

Global Identity as the Key Ingredient in English as a Foreign Language System

Marjo Mitsutomi

Abstract—This paper describes English as a foreign language education system in four different contexts. Two of the contexts are national: Finland and Japan. The third is a description of the current system prevailing in California. The fourth tells the story of the aviation industry, which in the last decade decided to adopt English for its world-wide communication needs. The author argues that English as foreign language systems, regardless of their scale and stated purpose, are effective only if the underlying motivation for system-wide decisions is rooted in the system's perception of itself in the global setting. Global identity is the key to developing and implementing an effective language education system, the goal of which is to produce proficient users of the target language – in this case, English.

Keywords—Education, Foreign Language, Global Identity, Systems

I. INTRODUCTION

THROUGHOUT my career as an applied linguist, I have been interested in language education at its most fundamental level. Here is a brief outline of why the four particular education systems discussed in this paper are of interest to me. First, my unpublished doctoral dissertation [1] was an ethnography, the purpose of which was to identify the components that make Finland's English education so successful that it is frequently studied by delegates from all over the world. Second, until recently, I worked for 15 years as a university teacher educator in southern California and observed first-hand the linguistic restrictions that the State educational policy put on students and teachers alike. The students' language proficiency results in their first and second languages by all measures were dismally disappointing. Third, my most significant work as a linguist occurred during a 10-year period when I was involved in creating a global English proficiency standard for native and nonnative English-speaking pilots and air traffic controllers. The international and cross-disciplined working group to which I was assigned had the task of identifying all aviators' communicative needs and proposing a minimum English proficiency level for this world-wide industry. The standard was voted on by 198 Member States in 2003 and was passed on to become the first global linguistic standard. Fourth, I am currently working in

Japan for the second time in my career, and this time I am particularly well positioned to help contribute to the system-

level change in Japan's outdated English education, without which the nation will continue to fall economically and educationally behind its other Asian neighbors .

II. ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE (EFL) CONTEXTUAL SYSTEM MODEL

All language education systems are comprised of the same components. How those components are realized in practice varies based on the system's inner driver: its linguistic and cultural, global, identity. If the system sees itself to be in isolation either geographically, linguistically, or culturally, it is likely that it sees other languages and cultures as "foreign." On the other hand, if the system feels a certain affinity towards the "other," it will have a tendency to want to provide its members the means to approach the "other," and language proficiency is the most natural tool for that purpose. In this age of globalization, then, it is the EFL system's underlying global identity that determines how language education is designed and implemented, all of which is directly linked to students' ultimate achievement in English.

To describe the findings of my dissertation, I created a flowchart, a framework (EFL Contextual System Model), which depicts all the layers that need to be in alignment to produce competent users of the foreign language studied. If a system is "dissatisfied" with its students' learning outcomes and wishes to change something in its structure, few if any of these changes will be meaningful without addressing the core of the problem, the foundation, on which the system is based. For example, changing textbooks or bringing in native speaker models are not a solution to the situation; they are merely superficial cosmetic changes when the real change required should be a fundamental shift from the local status quo mindset to a global mindset. Changes are possible only when the focus is placed on the system's own linguistic and cultural identity and its relationship to other such entities.

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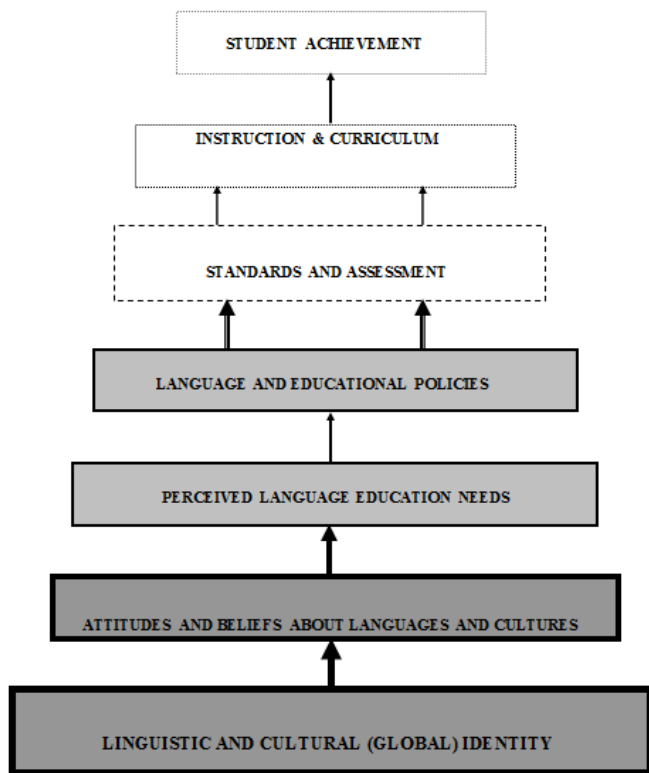


Figure 1: EFL Contextual System Model

A. The Case of Finland

Because of its education, political environment, quality of life and education, Finland was ranked by Newsweek (2010) as a best country in the world [2]. Finland is also successful in its foreign language education primarily because of its sociopolitical view of itself. Finland belongs not only to Scandinavia but is also a member of the European Union. Although Finnish itself is a non-Indo-European language, it sees itself as a full member of a larger community than its geographic and linguistic boundaries would indicate. Finland's identity as a nation is global in nature. TV broadcasts can be watched in numerous languages; foreign magazines are available at any local kiosk; many public documents are printed in a number of languages. In other words, foreign languages are considered absolutely essential for the country's economic future and only the best and most talented individuals go into teaching [3]. Because of this belief, the attitude among teachers, parents, students, and the general public alike all echo the same message: Foreign languages, particularly English, is a necessity for the nation's survival and participation in global affairs. English teachers must possess a master's degree in the subject and pedagogy even when teaching elementary school students. So, all components in the EFL system in Finland indicate that language education is deeply rooted in the Finnish psyche and is considered of utmost importance, receives major emphasis in the national curriculum, and produces users of English and other languages who are communicatively competent.

B. The Case of Japan

Japan is an island nation with an isolationist mentality. Even with the recent former economic prowess of Japan, few people can speak English although they have had six years of mandatory English classes in the public schools. The Japanese, as some have called it, suffer from an English "allergy." It continues to be a required subject in schools but is studied primarily for students to pass university entrance exams. The grammar-translation method is still prevalent. Many English teachers are unable to use English communicatively and for their licensing are required a four-year college degree and only two to three weeks of practice teaching. Japan is a homogeneous nation and tends to be very ethnocentric and disinterested in the world's affairs outside of its borders. Japan's identity, thus, is nationalistic – not global. Therefore, the English education system functions merely as a screening agent to see which students have been diligent enough to warrant entry into a university [4]. Japan's current practices signal that it has not outgrown its weariness of foreignness and "is still protecting its culture by not carrying out practices that would make foreign language policies effective" [5].

C. The Case of California

California is a large and diverse state where the population is more Hispanic than it is White. It would seem to be the perfect place for bilingualism to thrive. Yet, since 1998 as a result of Proposition 227 English has been the primary language of instruction in all school levels at the expense of bilingual programs. The identity of California is intricately tied to that of the United States. A nation of immigrants, people in the US are expected to speak English, and it is this language that is thought to give the citizens their American seal of approval and thus advantages in schools and beyond. The tragic consequence of this policy is that students lose their heritage language in the process and become monolingual users of English [6]. As linguistically diverse as California is, it is much like the rest of the United States most unprepared for the challenges that globalization will bring to its door. After all, isn't English the lingua franca of the world? Ethnocentrism in the California context dictates that the population's language needs in the school system are focused only the mastery of English. California, although located on the Pacific Rim, has a local identity with little interest even in the languages of its own citizens. It ranks among the lowest performing states in the entire nation, including literacy in English.

D. The Case of the Aviation Industry

World-wide air traffic for the last many decades has been using the so-called Air Traffic Control (ATC) phraseology for communication purposes. It works remarkably well although it only consists of a set number of phrases for standard procedures and some predictable emergencies. The problem with the memorized jargon was revealed through many accidents and near-misses where the pilot and the air traffic

controller could not communicate competently enough to arrive at mutual understanding. More than the phraseology, the affected parties needed to be able to negotiate meaning in real time, addressing the problem at hand and arriving at a satisfactory and safe solution to handle the situation. Recognizing the limitations of the ATC phraseology, the aviation industry by using its United Nations arm, International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO), agreed to a new system requirement which clearly stated the minimum English proficiency level for aviator licensing. The industry, truly being a global one, addressed its unique challenges in communication and agreed to make English the “default” language for all unusual circumstances. This decision was very much the result of the industry perceiving itself to be one large world-wide unit, all interdependent and accountable to one another. It is because aviation is global that a global change could take place in its decision for communication practices. Because this system change is still relatively recent, there is no data as of yet regarding the conceivably improved competency levels of aviators.

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III. CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

This paper has discussed four different educational systems where English is taught and/or used as a foreign language. No matter what policy makers and other governing bodies state in their official documents, it is ultimately their students’ achievement that bears witness as to whether the system is working or not. Global identity is the term that best describes this underlying factor which propels the system forward in its trajectory of possible selections toward language policies and ultimately high or low levels of student achievement.

Foreign language learning is a given in many contexts in the world. Yet, it is only when the underlying system motivation is rooted in a sense of belonging to a larger entity, the world of English speakers, whether imagined or real [7]. This orientation will produce globally thinking and acting citizens with communicative competence in English as a global language. The simple solution to an effective EFL system requires a mindshift from local to global thinking and from local to global identity. And, this must be the mindset of the governing bodies first. The rest of the system issues will be resolved appropriately but only when the priority is placed on the right place: global identity.

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