

## BRAVE NEW WORLD ENGLISH

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Last month I took on two clients, both seeking coaching in pronunciation. Pablo works in the finance department of a US multinational that has a key European plant here in northern Spain. His boss is Irish, but most of the people he uses English with are non-native speakers. Pablo handles accounts for the whole of Europe, and even within the confines of his office, he's in daily contact with speakers from over 17 different countries.

Ana works at the Spanish branch of a German company that makes air bridges, the metal and glass tubes that feed us on and off planes in airports around the world. She uses her English for telephone calls, Skyping and video-conferencing, and with Chinese, Brazilian, Arabian and European clients. English dominates her daily life despite working in Spain, and her office is a Tower of Babel in the making.

Wow! It's happened. (They said it would.)

Wow! It's happening right now. (It's everywhere I go.)

And wow! It's going to go on happening far into the future.

English has gone global, and is being used much more today as a lingua franca (between non-native speakers), than as a native language (between native speakers), or as a foreign language (between native speakers and non-native speakers).

So what? The world speaks English because the native speakers taught it to them. Keep teaching them native-speaker English and they'll be OK.

But will they be OK? Are native speaker norms the best thing when non-native speakers are communicating through English? Well, not for some. Not, for example, for two Japanese translators at the 2009 Davos World Economic Forum. For them, the non-native speakers were far more intelligible than the native speakers.

And when Chantal Hemmi (2010) checked this out in her research in Tokyo, she got the same results. Of five regular competent users of English for

international communication (presidents, prime ministers and CEOs), it was British Prime Minister David Cameron who was considered the least intelligible.

As David Graddol (2006) explains in his British Council report on where English is heading:

*In organisations where English has become the corporate language, meetings sometimes go smoothly when no native speakers are present. Globally, the same kind of thing may be happening on a larger scale.*

*This is not just because non-native speakers are intimidated by the presence of a native speaker. Increasingly, the problem may be that few native speakers belong to the community of practice which is developing amongst lingua franca users.*

English is a native language for some and a foreign language for others. But most of all today, English is a lingua franca. And for this brave new world, the beautiful old English might not do.

### **References**

Hemmi, C. 2010. Perceptions of intelligibility in global Englishes used in a formal context. *Speak Out!* 43: 13–15.

Graddol, D. 2006. *English Next. Why global English may mean the end of English as a foreign language.* 2006. London: British Council.