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An Interview with Henry Widdowson

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Welcome colleagues! For the last issue of 2019, we present a very special interview with Professor Henry Widdowson, an acclaimed authority in the field of applied linguistics who has made great contributions to the development of communicative language teaching. In this conversation, Professor Widdowson discusses English Language Learning in Japan in the context of Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), English Medium Instruction (EMI), and English as a Lingua Franca (ELF). Professor Widdowson is Emeritus Professor at the University of London, was Professor of Applied Linguistics at Essex University and is currently Honorary Professor at the Department of English and American Studies at the University of Vienna. He has published extensively on English language teaching and applied linguistics. Here he was interviewed by Chantal Hemmi, an Associate Professor, Graham Mackenzie, a Project Associate Professor, and Katsuya Yokomoto, a Lecturer at the Center of Language Education and Research at Sophia University.



Graham Mackenzie: *One thing that you have written a lot about is the ownership of English, and with the growth of CLIL and EMI, in Japan we have lots of content teachers who don't necessarily have English as their first language. I wonder if you thought this may cause a shift in the way the ownership of English is thought about, and a shift away from native speaker models in English language learning?*

Henry Widdowson: Well yes, I think it does because native speakers don't own the subject, nor do they own the language. If one takes the view that these developments in CLIL and EMI are ways of recognising how the linguistic resources available in English can be made use of, or in the case of CLIL, how they can develop a sense of how to make use of language by reference to the subject, then there is no logical reason why the E in EMI or the L in CLIL, should be modelled on native speaker norms. One has to ask what the appropriate language is, what language is appropriate to the purpose, and that purpose may not at all require that either students or teachers conform to the norms of native speaker usage or standard forms.

Graham Mackenzie: *So, do you think that these sorts of developments may mean there will be less of a tendency in classrooms to have native speaker like competence as the desired target for learners of English?*

It depends, because I think certainly with CLIL, and with EAP, it was clear that people could make use of English very effectively without conforming to native speaker norms. So then if people have developed what I call a “communicative capability” which allows for, and gives momentum to, further learning, that raises the question as to whether the objective of ELT, which traditionally is linguistic competence, (which really means the competence of the native speaker), actually is an appropriate objective. The important thing at the end of the course is not how far learners can approximate native speaker norms but how far they have invested in a capability for further learning because the end of a course marks the end of teaching, but in many ways the beginning of learning. So, I think that when one asks questions like “Well, what is a language used for?” and we recognise that it varies in the form it takes depending on what purposes it is required to fulfil. This inevitably raises the question about why what has been traditionally conceived of as the necessary norm of native speaker competence has always been set as the objective. This is really the significance of ELF (*English as a Lingua Franca*) because it's clear that people engage with each other, relate to each other, achieve communicative objectives, and nego-

tiate their relationships and their meanings without conforming to native speaker norms. They have the capability to do it, and the more they do it, the more demands are put on their capability. And then their linguistic resources will extend. So, what becomes clear from the evidence of ELF, is how effectively people in diplomacy, business negotiation, conflict resolution and so on, strategically use the language to achieve their objective. It's that kind of strategic capability that presumably, one needs to focus on in the teaching of language.

Katsuya Yokomoto: *Related to communicative capability, some Japanese teachers of English here are still worried about their language proficiency in English, so what general advice would you give to those teachers?*

Well, my general advice would be “Don't worry so much!” The point that I would make is that correctness, which is really what they are worried about, has more to do with correct comportment and etiquette, than it has to do with communicative effectiveness. And this attitude to me is a deeply entrenched feeling that communities have, that their identity is invested in their language. It was very clear in Germany in the 1930s for example—one language one people. The language and the community were seen to be very closely related. Although you can't, of course, argue that with English, nor to varying degrees with some other languages, including Spanish. But there is still a deeply entrenched feeling that somehow “My language is my social identity.” Now, I don't know Japan well enough to make any statement about this, but my impression is that because Japanese is so closely linked with being Japanese, it's quite natural for people to feel that language, the correct social behavior, and the conformity to social norms, are deeply entrenched. English must also, therefore, have norms of correctness which we must conform to or otherwise we are not behaving correctly. It's a sense of proper behavior, of comportment, rather than communication. Those countries which don't have this strong sense of lingua cultural identity, I think are more likely to accept the idea of English as a Lingua Franca, or accept the idea of non-normative use of language more readily. And also, I suppose historically, because there has been in the past anyway, a close association of language learning with learning the spoken language. The problem is that, of course, *speaking* a language is the most potentially face-threatening activity and it's very difficult, even if you wanted to, to change the way you speak. To change the way you write is much easier, which is why accent tends to be so well imprinted in people's behavior. But if you say, “You've got to speak like a Brit” that's a terrible burden for anybody! And anyway, which Brit? Which

British person are you talking about? Most people in Britain don't speak in the way that textbooks tell you that you should speak.

Katsuya Yokomoto: *Within Japan there are many different kinds of settings, for example elementary school teachers are not language experts, they have to teach very many subjects. In junior high and high school, they are English teachers and in higher education English teachers teach English and also subject teachers use English to teach their subjects. But when we all aim for students' learning of the language, what should we keep in mind as we are trying to help them?*

Again for me, the first thing to question is whether there is such a thing as “the language.” There is an assumption that there is “an English language” and that is what is described in reference books, and that is linguistic competence or communicative competence based on native speaker norms, and that is “the language.” My own view is that this is a fiction. There is no such thing. I mean people believe there's a language, and when it comes to the notion of language and community, it's important for people to think there is a language because it holds them together as a community. But we can shift focus and ask, “How do people use language?” or “How do people communicate?” The key to this is that if one shifts the focus to communication, how people use linguistic resources to communicate, what linguistic forms are needed for their purposes? Then I think you get a very different set of objectives for learning. The objectives then are, how do you actually motivate learners to use language? Often in the past when they have attempted to use the language, they have been penalized because their use has not been sufficiently correct. Even if the teacher says “well, we'll let that pass,” the learner knows that sooner or later they are going to have to go back to get it right. And this focus on correctness, conformity to native speaker norms, inhibits the real language learning process which is the ability to extend your communicative resources from what you've already got in your own language to other linguistic resources, which we call English or French or whatever it is. Why? Because it gives us a wider possibility for interaction with other people, and in so doing extends further our resource. The objective has to be some kind of dynamic investment in subsequent learning. And my own feeling is that once students have got that learning momentum, your job is done. That's it! You can do no more! Now, the problem is that assessment requires conformity. The real problem is that what is educationally desirable is in conflict with what is institutionally required. The institution requires that

at the end of the course, there is a measurement as to how far the learners have achieved the objective. So, these tests are actually tests of teaching. They're not tests of learning. In other words, they test the extent to which teaching has succeeded in making the learners conform. No matter how much learning has taken place, which may in fact be a very good dynamic investment for something to follow, that doesn't count unless it's also correct. Tests are predicated on the primacy of teaching. But the difficulty is that institutionally speaking, it's difficult to see how else you could provide a test because you've got to have something that's measurable. What I'm talking about, capability, is not so easy to measure. Competence is easy to measure as you check it against the standard norm. This is related to CLIL and EMI, and education in general. The real contemporary questions are "How do we decide what is educationally desirable, what is good for learners, and what is institutionally constrained?" And, the real challenge is that institutions will want to simplify because they want something measurable and reliable, something straightforward that you can explain easily. However, education is not like that.

Graham Mackenzie: *Perhaps teachers need to find a balance?*

Well, first of all, I think they need to understand that there is this conflict. In the academic field, this has become clear with publishing because what controls educational development in the universities now is publishing. The publishers tell us what we are to teach basically, and what research we should do.

Chantal Hemmi: *I'm reminded of McNamara and Sato's work, looking at non-native raters' evaluations of students. I think it's very positive that researchers are looking into that aspect of things. I think our paradigm has to change a little when we think about equity in education in a diverse world because we tend to regard correctness in reference to the native speaker norms. It's probably a new field that will open up a lot of research opportunities.*

Yes, well particularly when we talk about EMI and EAP, and ELF, Barbara (Seidlhofer) will tell you for example, that when she talks to people in conflict resolution or business people, they are not interested in how correct someone's English is at all. It isn't an issue for them. The issue is "Can we get along?" "Can we arrive at an understanding?" And you can well imagine how complicated this is. If you look at the kind of international negotiations that are going on around the world, what language does Trump use when he talks? English. What language is used

in the European Union for this disastrous Brexit? English. What language is being used for those seeking asylum in Europe? English. Marie Grazia Guido has done some interesting work on the use of English as a Lingua Franca in immigration situations with asylum seekers. There, the problem often occurs that the immigration officers have a concept of English which has been impressed upon them in their schooling: correctness – "Are you C1?" or "Are you C2?" and so on. If an asylum seeker is from Ghana, he or she will naturally use Ghanaian English, which is a World English variety. So, the Ghanaian will be using what the immigration officer thinks is incorrect English. And so, their concepts of English are in conflict because they have different norms of what is appropriate, and you can imagine that people are judged, as they have always tended to be, on the language they speak. And we all know that we tend to judge people as educated or non-educated, or foolish or arrogant by the language they use. Now if the judgement is based on native speaker norms, there are a lot of people that are in trouble if we persist in using that as the only effective measure of language learning.

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