

PAPER

Issues of intelligibility in world Englishes and EIL contexts

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Abstract

This article examines Larry Smith's work on intelligibility issues in English as an International Language (EIL) contexts. In his seminal articles and books, Smith describes how intelligibility can be problematized in both intra-/inter-national contexts in relation to cross-/inter-/intra-cultural communication purposes. As one of the guiding/founding scholars of the world Englishes paradigm, he is one of the first to describe the functions of English as an International Language in inter-/intra-/cross-cultural communication in world Englishes. His views on intelligibility influenced various fields of study – including the English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) paradigm – ranging from its connection to comprehensibility to interpretability in national and international contexts in intercultural communication studies to its implications for an EIL-aware pedagogical practice.

1 | INTRODUCTION

Larry Smith's work has been influential in the field of world Englishes for more than three decades. Starting from mid 1970s, Smith introduced to the field new terms like English as an International Auxiliary Language (EIAL) (Smith, 1976), English as an International Language (EIL) (Smith, 1983) and world Englishes (WE) (Smith, 1987). In his seminal 1976 article, Smith emphasizes the fact that scholars working in the field of English language education (ELE) should find ways to show that English belongs to the world. He indicates that English is used everywhere, for any number of purposes and reasons (for example, everyday interactions, educational purposes, and business), therefore, all users have the right to claim the ownership of English. He continues to say that:

English is an international auxiliary language. It is yours (no matter who you are) as much as it is mine (no matter who I am). We may use it for different purposes and for different lengths of time on different occasions, but nonetheless it belongs to all of us. [...] English is a language of the world. If you accept this argument, then it is time to stop calling it a foreign language or second language. The name should be EIAL (English as an International Auxiliary Language) which more accurately reflects the present state of English language usage around the globe. (Smith, 1976, p. 39, emphases added)

Ownership of English is also mentioned by Widdowson (2003) and other scholars in the field. However, Smith's (1976) and Widdowson's (2003) work on ownership of English paved the way for today's WE/EIL-/ELF-aware pedagogy

scholars to rationalize their approach and promote equal opportunities for both native and non-native teachers to use English confidentially without feeling disadvantaged against any standardized variety of English (Bayyurt, 2017; Bayyurt & Sifakis, 2015a, 2015b). Since it is beyond the scope of this article to discuss the terminological issues related to EIL and its implications for native and nonnative users of English, the rest of the discussion will be focusing on intelligibility, which is another term Smith (1992) emphasizes in his work together with other WEs/EIL scholars like Nelson (1992) – issues that arise in communication among users of WEs and EIL.

In many societies and cultures around the world, one of the central issues in human communication is developing a mutual understanding of one another in order to maintain short or long term relationships. In any spoken or written interaction, the speaker's message should be intelligible to the addressee/hearer in order to convey her/his message correctly. In addition, how the speaker positions herself/himself towards the addressee signaling their close, distant or no relationship with her/him and how s/he formulates his speech to get what s/he wanted to achieve as a result of any verbal communication with the interlocutor are important factors in achieving mutual agreement. However, when this involves a global language like English this phenomenon becomes a complicated situation. As Larry Smith (1992, p. 75, author's emphasis) indicates, 'it is necessary for every user of English to be *intelligible* to every other user of English'. In this quotation, Smith does not refer to user of any 'standard' variety of English as used by its 'native' speakers, but any native or non-native variety of English as used by both native and non-native users of English in an intelligible way. In his seminal article on 'Spread of English and issues of intelligibility', Smith (1992) stated that any communication in English should be intelligible to those who want to exchange their ideas in English in speech or writing. These issues will be dealt with in detail in the following section on intelligibility. However, it is important to note that in this description, the issue is the willingness of parties to communicate in English. There is no specific reference to communication between native speakers of English. The important function of this kind of communication is to clarify your message to the other parties; English functions as a shared common language or lingua franca. There is no implication of using any standard variety of English or not. In that sense, it was a groundbreaking article directing researchers towards the functional uses of different varieties English in different WEs contexts. In this article, the concept of intelligibility will be explored in relation to WEs paradigm with Smith's particular emphasis on the use EIL for communication among native and non-native speakers of English.

2 | INTELLIGIBILITY

Larry Smith is among one of the first scholars who emphasized the significance of intelligibility and functionality of English language use in inter-/intra-cultural as well as cross-cultural encounters in WEs contexts. As Bamgboşe (1998, p. 10) indicated earlier, intelligibility was seen as 'a one-way process in which non-native speakers are striving to make themselves understood by native speakers'. In other words, the native speakers were the judges of the level of intelligibility of non-native speakers' English and the intelligibility were described from the perspective of how much the speaker, who was a non-native speaker of English, was intelligible to the hearer, who happened to be a native speaker of English. As Jenkins (2000) indicates this view still holds true for traditional EFL contexts where the teachers prepare their learners for communicating with native speakers of English – in most of the cases these native speakers are either British or American English speakers. The term *intelligibility* is more complex than that. Smith (1992, p. 76) rephrases concerns about intelligibility of the users of English in both intra- and inter-national contexts as follows:

In international situations where people wish to communicate with one another in English, how intelligible are the speakers of different national varieties? With the global spread of English, is the problem of understanding across cultures likely to increase in frequency?

According to Smith and Nelson (1985), native speakers of English should not be the only judges of the intelligibility assessments of how people express themselves in English for communicative purposes. Since native speakers may not necessarily be intelligible to both other native speakers or nonnative speakers equally, they should not be the only resources for labelling the degree of intelligibility of communication between both native and nonnative speakers of

English. As Smith (1992) emphasizes familiarity of the speakers with a certain variety of English is important for successful communication among the members of a speech community. In other words, the focus of successful communication should be on the interaction itself rather than the individuals who are taking part in the speech event.

In their state-of-the-art article in 1985, Smith and Nelson discussed their concerns about how intelligibility, comprehensibility and interpretability were used interchangeably causing conceptual confusion in scholarly work in EIL. In order to spell out the essential differences between these terms they suggested the following terms (Smith & Nelson, 1985, p. 334):

1. Intelligibility: word and utterance recognition;
2. Comprehensibility: word utterance meaning (propositional content or Austin's, 1962, locutionary force);
3. Interpretability: meaning behind word/utterance (Austin's illocutionary force).

In this categorization, Smith and Nelson (1985) used 'interpretability' to refer to Nelson's (1982, p. 63) earlier definition of intelligibility that is 'apprehension of the message in the sense intended by the speaker'. Hence, *intelligibility* refers to the recognition of the word and meaning before any interaction takes place between the speaker and hearer. Smith (1992) describes this three stage definition further and states that degrees of understanding varies between intelligibility to interpretability along a continuum, intelligibility on the lowest end while interpretability on the highest one. In other words, in an interaction what is expected of the participants to at least understand what each other is saying (on the intelligibility continuum). Interpretability requires a higher level of understanding about what the speaker and hearer are saying and positioning oneself for or against the ideas presented during the speech event.

To date Smith and Nelson's (1985) categorization of 'intelligibility', 'comprehensibility' and 'interpretability' has not been replaced by any other categorization or description. Instead, intelligibility is only associated with norm-based pronunciation of the individual sounds in English and comprehensibility of the message. In other words, the terminological "confusion", to which Smith and Nelson drew attention in 1985, is still with us'. Hence, it can be said that it is not only the message and the individual sounds that are important it is also the individuals who are involved in the interaction are also important. Moreover, it is important to pay attention to who the message is intended for, how it is perceived by the recipients and to what extent the recipients of the message understands what the intention of the speaker is. Although these are important issues to be taken into account while understanding what is meant by particular utterances or statements. Since it is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss these issues I will continue by explaining how intelligibility is related to EIL contexts.

2.1 | English as an international language

English has been one of the widely spoken languages of the world for the past 200 years or so. Therefore, it is not possible for every speaker of English to be intelligible to every other speaker of English. That is, different genres of spoken/written English used in different domains should be intelligible to those who are using it for communication with others in that context. A decade later, confirming what Smith and Nelson discussed in their 1985 article, Crystal (1995) states that English is the language used in about 85 per cent of the international organizations around the world including United Nations. In addition, according to Crystal, 28 per cent of all the publications in the world are in English, over 60 countries in the world publish books in English. These are some of the figures that Crystal shares from 20 years ago. It would not be surprising to see that these numbers have doubled in today's world with the widespread use of smart mobile devices and Internet, English is the most widely used medium of communication among people from all over the world. For example, in order to increase their academic qualifications and to become international, many universities in the world promote exchange programs, such as the Erasmus exchange programs in Europe, and numerous special agreements between individual universities located in different continents. Hence, English has increasingly functioned as the medium of instruction in many universities all around the world (Jenkins, 2014). Smith and Nelson note that people use English to convey their message to only those with whom they are likely to communicate (in various ways, including face-to-face; online or offline; synchronous or asynchronous communication). Therefore, regardless of their

nationality, gender, race, and first language/mother tongue, people communicate with others with similar or different demographic and linguistic profiles all over the world for various purposes (educational, business, touristic, and so on). In these communication situations, they use English to ask for information, to order food, to take part in a debate, to present a paper based on a product/project at a business meeting/conference.

2.2 | Issues of standardization

Smith and Nelson (1985) state that these studies share another common point, that native speakers are no longer the only judges of what is intelligible and what is not in interactions in English. In his seminal article 'Standards, codification and sociolinguistic realism: The English language in the Outer Circle', Kachru (1985) discusses the need for re-examining traditional approaches to codification and standardization of English. Furthermore, he states that due to globalization of English, native speakers of English no longer possess the authority to determine the standards of English language. Hence, research should be carried out to see how English functions in different in different domains in different sociolinguistic contexts around the world. Supporting Smith and Nelson's observation on this topic, Kachru maintains that having different varieties of English with different norms does not necessarily indicate that there will be lack of intelligibility in and out of the Outer Circle varieties that exist. Moreover, he says that this kind of a divergent approach would lead to the emergence of educated varieties of English that will be intelligible within different world Englishes contexts. This confirms what Smith and Nelson (1985) say, that it is about time for speakers/users of non-native varieties of Englishes to set their own English language standards. However, setting standards of English, or the standardization of English and Englishes, is still an issue for debate in WE/EIL/ELF paradigms (Bolton & Kachru, 2006; Kachru, Kachru, & Nelson, 2006; McKay & Bokhorst-Heng, 2008; Saraceni, 2015). Since the focus of this article is not on standardization, it is time to explain the next common aspect of intelligibility studies.

2.3 | Issues of cross-cultural communication

Another common point that Smith and Nelson (1985) discuss is that native speakers of English may not necessarily be intelligible to other native or non-native speakers of English. Intelligibility is not only speaker oriented, it is interactional between speaker and hearer. Since 1980s, researchers has been working on 'intelligibility of English' used in international contexts (Kachru, 1992; Nelson, 2012; Smith, 1992; Smith & Christopher, 2006; Thir, 2014, 2016). As Smith and Christopher (2006) indicate the three terms of intelligibility – intelligibility, comprehensibility and interpretability – are often used interchangeably. Smith and Rafiqzad (1979) and Smith and Bisazza (1982) attempted to clarify these terms before Smith and Nelson delineated these three components of intelligibility. Smith and Christopher (2006, p. 83) emphasize that in cross-cultural encounters, the first two components of intelligibility may not be a problem – that is, identifying/recognizing the word/utterance and word/utterance meaning. However, when it comes to understanding meaning behind the words, it may become a problem if the people from the two cultures are not familiar with the context. According to Smith and Christopher (2006), cross-cultural communication contexts should be understood as:

[D]ifferences between people not only of race, nationality, color and creed but also of age and genders, class and caste, educational background and life experience [...] In these contexts there are four kinds of communicative behavior that will be helpful in promoting intelligibility, comprehensibility and interpretability [...] They are knowledge acquisition, information gathering (sometimes including the use of a mediator or informant) and negotiation. (Smith & Christopher, 2006, p. 83)

Smith and Christopher argue that knowledge enables the hearers and readers of a particular language to understand each other's words without any problems of comprehensibility. The more knowledge the users of a particular language have about the different varieties, dialects and idioms of that language, the more they understand each other. However, while the 'acquisition of knowledge' can be helpful in achieving comprehensibility, interpretability of those words may still be a problem. To illustrate this point, Smith and Christopher (2006) give various examples from different parts of

the world. The following example is from an exchange between a male taxi driver in Istanbul and a female tourist from Australia:

An Australian woman was on a visit to Istanbul. Returning to her hotel one night after a social engagement she took a taxi. The Turkish driver spoke excellent English and they had a pleasant chat until she asked him to turn off the interior light. However, he refused, replying quite sharply "No!"

The woman was startled. Thinking he must have misunderstood, she asked in different words for the light to be turned off. The driver replied: "No, I will not turn off the light!" Offended, the woman became silent, the driver did not speak again until the journey was over. Then he almost snatched the fare from her and drove away rapidly. "What on earth was that about?" the woman asked herself. (Smith & Christopher, 2006, p. 83)

Although the Australian tourist's words were intelligible and comprehensible to the taxi-driver, he did not interpret the tourist's request correctly. The tourist and the taxi-driver had different mindsets, different contexts, different genders and different power in this exchange. At the time when this incident happened, in Turkey, the taxi drivers were expected to turn on the interior lights of the taxi at night for safety/identification purposes in big cities like Istanbul. If the Australian tourist knew this regulation, she would not have misunderstood the taxi driver's resistance on not to turn off the interior light. In this example, there is intelligibility at the word level (first step); the driver understands the meaning of the words and the structure of the request. In this exchange, there is also evidence for comprehensibility, as both participants understood that this utterance was a request or command (second step). However, the conflict occurred because there was a problem at the level of interpretability. As can be seen in this example, Smith considers interpretability as the most important component of communication.

Almost two decades after Smith and Nelson's (1985) description of intelligibility, comprehensibility and interpretability, Kachru and Smith (2008) expanded the components of successful communication in an interaction – intelligibility, comprehensibility and interpretability – in relation to cultures and contexts of world Englishes. In this book, the first three chapters deal with the interaction between linguistic and sociocultural aspects of speech event taking place in different social contexts. They see linguistic interaction as a dynamic process, hence, many factors play a crucial role in achieving the intention of the speakers who come into the interaction with a certain goal in mind. In sum, it is important to note that in addition to what the words mean in a cross cultural interaction, expectations of listeners from the immediate interaction are as important as the cultural background of both speaker and the listener, and the context where the interaction is taking place – for example, in a taxi. If one wants to understand the speaker, s/he seems to be able to find the speaker intelligible, if s/he is not then it will not be possible. Hence, it is necessary to take into consideration the interlocutors' willingness to understand each other in judging the intelligibility of the speech of the speakers in various contexts around the world.

2.4 | Issues of familiarity with a certain variety of English

Active involvement along with exposure to a particular variety of English enables learners/users of English to become familiar with that particular variety. Therefore, the learners/users of English may feel more comfortable in practicing and learning. Many studies focus on investigating how interactions among non-native speakers of English were structured. In order to clarify these concepts, Smith (1992) reports the findings of a pilot study that he carried out with speakers – including educated speakers of English (graduate students) from China, India, Indonesia, Japan, Papua New Guinea, the Philippines, Taiwan, the United Kingdom, and the United States – of different varieties of world Englishes at University of Hawai'i. Smith (1992, p. 77) says that he deliberately chose both native and non-native speakers of English in his study and he wanted these participants 'to range in their proficiency in English and in their familiarity with the national variety of English being used by the speakers'. These participants were grouped as follows:

Group 1: non-native speakers;

Group 2: native speakers; and

Group 3: mixed, both non-native and native speakers.

All groups were given the same treatment. They were asked to listen to a tape about forms of address in Burma and then fill out sample test items for the cloze procedure (intelligibility), multiple-choice (comprehensibility), and paraphrasing (interpretability). Some of the selected findings of his study reveal some issues which are still discussed and investigated by WEs and EIL scholars in the field. These can be summarized as follows:

1. Language proficiency can have an effect on the intelligibility of different native and non-native varieties of English; and
2. Familiarity with different varieties of English facilitates the interpretation of cross-cultural communication among non-native speakers, native speakers and a mixed group.

At the end of his chapter, Smith (1992, p. 88) summarizes the results of his study by saying 'the increasing number of varieties of English need not increase the problems of understanding across cultures, if users of English develop some familiarity with them'. Therefore, it is important to be familiar or aware of these different varieties to be successful communicators in English in the future. This brings us to the point that how teaching of English as an International Language is influenced by these debates on intelligibility of English across cultures, among native-native, nonnative-nonnative and native-nonnative speakers of English.

3 | PEDAGOGICAL ASPECTS OF INTELLIGIBILITY

Global spread of English gave rise to many varieties of English that developed their own norms (McKay, 2002; McKay & Bokhorst-Heng, 2008) especially in Outer Circle contexts in Kachruvian terms – such as India, Singapore, Philippines, and similar. Although this is the case, in the Expanding Circle contexts many people learn English in educational settings where a particular standardized variety of English is taught – usually, British English or American English. Especially, in the Expanding Circle contexts, the stakeholders (the ministries of education, the school administration, parents, students and teachers) expect a particular norm-based teaching of English should be taught in schools without taking into consideration the sociolinguistic realities of English around the world. In addition, McKay and Bokhorst-Heng (2008) indicate that some standards are needed to enable the speakers of English to communicate with one another all over the world. Therefore, a standardized variety of English in the English language classrooms should be taught to enable learners and users of English all over the world to communicate with each other. To confirm this observation, almost three decades ago, Widdowson (1994, p. 385) says:

As soon as you accept that English serves the communicative and communal needs of different communities, it follows logically that it must be diverse. An international language has to be an independent language. It does not follow logically, however, that the language will disperse into mutually unintelligible varieties. For it will naturally stabilize into standard form to the extent required to meet the needs of the communities concerned. Thus it is clearly vital to the interests of the international community [...] that they should preserve a common standard of English in order to keep up standards of communicative effectiveness.

Today, English has become the common language of wider communication, therefore, having a common standardized variety of English language still holds true for wider communication all around world and I believe speakers of English are doing a great job in different domains of communication in various contexts all over the world. At this point, it is important to revisit Smith's argument on how significant it is for the interlocutors of English to be willing to understand each other leading to mutual intelligibility. What is the place of a particular variety of English or intelligibility of the speakers of that particular variety in English language teaching in places where English is taught as a foreign language? What is meant by the intelligibility of English in the Expanding Circle contexts where English has an instrumental function? In these contexts, talking about the development of a particular variety of English can be problematic as English does not have a major role in fulfilling various needs of people in their everyday lives – such as for official purposes, shopping, travelling, and similar.

It is an undeniable fact that Smith's categorization of intelligibility makes a significant contribution to English language teaching around the world. However, when we critically examine Widdowson's quotation above, there is still a controversial situation when it comes to setting the 'standards' of English language teaching. In many educational circles around the world, the educational decision makers, administrators, curriculum planners, teacher educators, teachers, students and parents still expect one particular standardized variety – American or British English in most of the cases – to be taught in mainstream education (primary, secondary and upper secondary levels). This tendency does not change in tertiary education as well. The language teaching methodologies, teacher training programs and English language teaching materials are designed in line with one standardized variety of English. In a way, supporting Quirk's (1985) concerns for the emergence of different varieties of English developing their norms would lead to unintelligibility of English among different varieties of English, therefore, it is unthinkable for these varieties to develop their norms. It is important to see the connection between English language teaching and preparing language learners of English as future users of English. In other words, English language teachers, whether they are native speakers of English or not, should prepare their learners to use English intelligibly not only at pronunciation level but at the three levels that Smith and Nelson (1985) formulized and discussed in the beginning of this article. Hence, if an appropriate EIL-aware pedagogy is adopted for English language teaching in a particular context, the learners will be able to understand and interpret what others are saying, and give appropriate responses, and repair them in cases when misunderstandings occur due to linguistic and cultural differences between the interlocutors.

Many scholars emphasize intelligibility issues in their models of teaching English as an international language. For example, Matsuda and Friedrich (2012) indicated that factors like students' needs, teachers' expertise, and accessibility of English language teaching materials should be taken into consideration in choosing which variety of English will be taught in a particular context. They suggest three options for developing an appropriate pedagogy of English language teaching by basing language teaching materials, methodologies, teacher training and so on:

1. An international variety of English (a particular variety of English that would be effective and intelligible in international communication);
2. Speakers' own varieties of English (such as Indian English or Singlish);
3. An established variety of English (for example, British or American English) (Matsuda & Friedrich, 2012, p. 17).

In a recent study, Bayyurt and Sifakis, (2015a, 2015b, 2017) investigate how non-native English language teachers perceived constructs like native speakerism, ownership of English, intelligibility and similar in EIL/ELF-aware English language classes. One of their major findings about the intelligibility issues was that English language teachers defined the construct of intelligibility as the intelligibility of the pronunciation of the students. Some of the teachers were critical of their pronunciation as well. It seems that Smith's understanding of intelligibility is difficult to conceptualize in EFL contexts due to teachers' and students acting as custodians of English and giving significance to its surface properties like pronunciation of English. Bayyurt (2018) states that English language teachers' awareness of varieties of English all over the World enable them to focus on comprehensibility of learners' utterances rather than pronunciation of the particular words. This reveals that by focusing on more realistic uses of English teachers acknowledge the significance of comprehensibility and interpretability of the messages rather than focusing only on pronunciation of particular word as signs of intelligibility problems in English language classrooms and beyond (Sifakis et al., 2018, pp. 173–179).

4 | CONCLUSION

For more than three decades, Larry E. Smith's work inspired many researchers in the field of world Englishes. In particular, his work on intelligibility influenced the works of researchers in interpreting and explaining how meaning is negotiated between people from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. While the earlier definitions of intelligibility referred to only the words that the people used to express their meaning, Smith's fully developed works revealed the

significance of developing the intelligibility construct to its further components – comprehensibility and interpretability – for successful communication among multilingual and multicultural interlocutors. The construct of intelligibility needs to be questioned in the context of world Englishes more than it used to be questioned in the past. Today, it is more important to be understood by both native and nonnative speakers of English. Results of research on intelligibility showed that there is no relationship between being a native speaker of English and being intelligible in international interactions. Accordingly, many teachers who have experience with this research and its application, now bring into the classroom examples from diverse uses and users of English. Learners become familiar with different native and nonnative varieties of English (Bayyurt & Altınmakas, 2012; Bayyurt & Sifakis, 2015a, 2015b; Kemaloğlu-Er & Bayyurt, 2016) and adjust their speech in English to be understood by people from diverse language proficiencies and backgrounds. Canagarajah points out:

The speakers are able to monitor each other's language proficiency to determine mutually the appropriate grammar, phonology, lexical range and pragmatic conventions that would ensure intelligibility. Therefore, is difficult to describe this language a priori. It cannot be characterized outside the specific interaction and speakers in a communicative context. (Canagarajah, 2007, pp. 925–926)

Although this is the case, in various world Englishes contexts, they still favour a normative approach to English language teaching and English language use locally and internationally (Kachru & Smith, 2008). The world has become a global village, therefore, it is significant for teachers of English to be aware of this factor and see their perspective in relation to native and nonnative speakers of English. Thanks to Smith's works on intelligibility, the study of intelligibility has become an important area of investigation in WE research to develop an understanding of the aspects of successful communication in international and intranational contexts. However, the topic needs further investigation to find ways of developing an understanding of English in cross cultural and cross disciplinary projects.

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