English across Cultures and Textual Intelligibility*

Sujung Min

(Kongju National University)

Min, Sujung. 2008. English across Cultures and Textual Intelligibility. *The Linguistic Association of Korea Journal, 16*(2), 187-206. With the acculturation of English into a variety of non-native socio-cultural contexts where English is a major language (i.e., the Outer Circle of English) a concern often raised is that aspects of these varieties will not be understood by speakers of other varieties, ultimately leading to a breakdown in international communication (Smith, 1992). This study investigates this concern, focusing on the English literature of Singapore, an Outer Circle country, and the United States, an Inner Circle country. Through an analysis by Inner Circle and non-Inner Circle readers of the understandability of short stories written by Inner Circle and Outer Circle English-using writers, the study shows that achieving full understanding of the stories depends more on the reader's familiarity with the sociocultural context than on the form of the English used. These results support the idea that the reader's role in understanding English literature across cultures is crucial, and that variation in English across cultures does not mean a breakdown in international communication in English. The implications of these findings for the English literature canon and for the English language classroom are then discussed.

Key Words: World Englishes, intelligibility, comprehensibility, interpretability, reader's role, cross-cultural communication

1. Introduction

It is repeatedly observed that there are now over 100 countries in the world where English has acquired "significant" functional roles in various domains (see, e.g., Crystal, 1998, 2004; McArthur 1992, and Mesthrie 2008). Kachru (1988) classifies these English-using countries into three groups, or circles: the

Inner Circle, where English is a mother tongue, the Outer Circle, where English is a significant but additional language, and the Expanding Circle, where English is an important foreign language.

With the acculturation of English into a variety of Asian and African socio-cultural contexts where English is a major language (i.e., the Outer Circle) a concern voiced is that features of these varieties will not be understood by speakers of other varieties, ultimately leading to a breakdown in international communication (see Smith, 1992). The growing body of Outer Circle English literatures, written within these various socio-cultural contexts, as well as spoken and other written forms of communication (including newspapers, business letters, etc.), has been the object of this concern.

This study investigates this concern, focusing on the English literature of Singapore, an Outer Circle country, and the United States, an Inner Circle country. We specifically ask two questions: how intelligible is Outer Circle and Inner Circle literature to Inner Circle and non-Inner Circle English-using readers, and what factors are involved in the intelligibility or unintelligibility of these English literatures?

To investigate these questions six stories – three written by Singaporean writers and three by American writers – were analyzed by two English speakers, one an American and the other a Korean who finished her Ph.D in the United States. The readers identified aspects of each story that presented difficulties in understanding, employing Smith and Nelson (1985), Smith (1992), and Bauman's (2004) broad framework of understanding, which considers understanding to consist of intelligibility, comprehensibility, an k   d interpretability.

The result shows that achieving a full understanding of these stories depends more on the reader's familiarity with the sociocultural context within which a story is embedded than on the linguistic form of the English used.

2. Intelligibility and Cross-Cultural Communication

Extensive research (Pakir, 1993; Arua, 1998; Agura, 1984; D'souza , 1991, 1997; Nihalani, 1995) has investigated the degrees of intelligibility or unintelligibility of different varieties of English, and factors that affect the

success of cross-varietal communication. However, the majority of these studies have focused on spoken rather than written communication. There has been much less empirical research on the factors of intelligibility involved in understanding English literature across cultures. Exceptions to this include Fox (1994) and Tawake (1991).

Some of the spoken language-based research has revealed factors that affect the intelligibility of English across cultures, based mainly on spoken language, and at the word recognition level. These factors include familiarity with the prosodic features of the variety (Nelson, 1981), familarity with the speaker's voice (Brodkey, 1972), the strength of the speaker's accent (Munro, 1995), and cultural factors (Nelson, 1995).

Smith (1992) also investigated the factors that affect international communication, arguing that understanding operates on three levels: *intelligibility*, or word and utterance recognition; *comprehensibility*, word, and utterance meaning; and *interpretability*, or the meaning behind a word or utterance. Thus, what is generally referred to as intelligibility, Smith argues, is more accurately investigated as a matter of understanding on these three distinct levels. In Smith's (1992) study Inner, Outer and Expanding Circle speakers of English assessed how well they could understand fluent English speakers from the Inner, Outer and Expanding Circle. The results showed that intelligibility is more easily attained than comprehensibility or interpretability. Familiarity with the topic of conversation was found not to affect results, but subjects with experience with many different varieties of English performed better on interpretability than did those without such exposure. The study also supports the idea that variation in English need not jeopardize cross-cultural communication, as will also be argued here for such variation in English literature.

3. Method

The analysis operates within Smith's (1992) framework, applying the three levels of understanding to the literatures. As we demonstrate in Section 4, this distinction proved to be insightful in assessing how well the readers understood the Singaporean and American stories, and factors that were

involved in understanding. This study also draws on Smith's (1992) study although it made some modifications to accommodate the primary focus on literature (i.e., written language). These modifications are described in the section below.

3.1. Data: American and Singaporean Stories

Singapore has a reasonable body of literature written in English, primarily after the 1970s. Although the use of English in this literature has been somewhat controversial, an ever increasing number of Singapore writers are choosing English over other languages, including Chinese, Malay and Tamil (Talib, 1994). There are, of course, other large bodies of English literatures in other parts of the world from which this study could have selected the data, including those from Nigeria and other African countries, or from India and other South Asian countries. But because one of the readers in this study is Korean and has significant experience with East Asian culture, this study selected literature from another East Asian culture. Using literature from such a culture allowed the researcher to determine the role of having experience with a culture, or a related culture, in understanding that literature. As will be discussed in following sections, the results of the study show that this factor is indeed significant in understanding the stories.

American literature was used because it represented the body of Inner Circle English. Also, as in the Singaporean case, because one of the readers is American, and both readers have experience with American culture, using American literature allowed the study to gain insight into how familiarity with the culture within which the literature is written affects the understandability of that literature.

The stories were selected only from award winning authors, so it could be assured that the literature has been recognized as representing the country's best work. The Singapore stories were taken from short story collections by Philip Jeyaretnam, Catherine Lim, and Goh Sin Tub. The American short stories were selected from the annually published *O. Henry Award Winner* collections. All of the stories were published in the same four-year periods: 1986-1989.

Within this corpora the data for the study was limited to stories based on contemporary families and domestic issues, rather than on a variety of settings and topics. This limit was imposed to prevent the results from being biased by differences in genre, or differences in the time period or settings of the stories.

Although a limit was imposed in the general setting and topics of the stories, the researcher did not read the stories before they were selected for analysis. The researcher skimmed through the stories only to the extent that she could determine these factors and could ensure that their length was roughly equal. This was done to avoid biasing the analysis by knowing the content of the stories in advance. As a further precaution the researcher did not discuss the stories with readers, other than to confirm they would be acceptable as data, until the analysis was complete.

(1) The stories

Singaporean:
   "Father," by Philip Jeyaretnam (1987)
   "The Concatenation," by Catherine Lim (1989)
   "Home for Grandma," by Goh Sin Tub (1986)

American:
   "To Be," by Barbara Grizzuti Harrison (1989)
   "Unstable Ground," by Ellen Herman (1989)
   "I Get By," by Mary Robinson (1987)

3.2. The Readers

One reader is a Korean with a PhD in linguistics, who studied in the US for over six years and has had vast exposure to US culture. The other reader is an American who completed her PhD in linguistics and who has lived in the US all her life. Although the American reader has had experience with many cultures, she has limited experience with Asian culture.

The researcher discussed with the readers the results of the analysis in

great detail, and could work to pinpoint the nature of the understanding difficulties in each case.

The readers read through the short stories and noted anything that gave them difficulty in understanding. For each word, phrase, or part that presented a problem, the readers explained why they thought they were having difficulty, and gave their interpretation of the meaning of the problematic word or part. In doing this, it was hoped that the level of the problem could be determined, not just the source of the problem; for example, whether the problem was a word comprehension issue or perhaps a deeper issue of interpretability. Smith and Nelson (1985) and Smith's (1992) framework of understanding was adopted in the analysis and classifying the understanding difficulties. After reading each story, the readers assessed their understanding of it overall, and what, if any, major problems in understanding remained. These analyses were then compared, with a focus on how understandable each reader felt the stories were overall, and the types of difficulty the readers had; that is, the levels at which there were problems in understanding.

4. Results

Neither reader reported having significant trouble understanding any of the stories at any of the three levels of understanding (i.e., *intelligibility, comprehensibility, and interpretability*). This finding is in itself interesting, as it supports the idea that cross-cultural linguistic variation need not result in a block in cross-cultural communication, or even cause serious problems in communicating. But although both readers reported they were able to understand the stories overall, the analysis also revealed that there were some aspects of both groups of stories that gave each reader some degree of difficulty. In the following sub-sections the difficulties the readers had were outlined at each of the three levels of understanding, and the root of these difficulties, wherever this was possible to determine.

4.1. Intelligibility

Both readers reported few problems in understanding at the intelligibility

level in all of the stories. The source of all but one of the few problems in intelligibility was non-English words which have essentially localized uses, for example, in Singapore English. In the Singaporean story "Father," for example, the American reader reported being unable to recognize the word *ang pow* (red envelopes containing money that are given primarily to children on holidays, p. 14), and in the American story "To be," neither recognized many of the Italian words used by the main character and her daughter, including *essere* (the verb "to be," p. 226). The data in (2) shows all the intelligibility problems reported by each reader.

(2) Reported intelligibility (i.e., word recognition) problem

Story	American reader	Korean reader
Singaporean		
"Father"	Chap Goh Meh	sinseh
	ang pow	
	sinseh	
"The Concatenation"	(none)	(none)
"Home for Grandma"	(none)	(none)
American		
"To Be"	Gezu	Gezu
	Grnite de cafe	Granite de cafe
	Penne	Penne
	essere	essere
	Sono. . .eri	Sono. . .eri
	eravamo eravamo	
	Forse che si	Forse che si
	forse che forse che	noche no
"Unstable Ground"	(none)	(none)
"Get By"	(none)	(none)

As the data in (1) illustrates, intelligibility was so high for these stories that only two presented any such problems at all, and those that did were

very few in number. Also important is the fact that the Singaporean stories were not more problematic than the American stories at this level of understanding. This may have been because there were relatively few non-English words in them. Also, at issue in intelligibility is the ability to recognize a word or phrase, which in spoken language can be a significant task, because of accent differences, and other similar factors (see Smith 1992). In contrast, written language does not pose the same problem at this level, as the reader only need recognize the word or phrase. In stories written in legible type and using conventional orthography, such as the stories in our analysis, intelligibility is not problematic.

4.2. Comprehensibility

There were significant differences between the readers in the degrees of success each had at the comprehensibility level. The Korean reader had far more trouble than the American in both groups of stories, although she had more problems in the American stories than the Singaporean ones. The American's difficulties were roughly equal for both groups of stories, but she had slightly more problems with the Singaporean ones. The data in (3) shows the total number of problems each reader reported in each story.

(3) Total number of reported problems in comprehensibility

American reader
Singaporean stories:
   "Father"   8
   "The concatenation"   2
   "Home for grandma"   3
American stories:
   "Unstable ground"   2
   "I get by"   4
   "To be"   5

Korean reader

Singaporean stories:

"Father"	6
"The concatenation"	6
"Home for grandma"	5

American stories:

"Unstable ground"	13
"I get by"	11
"To be"	11

Two major types of comprehension problems were reported by both readers: one linguistic and the other socio-cultural in nature. The first can be illustrated in word *inchoate* in "Unstable ground" and *ulcers* in "Home for grandma," where the words are in current use in American English, yet the reader lacked knowledge of the word's meaning. The second problem, as illustrated by words such as *hamper* in "Father" and *hawker center* in "The concatenation," has its basis in a socio-cultural difference, where the word or phrase is English but is either not an American English word, as in *hawker center* or *boiled sweets*, or is an American English word used in a different sense in the stories, as in *hamper*, meaning a basket rather than a container for dirty clothes. Examples of comprehension problems reported by the readers are given in (4).

(4) Examples of comprehension problems

Both readers

Singaporean stories	Problem
"The concatenation"	hawker centre
"Father"	temple paper water
"Home for grandma"	grouse feed-back sessions
American stories	
"I get by"	pink excelsior
"To be"	tribality
"Unstable ground"	inchoate

American reader

Singaporean stories

"Father"	boiled sweets
"Father"	hamper

American stories

"I get by"	laminated writing arms
"To be"	laird

Korean reader

Singaporean stories

"The concatenation"	galvanised
"Home for grandma"	culcers
"Home for grandma"	voracious reading

American stories

"I get by"	paraphernalia
"I get by"	cockeyed
"To be"	schizophrenia
"Unstable ground"	ESP

Many of the problems the Korean reader reported in comprehension she found easy to remedy by consulting a dictionary. This is because most of these difficulties were due to the first problem: that the reader simply lacked knowledge of some English terms, as in the case of *cockeyed* and *paraphernalia*. The American was able to remedy fewer of her difficulties with a dictionary, primarily because the words that gave her trouble were of the second type: words or phrases that are English words but not part of American English or are not used in the way they would be in American English. However, because the American reported few problems in comprehensibility this was not a significant issue.

4.3. Interpretability

The Korean and the American readers both reported that they found the American stories to be highly interpretable. The readers also had high levels

of agreement about what the authors' motives and intention appeared to be. In contrast, the readers reported different levels of interpretability for the Singaporean stories, with the Korean reporting a high level of interpretability and the American reporting low interpretability in these cases. Although the American reported she could interpret the stories to some extent, she felt there were parts of the story she was unable to understand as fully as she could the American stories, or to the extent that Korean reader did.

Measuring interpretability can be difficult, particularly when information about the author's intentions in their writing is not made available through other sources. Misinterpretation is common in cross-cultural communication and in literature in general. Because of this potential difficulty, success was based on the readers' reported ease and confidence in interpreting them. While this still leaves open the possibility of misinterpretation, in the course of the analysis it was found that this framework was successful in determining the extent to which the readers felt they understood what the author was trying to communicate through the story. This confidence was generally based on the extent to which the reader could make sense of the events, motives of the characters, and the general message of the story. These factors tended to be either understood or not well understood by the readers, as the examples below demonstrate.

When the story was not interpreted easily the reader reported that she could not understand why the characters would do what they did, for example, or why one event followed another, or what the authors' motivations were in writing the story as they did. When the reader did report there was high interpretability the story was reported as making sense and as causing little or no difficulty in understanding. In contrast to the low interpretability reports, in these cases the reader could easily summarize the story, could understand why the characters did what they did, and could explain with ease what they believed the author's intentions were. It was on this basis that the researcher determined interpretability.

This difference in reported interpretability is demonstrated by the story "Father". "Father" describes what happens when a family receives a package on New Year's Day. The package, sent by a cousine living in Australia, includes an unlabeled gray porcelain pot containing a gray powder. The family

determines this is a special herb from Australia, so they cook it in a chicken soup for a period of several days. After eating the soup they learn that the clay pot actually contained a neighbor's dead mother's ashes. When the neighbor asks for the pot the father lies, telling him it was not in the package – that he lied to spare his neighbor's feelings – it would have been far more difficult for the neighbor to know the family had eaten his mother's ashes than to believe they had been lost in the mail.

The American reader had difficulty understanding why the family in the story was so confident that the mysterious powder was edible – confident enough to cook it into a soup and eat it without further investigation. But the Korean reader understood that this is not very unusual – that relatives from abroad often send very valuable and healthy herbs from their home country, esp on holidays like especially on holidays like New Year's Day, as was the case in this story. While to the American the gray powder did not resemble any edible substance she was aware of, the Korean understood that the powder was intended to resemble a common herb powder, or salt, cooked in bamboo, that is widely know in Asia, and is considered a healthy supplement. As she read the story she believed it was that herb, as the fictional family did, and understood why the family could so easily conclude that the powder was edible. While in the American reader's socio-cultural experience eating unlabeled powder would be taking a substantial risk, the Korean reader understood what a simple and reasonable mistake the family made.

In "Home for Grandma" a family struggles with what to do when the narrator's grandma, his mother's mother, comes to live with them. The family realizes their busy lifestyle is not ideal for the care of grandma, who frequently and aggressively complains about how poorly she is being treated. They struggle with the idea of sending grandma to a nursing home, finally deciding that they will. The initial conflict is resolved by the story's conclusion – grandma goes to the home and has made peace with the family.

The difference in perceived interpretability the two readers had of "Home for Grandma" were significant, although they were more a matter of degree than was the case with "Father". At issue was understanding the sense of obligation the children in the story felt in the care of their parents. The American reader understood the obligation, but not the comparative severity of

it that exists in many Asian cultures. The Korean reader deeply empathized with the fictional family's dilemma, and understood that the decision meant acting against very deeply embedded Asian cultural values. Although the American also understood the sadness of the situation, she did not feel the decision was serious, and in such extreme conflict to these cultural values, as the Korean did.

A specific example of this difference in interpretation is illustrated by the description in the story of the lack of care grandmother received at her son's home:

> Other complaints seemed more serious. Like the time Uncle and Auntie came home late forgetting that the servant was off ... So [Grandma] had her dinner thirty minutes later than usual (Goh Sin Tub 1986, p.25).

The Korean reader agreed that this was a very serious complaint. Keeping one's grandmother waiting for her dinner that long was indeed a sign that the care she was receiving at her son's home was insufficient.

In contrast, the American did not perceive this thirty-minute delay as a reason for serious complaint. She concluded instead that the author intended this description as an indication that grandma was too demanding, and that she was in fact receiving excellent care, but that she was exaggerating how badly she was being treated. The American's misinterpretation was evidenced by the confusion it caused her in interpreting the tone and course of events in the story. Her interpretation ran in conflict with what was a far more likely intended interpretation, making the course of events and reactions of the characters, among other such factors, illogical to her at times.

The American reader's inability to fully interpret the Singaporean stories was not based on their linguistic form. As indicated earlier, her comprehensibility of each of the stories was quite high – even higher than the Korean reader's. But even with high word-level understanding, the deeper message was unclear. She was able to understand the course of events in the stories, but she was sometimes unable to tell why characters acted as they did, or recognize the deeper significance of some events. Her lack of

familiarity with Asian culture, but not the linguistic form of the stories, made her less well-equipped to easily and fully interpret these stories.

In contrast, the American stories, which present a culture with which both readers are experienced, did not yield the same kind of interpretation troubles to either reader. For example, "Unstable ground" describes the life of a struggling screenwriter living in Los Angeles. His life is in every sense of the word on "unstable ground," it suddenly becomes even more unstable when his partner becomes pregnant, and her young son from a previous marriage comes to live with them. But his life carries on, despite its being on this increasingly "unstable ground."

Both readers reported understanding the author's intentions in creating a feeling of instability in the main character's life and how the author established this feeling in the text, as well as the lack of resolution at the end of the story. For example, readers described the end of the story in a similar way in their analysis notes: "life goes on" (Korean reader), and "... life continues in this way ..." (American reader). Compared to the Singaporean stories, there was little difference in the readers' reported ability to interpret this and the other American stories. Both readers, with knowledge of American culture, were well-equipped to interpret them.

5. Conclusion and Implications

This study focused on two major questions: how intelligible is Outer Circle and Inner Circle literature to Inner Circle and non-Inner Circle English-using readers, and what factors are involved in the intelligibility or unintelligibility of these English literatures? The results revealed that the first question can be best answered in terms of the second – that is, the understandability of the stories depends on several reader-based factors. To a reader who is familiar with the socio-cultural context within which the stories were written, the stories are not difficult to understand. Conversely, the stories are more difficult to fully understand for a reader who is unfamiliar with the socio-cultural context within which they are written. A less important factor in understanding the stories was their linguistic form.

The analysis revealed that the Korean reader had more difficulties in

comprehension than the American reader did for both groups of stories, but her overall level of interpretability was higher than the American's. Two factors that differed between the readers were proficiency in English (a native speaker of English compared to a speaker who uses English as a foreign language), and socio-cultural familiarity with the cultures within which the stories were written. Thus the Korean reader, who had the advantage in socio-cultural knowledge, was better equipped to fully understand the stories overall than was the American, who might be assumed to have the advantage in this situation as native speaker of English, the medium of the stories.

The Korean was not only better equipped to understand the stories at the interpretability level but she was also better able to clear up the comprehension troubles she had, quickly and independently. She found that the bulk of her comprehensibility troubles, including words like *ulcer, schizophrenic*, and *voracious*, were rectified very quickly with the help of the dictionary. In contrast, the American could not so easily "fix" her interpretability problems. She received clarification only after she was given the necessary socio-cultural background information.

Distinguishing between *intelligibility, comprehensibility*, and *interpretability* proved to be helpful in understanding the nature of what was understood and not understood in the stories. The major differences found in the readers' ability to understand the literature were between comprehensibility and interpretability. A less specific framework for categorizing the problems with understanding troubles might not have allowed the researcher to determine the nature of these problems to differentiate the types of problems the two readers had.

The study has serious implications for notions of the English literature canon and for the English language classroom. The concept of a monolithic English, described by those who view a particular form of *native* English, consists of a *norm* that has been problematized by the spread of English worldwide and in cross-cultural contexts. English has, for a long time, been used by writers from Western and non-Western cultural traditions. Yamuna Kachru (1987) demonstrates the creative aspects of new-English literatures, written in English by native speakers of other languages, and emphasizes the necessity of recognizing "multi-norms of styles and strategies" (p. 130)

working within in new linguistic and cultural paradigms. These new English literatures have contributed to the development of traditions and paradigms of world Englishes rather than a single English. Readers of literary texts produced in another sector of the English-using world face the differences in "conventionalization of appropriate theoretical forms in different language and cultures" (Yamuna Kachru 1987, p. 87). This is the starting point from which we should work. No analysis of a literary text's intelligibility can be complete without a consideration of the role of readers. And by examining the responses and roles of readers from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds to literary texts, this study revealed that factors of culture and context have roles in achieving a deeper understanding of English literature across cultures.

In addition, the study has implications for the English language classroom and other related concerns. When using literature in the classroom, teachers should be able to guide students (readers) to creatively respond to world literatures in cross-cultural contexts rather than on the British and American literary canon. Instead of persisting in using only an outdated literary canon based on monolithic English, it is the teacher's responsibility to develop readers who are capable of gaining the insider knowledge about values and priorities of the cultures represented in multi-ethnic literatures.

Rather than being a detriment, the variation in English literatures across cultures enriches this literature. The large number of international award winning writers who write in non-Inner Circle English testify to this richness (such as Derek Wolcott and Salman Rushdie, to name just two). Although such variation may not be fully understood by readers who are unfamiliar with the culture in which it was written, if written in Inner Circle English, these stories might lose some of their richness, in this case their Singaporean (see also Achebe, 1966, for discussion regarding Nigerian English; Bokamba, 1992; Kachru, 1992).

Furthermore, teachers and readers armed with the knowledge that the role of the reader can outweigh the linguistic form of literature in its intelligibility, can adopt strategies that will promote understanding, both linguistic and cultural, rather than avoiding such literature because it is unfamiliar. The benefits of using such literatures in the classroom have been well established.

For example, Talib (1994), regarding Singaporean English literature, argues that the inclusion of such literature in Singaporean classrooms can help make students more aware of the country's culture. Thumboo (1977), D'souza (1984), and others have also argued for the use of English in literature to unite individuals of various ethnic and cultural groups in Singapore and Malaysia. Tawake (1991) argues that multi-ethnic literatures in English can provide students in the West with "a window into cultures and codes of behavior that are often at variance to the ways of mainstream Western society" (335). In a broader context, Smith (1986) shows that readers gain increased interest in other cultures and a better understanding of them through guided exposure to literature written in English from other cultures. Thus, the variation in English in literature should not be seen as a threat to international communication. Instead it can more accurately be seen as a vehicle for promoting cultural understanding in English-using readers around the world.

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Sujung Min
Department of English Education,
Kongju National Univeristy
182, Shinkwan-dong, Gongju, Chungnam, Korea, 314-701
Tel: 041-850-8192
E-mail: sujmin@kongju.ac.kr