ENGLISH AS AN INTERNATIONAL LANGUAGE

Who English belongs to, how it is used around the world, and what this means for teaching

AT A GLANCE

What it is	an introduction to the global spread of English, its varieties, and its use as a lingua franca between speakers of different first languages
Why it matters	most of our learners will use English mainly with other non-native speakers; this affects the models we choose, the errors we prioritise, the materials we use and how we see ourselves as teachers
Key message	the goal for most learners is not to sound like a native speaker but to communicate effectively and intelligibly with a wide range of speakers
Tools	the **materials evaluation checklist** in the appendix

THINK ABOUT

> *"...which community, and which culture, have a rightful claim to ownership of standard English? For standard English is no longer the preserve of a group of people (...) It is an international language."*
>
> Widdowson (1994: 382)

- What is your idea of standard written and spoken English? Who should set the standard?
- Which variety of English should teachers teach and learners learn? Why?
- What does "international language" mean to you? What could it mean for your teaching?

English in the world today

English is used by more people, in more countries and for more purposes than any other language in history. Exact numbers depend on how we define a "speaker", but the overall picture is clear.

1.5–2 billion	3 : 1	74%
people speak English, from around 1.5 billion with a useful level to 2 billion including learners at lower levels	non-native speakers outnumber native speakers by roughly 2.5 to 1, and by up to 4 to 1 in broader estimates	of interactions in English are estimated to take place between non-native speakers

Sources: Ethnologue (2026); Crystal (2012); Graddol (2006: 29)

Why did English spread?

There is nothing about English itself that makes it suited to being a global language. Its spread is the result of historical, political and economic factors (Crystal 2003):

- **British colonialism**, which took English to North America, Africa, South Asia, Australia and the Caribbean.

- **The economic, political and cultural power of the USA** in the 20th century: business, science, film, music and technology.
- **International organisations and communication:** the United Nations, air traffic control, academic publishing and, more recently, the internet.
- **Education policies** that made English the main foreign language taught in schools around the world.

Key terms

Term	Meaning
ENL · English as a Native Language	English as a first language, e.g. in the UK, the USA or Australia
ESL · English as a Second Language	English as an official or everyday language alongside others, e.g. in India or Nigeria; also used for migrants learning English in an English-speaking country
EFL · English as a Foreign Language	English learned at school or for travel and work, in countries where it is not widely used day to day, e.g. in Brazil or Japan
World Englishes (WE)	the different varieties of English that have developed around the world, e.g. Indian English or Singapore English
ELF · English as a Lingua Franca	English used as a common language between speakers who have different first languages
EIL · English as an International Language	English used for international communication, by both native and non-native speakers
Global Englishes	an umbrella term for World Englishes, ELF and EIL (Galloway & Rose 2015)

Native and non-native speakers

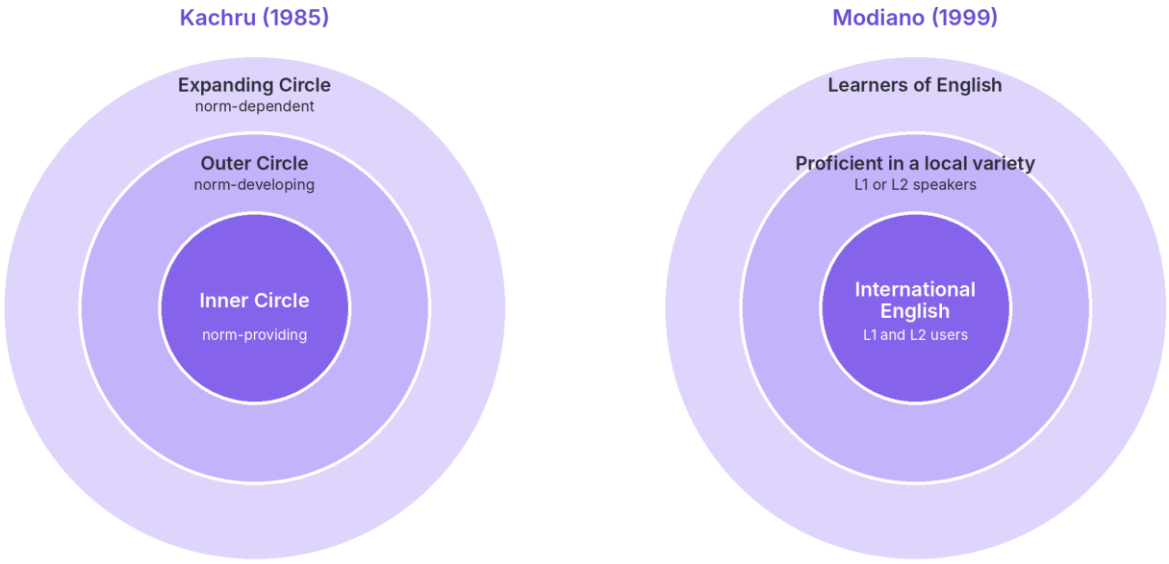
The terms **native speaker** (NS) and **non-native speaker** (NNS) are widely used, but they are not as simple as they seem. Many people grow up with two or more languages, many non-native speakers are more proficient than many native speakers, and the terms can suggest that native speakers are the "owners" of English. Some writers prefer terms such as **L1 and L2 users**, or simply **English users**. This handout uses NS and NNS because they are familiar, but with these limitations in mind.

Standard English

Standard English is the variety used in education, publishing and official contexts. It is a dialect, mainly a matter of grammar and vocabulary, not an accent: it can be spoken with any accent (Trudgill 1999). Received Pronunciation (RP), the accent often associated with it, is spoken by only a small minority of people in Britain. There is also more than one standard: American and British Standard English differ, and countries such as India and Singapore are developing their own norms.

Models of English use

Two well-known models show different ways of describing who uses English and how.



Based on Kachru (1985) and Modiano (1999)

Kachru's three circles

Kachru (1985) grouped countries according to how English is used there:

- **Inner Circle:** countries where English is the main first language, e.g. the UK, the USA, Australia. These varieties are **norm-providing**: they have traditionally set the standards.
- **Outer Circle:** countries where English is an official or second language, usually because of colonial history, e.g. India, Nigeria, Singapore. These varieties are **norm-developing**: they are developing their own standards.
- **Expanding Circle:** countries where English is learned as a foreign language and used for international communication, e.g. China, Brazil, Germany. These varieties are **norm-dependent**: they look to Inner Circle standards.

The model was important in showing that English belongs to many communities, not just one. However, it is based on countries rather than individuals, and it doesn't reflect people's proficiency, multilingualism or mobility (Jenkins 2015).

Modiano's centripetal circles

Modiano (1999) placed speakers according to their **proficiency in international English** rather than their nationality. At the centre are proficient users, native or non-native, whose English works well in international communication. Around them are speakers who are proficient in a local variety that may be less intelligible internationally, and then learners. The model is useful, but "international English" itself is hard to define.

Where do they fit?

Here are four English users. Notice how the two models place them differently.

English user	Kachru	Modiano	What it shows
A pub owner in Birmingham, UK. First language English, with a strong Birmingham accent and local expressions; rarely uses English with people from other countries.	**Inner**	**Local variety**	Native speakers are not automatically effective international communicators.
A footballer from Liberia playing in Italy. First language Bandi; grew up using Liberian English; speaks Italian and English with teammates from many countries.	**Outer**	**International (if widely intelligible)**	Kachru's model is based on countries, but many speakers are multilingual and mobile.
A Russian English teacher in New York. First language Russian; highly proficient in English and uses it every day.	**Expanding**	**International**	Some of the most proficient English users are non-native speakers.
A shop owner in San Antonio, USA, born to Mexican parents. Grew up bilingual in Spanish and English; speaks Chicano English.	**Inner**	**Local or international, depending on the context**	Many people are bilingual from birth: "native" and "non-native" are not always clear categories.

Varieties of English

Every variety of English has its own features of pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar and ways of using language. Here are some examples of vocabulary.

Variety	Circle	Example
American English	Inner	*pants* (trousers); *gotten* (*I've gotten better*)
Australian English	Inner	*arvo* (afternoon)
Irish English	Inner	*I'm after eating* (I have just eaten)
Indian English	Outer	*prepone* (bring forward, the opposite of *postpone*)
Singapore English	Outer	the particle *lah* for emphasis (*Don't worry lah*)
Nigerian English	Outer	*to flash someone* (to give someone a missed call)
Philippine English	Outer	*comfort room* (toilet)
South African English	Inner and Outer	*robot* (traffic light)
China English	Expanding	expressions for local concepts, e.g. *one country, two systems*

Varieties adapted from Dewey (2012). Whether Expanding Circle Englishes, such as China English (Kirkpatrick & Xu 2002), Russian English (Proshina & Eddy 2016) and Brazilian English (Montes 2016), are separate varieties is still debated.

No variety is uniform: there are varieties within varieties. British English includes the very different accents of Liverpool, Glasgow and London, and Indian English varies by region and by speakers' first languages.

The importance we give to a variety usually reflects the economic and political power of the country where it is spoken, not any linguistic quality.

Intelligibility in international communication

Three levels of understanding

Smith & Nelson (1985) distinguished three levels of understanding between speakers.

Level	The listener can…	Example
Intelligibility	recognise the words	hearing that the speaker said *Can you open the window?*
Comprehensibility	understand the meaning	understanding that it is a request
Interpretability	understand the intention behind it	realising the speaker is too hot and expects you to act

Breakdowns can happen at any level, and native speakers are not always the easiest to understand: fast speech, idioms and cultural references can make them hard to follow for international listeners.

Which "errors" matter?

Seidlhofer (2004) found that speakers using English as a lingua franca often used the forms below, but that these rarely caused misunderstandings.

Feature	Example
dropping third person *-s*	*she think*
using *who* and *which* interchangeably	*the book who…*
leaving out or adding articles	*this is apple; I'm making the coffee*
using an invariant tag question	*They should be here by now, isn't it?*
adding prepositions	*We have to discuss about…*
overusing common verbs	using *do, have, make, put, take* for many meanings
using *that*-clauses instead of infinitives	*I want that…*
making meaning extra explicit	*black colour; how long time?*
making uncountable nouns countable	*advices, informations, feedbacks*

Adapted from Seidlhofer (2004) and Jenkins (2006)

This doesn't mean we shouldn't teach the standard forms: learners need them for exams, writing and many professional contexts. But it can help us decide **what to prioritise**, especially in speaking activities, where communication is the main aim (see the **Error Correction** handout).

Accommodation strategies

Successful international communicators adjust their language to the people they are talking to. These **accommodation strategies** can be taught:

- **repeating** and **rephrasing** key words and ideas
- **checking understanding** and **asking for clarification**: *Do you mean…? Sorry, did you say fifteen or fifty?*
- **speaking clearly** and avoiding very fast or reduced speech

- **avoiding idioms** and culture-specific references: Seidlhofer (2004) found that **unilateral idiomaticity**, using idioms the listener doesn't share, often caused problems

> **TEACHING TIP**
> Native speakers need these strategies too. Speakers who use English as a first language are often the ones who most need to adapt in international settings.

Pronunciation for international intelligibility

Walker (2010) suggests that the importance of pronunciation features depends on the goal: sounding like a native speaker, being comfortably understood by native speakers (**comfortable intelligibility**; Kenworthy 1987), or being understood by speakers from many backgrounds (**international intelligibility**). The last column is based on Jenkins' (2000) **Lingua Franca Core** (adapted from Walker 2004, 2010).

Feature	Native-speaker accent	Comfortable intelligibility	International intelligibility
Vowels	very important	very important	very important: especially long vs short vowels and /ɜː/; vowel quality can vary if consistent
Consonants	very important	important	very important, except /θ/, /ð/ and dark /l/; includes rhotic /r/ and aspirated /p t k/
Consonant clusters	very important	important	very important at the beginning of words; medial and final clusters can be simplified as native speakers do
Nuclear (main) stress	very important	very important	very important
Word stress	very important	very important	a grey area: not in the core, but misplaced stress can cause problems
Stress-timed rhythm	very important	very important	not important
Weak forms and schwa	very important	very important	not important to produce, but important to understand
Intonation (tones)	very important	important	not important
Connected speech	very important	important	not important to produce, but important to understand

Most learners don't need, and many don't want, a native-speaker accent. A clear, consistent accent that reflects their own identity is a realistic and respectable goal (see the **Teaching Pronunciation** handout).

Traditional and international ELT

Galloway & Rose (2015) compare traditional English teaching with an approach that reflects how English is used today.

	Traditional ELT	International ELT
Target interlocutor	native English speakers	native and non-native English speakers
Owners of English	native English speakers	native and non-native English speakers
Target culture	fixed native English culture	fluid cultures
Teachers	non-native English-speaking teachers (same L1) and native English-speaking teachers	non-native English-speaking teachers (same and different L1) and native English-speaking teachers
Norms	native English and the concept of Standard English	diversity, flexibility and multiple forms of competence
Role model	native English speakers	successful users of English as a lingua franca
Materials	native English and native English speakers	native and non-native English, ELF communities and contexts
First language and own culture	seen as a hindrance and source of interference	seen as a resource

Adapted from Galloway & Rose (2015: 208), in Galloway (2018)

Teachers and native-speakerism

Native-speakerism is the belief that native speakers are the best models of English and the best teachers of it (Holliday 2006). It can still be seen in job advertisements that ask for "native speakers only", and in learners' and teachers' own assumptions.

Research doesn't support this belief. Medgyes (1992) argued that teachers whose first language isn't English bring particular strengths:

- they are a model of a **successful learner** of English
- they can **teach learning strategies** they have used themselves
- they can often **anticipate difficulties** and explain language clearly
- they can **empathise** with learners and, in many cases, use a **shared first language** to help them

Native and non-native English-speaking teachers each have strengths. What makes a good teacher is proficiency, training, experience and intercultural awareness, not a first language.

Principles of EIL teaching

McKay (2012) proposes principles for a socially sensitive and responsible approach to teaching English as an international language.

Principle	In the classroom
Learners' other languages are a resource, and part of their personal and social identity.	Use the L1 when it helps, e.g. to compare forms, and show interest in learners' languages.
Learners should be exposed to a range of varieties, not only one prestige model.	Use listening material with speakers from different backgrounds.
English is used with native and non-native speakers in many cultural and social contexts.	Include situations where non-native speakers communicate with each other.
English is not the only factor in people's educational, economic and social success.	Avoid presenting English as a guarantee of success; value other languages too.
Cultural awareness should include many cultures, including learners' own.	Ask learners to describe and compare their own cultures, not only those of English-speaking countries.
Access to English should not depend on socio-economic background, and learning English should not replace other languages, e.g. for migrants learning the language of their new country.	Be aware of who has access to English in your context; support learners' other languages.
Teachers should be judged on their proficiency, qualifications and intercultural competence, whatever their first language.	Challenge native-speakerism in your workplace and in your own assumptions.

Adapted from McKay (2012)

EIL in the classroom

Choosing a model

Learners need a model, and for most teachers the most practical one is **their own English**, provided it is clear and consistent. Alongside it, learners benefit from **exposure to other varieties**, especially those they are likely to meet. If your learners have specific goals, such as studying in Australia or working with Indian colleagues, make sure they hear those varieties too.

Classroom ideas

Activity	Aim	Example
Many voices	expose learners to different accents	Learners listen to short clips of speakers from different countries talking about the same topic and note what helped or hindered understanding.
Strategy spotting	raise awareness of accommodation	Learners analyse a conversation between two non-native speakers and identify how they solve misunderstandings.
Say it simply	practise avoiding idioms	Learners rewrite idiomatic messages (*Let's touch base later*) for an international colleague.

Activity	Aim	Example
Word map	raise awareness of varieties	Learners compare words across varieties (*pants/trousers, robot/traffic light*) and find examples from their own region.
Coursebook audit	think critically about materials	Learners count who speaks in a unit's recordings and discuss who is missing.

Adapting a coursebook listening

Many coursebook recordings feature only native speakers. Here is how a typical listening lesson could be adapted.

Stage	Original lesson	Adapted lesson
Lead-in	Learners discuss staying in hotels.	Learners discuss staying in hotels abroad, and the languages they used.
Listening	Two British speakers: a guest books a room.	The same task, plus a second recording of a Brazilian guest and a Thai receptionist booking a room.
Language focus	Polite requests for booking.	Polite requests, plus how the speakers check and clarify details (*Sorry, was that the 15th?*).
Speaking	Learners role-play the booking.	Learners role-play the booking, with role cards that include a misunderstanding to solve.

Debates

The ideas in this handout are widely accepted in principle, but there are also debates about how far they should change teaching.

Concern	Response
Many learners want to sound like native speakers and prefer native-speaker models (Timmis 2002).	Learners' goals should be respected. The aim is an informed choice: learners should know that a native-speaker accent is not necessary for successful communication.
ELF is too varied to be described or taught as a model (Swan 2012).	Most researchers don't propose teaching ELF as a new standard, but raising awareness and prioritising what matters for communication.
Accepting non-standard forms means "anything goes" and will lower standards.	Intelligibility, accuracy in writing and appropriate language still matter; the question is which features to prioritise and when.
Exams and employers still expect standard native-speaker norms.	Learners need to meet the requirements of their context. EIL awareness can be added to, rather than replace, exam preparation.

Making it work

Start from your learners' needs

Find out who your learners will use English with, and for what. Let this guide the varieties, skills and strategies you focus on.

Be confident in your own English

A clear, consistent model is more important than a native-speaker accent.

Widen the range of voices

Supplement coursebook recordings with speakers from different backgrounds, and include interactions between non-native speakers.

Prioritise intelligibility

Focus feedback on features that affect communication, especially in speaking activities.

Teach communication strategies

Give learners the language and practice they need to check, clarify and adapt in international conversations.

Common pitfalls

Pitfall	What to do instead
Presenting one variety as the only "correct" English.	Present standard forms as one useful model among others.
Telling learners that errors don't matter.	Prioritise errors that affect communication, and maintain standards where they matter, e.g. in writing and exams.
Using only native-speaker recordings.	Add recordings of speakers from other circles.
Ignoring learners' wishes about models.	Discuss the options openly and let learners make informed choices.
Assuming you are a less valid teacher because English isn't your first language.	Focus on your strengths: proficiency, training and experience as a learner.

ONLINE CLASSES

Online classes make it easy to bring in a wide range of voices: short video interviews, podcasts and talks by speakers from many countries. If your learners come from different countries, online lessons can themselves be real lingua franca interactions: use them to practise accommodation strategies.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Most communication in English takes place between non-native speakers.
- English has many varieties; no single variety is linguistically better than another.
- Models such as Kachru's and Modiano's help describe English use, but real speakers are more complex.
- For most learners, the goal is international intelligibility, not a native-speaker accent.
- Accommodation strategies, a range of voices and a focus on intelligibility prepare learners for real-world use.
- Good teachers are defined by proficiency, training and awareness, not by their first language.

WHERE NEXT

Teaching Pronunciation the Lingua Franca Core and intelligibility in practice

Error Correction deciding which errors to prioritise

Teaching Listening exposure to a range of accents

ELT Approaches and CLT the role of the L1 and communicative competence

Further reading

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Appendix · Materials evaluation checklist

Use this checklist to evaluate a coursebook unit or other materials from an EIL perspective. Rate each item from 1 (low) to 5 (high).

Does the material... · Language	1	2	3	4	5
...respect and promote multilingualism?	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
...provide exposure to a range of varieties of English?	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
...raise awareness of the diversity of English?	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
...help learners develop strategies for communicating across varieties of English?	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Users	1	2	3	4	5
...represent speakers from different linguistic backgrounds?	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
...represent speakers from different socio-economic backgrounds?	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
...include interactions between native and non-native speakers?	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
...include interactions between non-native speakers?	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Cultures	1	2	3	4	5
...represent a variety of cultures?	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
...represent cultures fairly, without stereotypes?	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
...give learners opportunities to reflect on their own cultures?	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
...help learners develop intercultural competence?	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Total score ____ / 60

Notes

Adapted from Dinh (2017)