as a barrier to effective communication. But it is indeed not really the case. Like I said, some of my studies, including my British..., current project, one of the key findings of my study basically said accent does not necessarily hinder intelligibility. Someone can have an accent that doesn't mean we can't understand. So that would be the main part. And like I said, accent is inseparable from identity. Many studies, including mine, and many other social linguistics research shows that listeners' perception of accented speech is heavily influenced by the stereotypes bias, rather than their actual speaker's speech. So if you don't like certain accents, whether the speaker is highly intelligible or not, you just don't understand. Yes. I mean, do you have that incident yourself?

Speaker 1 17:09

Yes, yes. Definitely seen that sort of thing. And as you suggest, it may not be any of the speaker's fault. They're absolutely comprehensible and intelligible, but there's just bias towards a particular variety.

Speaker 2 17:26

I know. So the same thing with our learners. You know, because of that, when there are communication breakdowns, our test takers or our learners often blame themselves, saying, "Oh, it's because of my accent. People don't understand because of my speech". But a lot of cases, according to my research studies and many other studies, the problems are listeners.

Speaker 1 17:51

Yeah, and it's, I think, a lot of about testing, and I don't know how we solve this, but it's focused very much, and the responsibility is put on the speaker to get the meaning across, whereas actually in real life, communication, there's a lot more co-construction of meaning, and a listener plays a really important role in wanting to understand the speaker, their motivation to understand what the speaker is saying. Interesting.

Speaker 2 18:16

Yes, yeah. So, like you said, a lot of cases we just need a very responsive, responsible listeners who shows a willingness to communicate, a willingness to listen, yeah, rather than just our learners trying to speak perfectly, and sometimes they may speak perfectly, but if listeners are Not willing, and still people don't communicate well. So I would say overall, for learners, especially, they shouldn't just think about trying to get rid of their accent. In fact, more realistic goal is to make their speech intelligible, probably maintaining their own accent, but that's the best way to make the actual learning process more effective I think.

Speaker 1 19:15

Moving on to testing specifically. Testing loves standards. It's all about comparing performance to a particular standard and English language as as we've already mentioned, often draws on standard accents. So a typical US, or Midwest US accent, specific UK accent, for example, for both listening and speaking, what are the implications of continuing to do this, continuing to use a very narrow range of standard varieties in listening tests of English?

Speaker 2 19:50

Yes, yes, that's standard varieties. I mean, using that standard varieties, of course, that will simplify test design and scoring.

Speaker 1 20:00

Yes, it'll be good for our jobs.

Speaker 2 20:03

Yeah, but yeah, like I said, there are significant implications. Many of my studies for the last 10 years or so have proven that the perceptions of accented speech is so variable, inherently variable. And like we just said, intelligibility, often depends not really on the deviations of the standard, but listeners own perceptions, right? So I would say this standard norm based, like a very narrow approach, have several, several issues. First probably is lack of authenticity, or the construct under representations. We talked about the construct a little bit earlier. As you know, the real world communication is increasingly involving exposure to different diverse world Englishes and English accents, but then limiting our input just to standard accents does not reflect the reality, right, reality of how English is used internationally. And then this reduces the authenticity of the test takers, and then under representing the construct of language proficiency as a communicative competence in international context. So I think that would be the first problem. Second, this approach can reduce the validity, particularly the ecological validity. I mean, it's somewhat related, but if a test claims to assess just the listening proficiency for global communication, but just excludes different varieties, right? Then validity is undermined. I think, for example, test takers who are fully capable of understanding intelligible like a non native speakers' accent, just like Hong Kong English, for example but then they are only taking the test with a British accent, and then they are probably not familiar with it, right? I mean, which is not true. People are very familiar with the British accent, but let's say that's the case, but then it is just not fair, right? We are not really measuring the full comprehensions of all the possible input available out there. So that would be more of the validity issues. Third, we talked about this EDI issues a little bit, but it's more of the equity and fairness issues, I think so this narrow accent inclusion can advantage candidates who are more familiar with the British accent, but who are not familiar British accent will get disadvantages, right? So it's not fair, and then also that unfairness brings up construct irrelevant variance. Another issue could be probably this kind of approach reinforces the bias and standard ideology problems. Maybe that's why we continue to have these prestige norms that, you know, people still care for British accent or American accent for some American context, yes. So continuing to this, giving certain privileges to a certain set of norms will definitely facilitate the constant superiority, like one English is better than others.

Speaker 1 23:44

yeah, that sort of status quo, doesn't change. It's just

Speaker 2 23:47

really Yeah. It's gonna Yeah. I mean, we know it's not the case, but that kind of idea will continue unless we make some radical, intentional changes, right? My last point would be, this kind of approach really is linked to pedagogical approaches, pedagogical impact like a watch back in fact, right? Yes, you know cause we continue to prioritise these prestigious norms, if you look at the English list, especially listening speaking of assessment classrooms. Yes, everyone is still using the British accents or American accents, and this kind of practice will never change.

Speaker 1 24:28

Yes,

Speaker 2 24:31

Go ahead?

Speaker 1 24:33

That has a further sort of wash back in terms of or impact on the learner, because when they get into that real life situation that you were talking about, they're not going to understand the person across the table if they're in a business meeting, for example, because they've never had the exposure to those different accents. So the wash back is detrimental to the learner themselves. They're not just going to go out into the world and speak to only very standard accented Americans or British speakers. So the wash back is potentially negatively impacting the individuals in the future as well.

Speaker 2 25:14

Yeah, that's exactly what I say and what I think, therefore, we need to make an intentional effort meant to be more inclusive, right? And then providing more clear benefits to our learners and test takers why it's good to have accent varieties in the classroom, for example.

Speaker 1 25:35

And do you think assessment has a role to play in encouraging this greater acceptance and inclusion of accent varieties?

Speaker 2 25:44

Yes, absolutely, I think. I mean, we talked about wash back effects, right? Assessment has a very important role to play in promoting this greater acceptance, I think, and the inclusion of different global Englishes. First, I would say assessment will provide a very strong signals to teachers and learners about what is valued. So let's say if tests start to include different varieties of accents and recognise this global intelligibility rather than this standard norm then, as we just briefly mentioned, it will bring a significantly positive, wash back effects immediately I think. So first, I think it's going to change learners attitudes, and then also it's going to reduce bias immediately. So we talked about how teachers and learners, they only want to learn the British accents and all that. But once we know our assessments practices are incorporating different accents then they will recognise, "oh, it's good to have different models. I need to study XYZ models" so they will develop more receptive attitudes. And then, like you mentioned, they're going to develop or build more real world listening skills. I mean, you already talked about in the classrooms, there are all kinds of different accents, right? But once they are starting to be exposed to different accents, that they should be able to understand things better. And that's the reality,

Speaker 1 27:40

Absolutely.

Speaker 2 27:42

And then also, I think this approach is going to empower learners' identities. I mean, we talked about identity quite a bit. But you know, if assessment treats different accents as a legitimate, like intelligible forms of English learners feel like their identities and backgrounds are important

Speaker 1 28:05

and valued,

Speaker 2 28:06

Valued, yeah, yeah, so that they don't have to have that pressure of getting rid of their own accent. So this is gonna change dynamics in the classrooms is going to create more positive environments, I think. Finally, I mean, it's all related to, ultimately, the instructional pedagogical curriculum. So it will change our own pedagogical approaches, or curriculum changes, so now, you know, we don't have to use just once. Then that model in the classrooms, we start to incorporate different varieties, and it's going to be much more colourful and exciting.

Speaker 1 28:56

Yeah, great. I'm really excited to talk to you about your study specifically, but before we move away from the broader context, just one last question for us to think about, I suppose, if we're talking about the ability to communicate in an international context, is there a future, whether it's medium term or longer term, where everyone will need to take a test to prove that, including native speakers, so that they can show also tolerance for all these different accents.

Speaker 2 29:32

Yeah, that's actually an idea. I mean, I used to offer a class called World Englishes, in my institution at Northern Arizona University, and I've been arguing that even native speakers have to take a class called World Englishes and try to learn what kind of different forms of varieties of English are being used in global context and Global English users, like there are certain just like Jennifer Jenkins lingua franca core, certain forms are more commonly used to Global English speakers, not necessarily American English per se, not necessarily British English per se. Everyone needs to learn those common forms so that they get to better understand each other for the successful communication. So when it comes to the English test, why not? There could be a certain Global English assessment practices that even native

speakers and the native speakers everywhere, everybody can take it and be aware of those changes, and that will probably promote the whole EDI approach and aspects.

Speaker 1

Thank you Okim, for sharing the background to your research and in the next session we'll be focusing on your study itself and what insights it offers to some of the points that we've discussed so far.