Noparat Tanauraksakul
Macquarie University

The cool medium of English and the cool message in an Australian context

Abstract

The paper addresses an extension of Marshall McLuhan's 'the medium is the message' and Four Laws of Media to the use of English among non-native-English students in an Australian context. English was a cool low-definition medium of communication and instruction, requiring students to participate actively in daily conversations and class discussions. Without a high degree of participation, they misinterpreted information, hardly made sense of the world around them and failed to extend their voices inside or outside the classroom. Qualitative findings indicated that the cool medium of English was the cool message itself in that it negatively affected the students' identity security. The effects concomitantly caused them to encounter 'World Englishes shock', 'repetition shock', 'intercultural identity negotiation shock' and 'identity shock'. McLuhan's Four Laws of Media crystallized the role of English as the cool medium and the cool message in the present context.

Keywords: the cool medium and the cool message, four laws of media, feeling of security, World Englishes shock, repetition shock, intercultural identity negotiation shock and identity shock

Introduction

In today's globalised era, it appears that one of the results of innovative technology and communication is the growing number of English speakers. About 80 per cent of all web sites are posted in English (Wareing 2004) while more than a quarter of the world's online language population of 729 million communicates in English (Global Reach 2004). As such, English is seen as the most widely distributed language on the most continents strengthened by the development of electronic technology (Guilherme 2007) and it remains a dominant language in most online contexts (Danet and Herring 2007). English increasingly plays an essential role in

the lives of non-native English speakers, even though in their social context English is only used for certain specific purposes. If they are competent in English, they are likely to have better opportunities in employment and education because higher levels of English skills are demanded. And if they seek a global success, English competence is a pathway for them to reach it (Tananuraksakul 2008).

It can be assumed that the above mentioned essential role of English may have persuaded non-native-English speakers to study the language in their home countries, and that part of the motivation is to gain access to a powerful medium (Fairclough 2001). Acquiring English in an authentic environment is also a significant ideal for students seeking to attain fluency and competence. Australia is an option for English-medium study, attracting the third largest number of overseas students after the United States and the United Kingdom (Novera 2004). Concomitant to this large number, research into overseas students' well-being has arisen. Nevertheless, little attention has been paid to the feelings of security or insecurity when international students communicate in English with culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) people during their initial transition from homeland to Australia. It is this aspect that I seek to explore.

The present study

Defining the key concept of 'security'

In transition from homeland to Australia, overseas students from a non-native-English background inescapably go through a process of intercultural adjustment which involves dealing with unfamiliarity and insecurity (Ting-Toomey 1999, 2005). According to Tananuraksakul's (2009) study, an exposure to disorienting language and culture in such a new social environment appears to affect overseas non-native English students' security, which includes self-confidence and self-esteem, because English becomes an essential survival tool in their academic and social realms. The concept of security she refers to focuses on how they emotionally feel when they communicate in English with CALD people during their initial transition from home countries to Australia.   If they experience success in communication, they feel secure and gain self-

confidence, and conversely, lack of success decreases security and self-confidence. Tananuraksakul's (ibid) concept of security is used for this paper.

The key research question

The study primarily investigates how English affects non-native-English students' security when they communicate with CALD people inside and outside the classroom. In seeking the answer, I apply the aphorism 'the medium is the message' coined by Marshall McLuhan (1964). Additionally, I apply the Four Laws of Media (McLuhan and McLuhan 1988) to demonstrate that the medium is the message. These theoretical lenses are discussed further in the next section.

Theoretical lenses

McLuhan (1964) interprets the term media non-traditionally, so for him 'the medium' is indeed any mediated form: money, clothing, number, games and cars 'are so persuasive in their personal, political, economic, aesthetic, psychological, moral, ethical, and social consequences that they leave no part of us untouched, unaffected, unaltered' (McLuhan and Fiore 1967: 26). They not only influence how people perceive the world and transform society but also rely upon society for 'interplay and evolution' (McLuhan 1964, 49). Because of his unique interpretation, he further looks beyond the content of the medium, so 'the medium' itself is 'the message' which consists of the changes or the effects on humans and their relations with others in a community. Television, for example, is a facilitator of communication, and its message may be that it is merely a passive activity, something to be watched, where content is of little importance.

Media in McLuhan's view (1964, 1994) can be categorized into hot and cool, describing the demanding levels of one's participation or involvement. Hot media such as radio and film make few active demands on listeners and viewers, with little need to participate or become involved in filling in any missing information. Radio and film are low in participation because they mediate in high definition, which provides essential meaning easy to understand. West and Turner (2004) observe that hot media offer something the audience is looking for, that is

entertainment. Cool media, in contrast, require a high degree of involvement and contain low definition. Telephone, television and cartoon are considered cool, for they need high sensory involvement of the audience to interpret the meaning of the information. For example, on the phone, one needs hearing capability to grasp the information as well as the listener to fill in to complete sensory data. Television engages viewers who need 'to be *with* it' (McLuhan 1964, 1994, 312) and who are required to actively or perceptually participate in it. Cartoons usually provide few words or phrases and illustrations that need the readers to think or complete missing data. In some senses these two categories of media more clearly show how they underpin society, which is considered cool to McLuhan. It is worth noting that more recent developments in communication technology may have blurred some of McLuhan's clear distinctions between 'hot' and 'cool' media.

McLuhan and his son developed the four laws of media tetrad to prove that his notion about the medium was objective (McLuhan and McLuhan 1988). These four laws become new instruments, framed as four different questions, to crystallize the role of new technology in society. Together with McLuhan's ideas of figure (medium) and ground (context), the tetrad can illuminate the role of the medium by means of examining how the medium affects the society and individuals under both past and present situations. First, 'what does the medium enhance or extend?' For instance, eye glasses would extend the vision and a phone would extend the voice. Second, 'what does it make obsolete?' Kappleman (2001) states that a car may reduce walking for a long distance, and a phone may make smoke signals unnecessary. Third, 'what is retrieved from the past?' While the car may retrieve a sense of adventure, the phone service returns a sense of community. Finally, 'what does it reverse into if it is pushed to its limits or overextended? Television reverses family ties into isolation as the automatic act of switching on television may make people in a family room fall silent. It is the same case with the Internet, which may keep its users solitary or isolated. Application of the four laws of media reveals the complete circle of a medium and how a new technology affects not only communication but also society and individuals. Once there are changes in technological innovation, there will be changes in society.

Applications of McLuhan's ideas in previous studies

Despite McLuhan (1964) coining the term 'the medium is the message' over 40 years ago, still makes a valuable contribution to media studies. Previous studies show that his aphorism has been applied to various fields; for instance, advertising, business, education, music, information and communication technology, as well as political economy (e.g. Andrew and Dyrud 1996; Brown and Kulikowich 2004; Carabell 2000; Dahlen 2005; Walls 2002). These studies have examined issues of societal change and impacts caused by or facilitated by new communication technology. However, there have been no previous applications of McLuhan's aphorism in regard to the use of English by non-native-English speakers in a context of intercultural communication and applied linguistics.

For example, Lane (1998) considers today's world not only as visual but also wired. These two perceived worlds have become 'the global village', primarily because television has proved itself to be a global messenger via, for example, 24-hour CNN news coverage and Satellite Television Asia Region. The death of Princess Diana in the 1990s, one of the most important contemporary examples of a media event that severely impacted on the British public, by extension presented a political challenge to the British monarchy. Through broadcast, people around the world watched the events portraying the life of the Princess, the public grief at her death, her funeral, and the car crash photos, which together extended the audiences' consciousness and modes of knowledge affecting their experience and interpretation of the event. Second, the wired world has revealed the powerful characteristics of money and social influence enjoyed by the wealthy to whom money offers unlimited power. Within 'the global village', ordinary people are encouraged to deliver their opinions regarding issues they find important, addressing them both on air and online. In this sense, the world is remotely, silently and legitimately changing, undermined by the forces and speed of emerging technologies with their ability to shift public opinion, balances of power and attitudes towards authority. For Morris (2004), however, 'the global village' signals fear: 'fear of the network' (418), creating significant terror in the US. The use of images in lieu of language demonstrates untranslatable stereotypical fetishism. This leads to refusal to contemplate peace negotiation.

Brown and Kulikowich (2004) have commented upon distance education via the channel of new communication technology, which compares positive attitudes of postgraduate students enrolled in a statistics course as distance learners with students studying in a traditional lecture format. This shows the extent to which technology can positively impact upon people's perceptions; professional teachers can concurrently convey this perception to society. Andrew and Dyrud (1996) suggest teaching document design as a part of business communication education, so that students can become productive and capable of meeting the future demands of current technology. They reason that the actual message is influenced by the computer screen and also that receivers' brains are stimulated or massaged by the visual display.

Shafer (2007), who teaches information design, stresses that there is a need to generate a common ethical code in the village based upon mutual respect, appreciation of cultural diversity, and ecological responsibility. In the 'global village', Shafer has students who have never met each other, and are from different parts of the world, enrolled in a same course. All online students are assigned to work on a project making a grass-roots model of international cooperation leading to a peaceful and prosperous future for all people. Through this virtual space, 'interconnectivity' and 'reciprocity' emerge. For Shafer, the Internet is the medium, the mode of delivery. The message is a global ethics development.

When it comes to diverse forms of medium, messages can be conveyed differently even though they have the same content. For example, reading about a war in a newspaper is not the same as watching a war on television or searching for a war story on the Internet. People who deliver the same message may imbue it with different meanings. For example, Walls (2002), who is a consultant in business management, views a messenger as a medium but disregards him as a message. Rather, the message is in the style, tone of voice, motivation and political agenda peculiar to the person who delivers it. In the similar vein, digital media, which are currently dominant, can convey various messages. They can bring text and images previously confined to the printed page to life as interactive research documents on CD-ROM through an integration of word processing and scientific software successfully reproduced. They can also please Levinson (1997, 250) while he mouses about and clicks on his computer.

The above mentioned type of reproduction is called 'convergence', which is one of digital media's key characteristics integrating text, graphics, sound and data into one form and reproducing it via a common digital language of bits and bytes (Miller 2005). Miller, a business consultant and communications theorist, suggests that digital media transform people's perceptions and behaviors by means of convergence. He considers the rethinking and redesigning of existing institutions challenging for people, especially for the younger generation who increasingly depend upon digital media at school, at work and at home. Institutions thus need to 'be highly agile and fast-changing, with extra capacity, awareness of the environment, powerful stabilizers, and buffering' (34).

In terms of web economics and advertising, Belle (2001) argues that technology cannot create value online without content, and that good content is easier to distribute than to create. It is a misrepresentation to cite McLuhan's original intent of 'the medium is the message' in web economics i.e., that the content is king. Rather, it should be the context that is king, especially when the meaning of the content is related to how it is delivered by technology. Similar to advertising, the medium creates the imagery and awareness of an advertised brand (McLuhan 1964). Anything 'along the route to a purchase is a part of the medium equation' (Kwiatkowski 1998, 45). In this context, web pages, licensed merchandise, product placement in films, package design and labeling become the additional vehicles that carry the advertising, which is the virtual product. Although many studies have proved that media context is important for advertisements, Dahlen (2005) argues that creative media choice in which the medium itself conveys the message has more potential advantages than traditional advertising. A creative media choice takes places when 'the brand logo and slogan are exposed and the brand associations are implicitly [conveyed] through the medium by [means] of priming and assimilation' (89).

Music is another area that has been explored using McLuhan's term 'the medium is the message'. Carabell's (2000) study of intentions claims that rock and roll music is the preferred musical vehicle for many people from the baby-boomers (post-1950s) generation onward. It is a form of musical expression that tells a narrative story describing changes and unexpected difficulties during the late twentieth century. The medium in this case is rock and roll music, and

the discourse which takes place within the social and/or political area is the message. Morris (1997), however, thinks that McLuhan's slogan is not a brand new idea and that some composers of electronic music in the latter part of the twentieth century interpreted it literally, thus misrepresenting the original concept and consequently his mediated perception. The statement would actually be 'best appreciated as an invitation to focus attention on the contingencies between a message and its mode of transmission' (85). Morris also gives credit to Milton Babbitt's thoughts on musical perception and its psychoacoustic invariants regarding electronically synthesized sound.

Applications of McLuhan's ideas to the present study

In the present context, I argue that the act of using English – the medium – takes on more significance in the lives of international students than what is said – the message. English is highlighted to be a cool medium of communication and instruction because, in reference to McLuhan's definitions, it contains low definition and requires non-native English students to participate actively inside and outside the classroom. If their pragmatic English ability is not yet developed into an adequately competent level despite the fact that they pass the minimum requirement of an English proficiency test, they will be unable to comprehend what is going on around them, especially in a spoken environment. Taking part in class discussions and daily conversations with CALD peoples then become barriers to them. An experience of such barriers is the cool message itself because it affects their security. This lack of confidence and security may further affect their academic and social life with CALD people. If they are able to develop their pragmatic English ability to a level where they can participate effectively in their academic and social lives, they are likely to gain security. Further, the tetrad or four laws of media will crystallise the role of English as a cool medium of communication and instruction. First, what does English enhance or extend? Second, what does English make obsolete? Third, what does English retrieve? Finally, what does English reverse into?

Method

One-on-one interviews were a means for data collection for this study. This qualitative research approach was selected because the study was not concerned with numerical measurement but

students' personal lived experiences in relation to their communication in English and their personal security in the Australian context (Johnson and Christensen 2004).

Participants

A small number of postgraduate students (n = 28) from a nonnative-English-speaking background were recruited on a voluntary basis in response to an advertisement at an internationally recognized university in Sydney, where more than 7,000 international students were enrolled. Although they studied at the same university, they studied different Master's Degree Programs. In order for them to be admitted to the university, they must pass the minimum requirement of a standardized English proficiency test, usually either IELTS or TOEFL. Most of them demonstrated their English competence through overall band score of IELTS result which is 7.0. This indicates their level of English as *good users*. Four of them passed equivalent English test through a direct language entry school. Only one person had the privilege to use her Korean university entrance exam result recognized in Australia. The following reveals the participants' pseudonyms and home countries.

Pseudonyms	*Country of origin*
1. Peng, 2. Shin, 3. Guang, 4. Dui, 5. Yao, 6. Kuo, 7. Doa, 8. Fong	China
9. Nadia	Czech Republic
10. Natalie	Colombia
11. Nelcy, 12. Josh, 13. Neil	Indonesia
14. Joo, 15. Kim	Korea
16. Keiko	Japan
17. Jose	Mexico
18. Fernando	Peru
19. Anna	Slovakia
20. Tom, 21. Cathy	Sweden
22. Jib, 23. Tik, 24. Gai, 25. Noy, 26. Toon	Thailand

27. Lam	Vietnam
28. Abdul	India

Procedures

Prior to each interview, I introduced myself and explained the aims of the study including the definition of the key concept. During each interview which took about half an hour, I took notes instead of tape recording the conversation so as to create an informal atmosphere. I also asked each student to recall his or her experience in communicating in English inside and outside the classroom during time spent in Australia (ranging from two months to one year). Although they had been studying at the same university for various lengths of time (ranging from two months to one and a half years), they all said that their memories remained fresh and that their experiences were hard to forget.

These are examples of the structured interview questions:
  1) Have you had any language barriers inside and outside the classroom? If yes, when and what are those?
  2) How did you feel when you faced the barriers?
  3) Did the feeling(s) you have affect your emotional security? How and why?

The data were validated by each student within a week after the interviews. First, I re-created each interview from my notes and emailed it to the participant for validation. All of them corresponded with me electronically, and three of them suggested minor changes which were then revised accordingly. The validated data were then analyzed and constructed into critically common themes (Bodgan and Biklen 1998).

Findings

All of the participants shared that they had experienced language barriers after their arrival in Australia. The length of the encounters of the barriers ranged from a minimum of a week to a maximum of an entire semester. For example, barriers lasted a few weeks for Nelcy, Shin, Nadia, Abdul and Tom, a month for Dui, Cathey, Toon and Natalie, seven weeks for Jib, a few months for Joo, Guang, Josh, Neil, Peng, Gai, Lam and Jose, and between four and six months

(approximately one semester) for Anna, Fong, Yao, Kuo, Kim, Doa, Fernando and Keiko. Fernando wished that he had started his academic life a semester later and had spent more time practicing English at the direct entry language school in which he was enrolled for 14 weeks. During the time they participated in my interviews, they saw that they had already managed to cope with the language barriers and they felt more positive with themselves and their pragmatic English ability.

The participants faced the same problem with understanding native-English speakers, especially Australians, in the beginning of their study at the university because they were not familiar with its language variety. While Anna, Nadia and Lam were more accustomed to British English, the rest were used to American English as they studied it at school in their homeland and were influenced through popular culture. Some participants additionally encountered difficulty in comprehending other varieties of English. The barriers at the same time affected their security. Their encounters are categorized into the following common themes: 1) barriers in varieties of English, 2) barriers in repetition and 3) feelings of security and insecurity.

Theme one: barriers in varieties of English
All 28 participants collectively said that Australian English (AE) was significantly different from English they were used to in two most obvious ways: the accented speech (how the Australians enunciate words) and its fast speed. They all expressed a hard time understanding the Australian accent and that Australians talked fast. Peng labeled her Australian tutors and lecturers' spoken English as having a strong accent and believed that they were lazy in their pronunciation. Shin labelled AE a 'tongue-twister'. Toon's Australian lecturer 'talked in his throat' and Tik's customers at Starbucks 'talked fast as if they mumbled in their throat'. Dui thought that AE was 'brand new'. While Nadia positively considered that AE accent was 'very special' for her to get used to. Lam presumed that AE was perhaps 'not a standard variation'. Fernando concluded that Australian pronunciation differed from American and British in a sense that 'it was so chunky'.

Joo, the only non-native English student in her class, thought that most Australian classmates and lecturers did not know how to interact with her so that she could feel at ease, understand them and take part in class. Most lecturers did not seem to care about the language as they spoke

quickly. At first, she thought she would understand most of the lectures, but when she started the class, she actually understood only half of it.

Apart from the Australian accent, other non-native English accents namely Asian, European and Brazilian caused difficulty in interactions when Anna, Cathy, Keiko, Fong, Kim and Nelcy spoke in English. Anna's main problem was her listening skills when unfamiliar accents were uttered by her teachers with Chinese and Chinese Malaysian backgrounds. British and European accents were the easiest for her to understand because she learned British English at school and met many Europeans with different accents. Cathy shared a similar experience to Anna in understanding her Asian classmates. She saw that her classmates from Asia seldom spoke in the class and when they did, they usually said something with a softer tone of voice which made it more difficult to understand them.

Keiko was unfamiliar with the accents of her lecturer from a Chinese background and classmates from Chinese, Indian and Brazilian backgrounds. Nelcy found it hard to understand some of her Asian classmates who spoke English with different accents and without full sentences. However, she thought that Chinese students who had studied a double degree in Translation and Interpreting and International Relations were good at English. Despite such barriers, Nelcy was able to make good friends with a person from Korea. Kim, a Korean student, could not understand her lecturers from Japan, Thailand and even Korea. She emphasized that it was necessary for her to understand everything the lecturers said. She thought that she could not hear it properly because it was the first time for her to study abroad in a country where the primary language was not her mother tongue.

While some participants had a hard time comprehending Asian and Brazilian English accented speech, some others faced obstacles with European English accent. Those included Fong, Nelcy and Dui. Fong encountered difficulties in grasping the content of class discussion due to her European classmates' accents, especially one from Poland. Nelcy had a little difficulty understanding some of her tutors from Greece and Turkey. She thought that they spoke English with the influence from their first language and this made it hard to comprehend. In contrast with Nelcy, Dui began to appreciate his tutor from Greece after his first week of tutorials

because he could adapt his ears to the tutor's English accent. However, a tutor from Turkey was different because he spoke English unclearly and this affected Dui's motivation in learning.

Theme two: barriers in repetition

In speaker roles, Neil and Kim had a similar experience which hindered their communication. They had to repeat what they said. Neil described his experience of class in the first few months when his Australian classmates did not understand his English, missed the points he wanted to make and asked him to say it again. He tried hard to take part in the class but he then preferred to be silent and just listen to the lectures. Additionally, Neil was reluctant to make contact with local people because he was asked to repeat what he said. For example, at a supermarket when he needed to ask about food or at a bank where he needed to interact with a teller, he was unsure because of the language barrier. This apparently affected his selection of where to shop and buy things because he preferred to go to Asian supermarkets where it seemed there was a better cultural understanding. At the bank where he had an account, a female bank teller from a Middle Eastern background seemed to understand him so he usually queued at her window every time he went there.

Kim was in a similar situation to Neil. She had to keep repeating the same sentences, but this was only on her first day at the university. One of the Australian administrative staff could not comprehend what she said when she was trying to find out why her name was not on the enrolment list in one of the courses. This tough encounter was unforgettable.

In a receiver role, Jib, Jose, Fong, Cathy and Gai had some experiences in common which hindered their communication. They did not feel at ease participating in two-way interaction because they had to ask other people to repeat what they were saying. Jib described this as a bad experience. Jose remembered the time he was talking with Australian friends and housemates. It was troublesome and tiring for him to try to understand what they said as he had to spend some time catching the words. Sometimes, he repeated the same question, specifically 'what?', and did not enjoy saying it over and over. Fong did not have the courage to ask such a question when she could not follow what her European classmates were discussing in class. She wanted to ask them to repeat the question but she felt too embarrassed to do so.

Cathy recalled her experience in talking on the phone. It was quite hard for her to understand the other person and express her thoughts. She could not use gestures to express herself either. In this case, she would ask them to repeat again and again. If she asked them three times and they did not respond, she would say something such as never mind. Similar to Cathy, Gai who worked part-time at a Thai restaurant rarely understood her customers because they spoke with an unfamiliar accent. When she took orders on the phone, she repeatedly asked the customers to spell some words such as their address and names. Regardless of the repetition she made, she was not discouraged. In fact, she stated that she would try harder to understand AE.

Theme three: feelings of security and insecurity

Nelcy was the only participant whose confidence in English was high because she did not think her English troubled her. Although there were barriers in understanding English spoken by her European tutors and Asian classmates including the Korean lady who became her good friend, she felt comfortable in the use of language as a means to build and maintain the intercultural friendship. As such, she felt secure. However, Abdul and Nadia lacked confidence and felt insecure because the former could not express himself in English and native speakers imitated his way of talking in English. The latter felt shy and worried that native speakers would make fun of her English accent.

Lam, Natalie, Fernando, Keiko and Doa did not see language barriers relating to their security even though they felt stressed, frustrated and depressed. It was because Lam felt left behind in her study but that she was able to cope with it. Natalie and Fernando believed their easy-going character helped them to cope. Keiko blamed her seniority believing that being in her mid forties impacted on her English. Doa who considered herself an introverted person had never subconsciously thought about her security.

When Neil, Jib, Kim, Gai, Cathy, Jose and Fong had difficulties with repetition, they all admitted that they were affected emotionally in a way that related to their sense of security. Neil felt reluctant and unsure. Jib felt awkward, and at the same time, he lost confidence and security.

Kim and Gai felt frustrated and insecure whereas Jose and Cathy felt a bit desperate and in a way insecure. Fong was too embarrassed to ask others to repeat what they said.

Peng felt upset, a little discouraged and insecure. She was upset about Australia and felt like going home. Other feelings of insecurity affected by language barriers were described by Dui, Joo, Tik, Noy, Josh and Tom. Dui was particularly helpless when he could not understand an announcement at the Sydney airport. Joo felt unconfident and excluded. Tik was insecure because she did not feel a part of the local society when she was unable to understand her customers. Noy and Josh felt insecure when failing to understand the Australians. Tom felt frustrated and insecure when he could not express himself.

Fong and Guang also felt frustrated, which led them to insecurity when neither could follow class discussions due to difficulty in understanding various accented speech. In the same vein, Shin felt frustrated and wondered if he would ever acquire AE. Toon was nervous and felt insecure when she could not follow the lectures because the conveners had unfamiliar accented speech. Natalie felt a little insecure when she was among native-English-speakers because she felt worried about speaking in English among native speakers.

Discussion

Themes one and two confirmed that English was 'the cool medium' of communication and instruction which contained low definition and required all 28 participants to actively participate in their social and academic lives. Theme three confirmed that English was 'the cool message' itself since the participants were emotionally affected by their undeveloped pragmatic English ability although they were assumed to be adequately competent in English as a result of passing the IELTS or the TOEFL. These three themes answered the key research question.

Theme one particularly showed that the cool medium of AE contained the lowest definition which required all participants to highly participate in and out of the classroom. This was because they all hardly comprehended AE and it took some time for many of them to adjust their ear to the language. The lowest definition appeared to lead them to perceive the cool medium of AE to be ugly, lazy and slovenly, unclear and marred by lip-laziness. These perceptions were

similarly observed over forty years ago by Mitchell and Delbridge (1965). This may be firstly assumed that AE accent is less favorable for study and mimicry by non-native English speakers as compared to American English and British English. Secondly, Australia has been unable to achieve what the United Kingdom and the United States have achieved in globally promoting their variety of English and cultures (Kirkpatrick 2002; Pennycook 1995; Skutnabb-Kangas 2000).

Besides AE, some participants struggled with understanding other unfamiliar varieties of English spoken by people from an Asian ethnic background (Chinese, Chinese Malaysian, Indian, Japanese, Korean and Thai), a European ethnic background (Greek, Polish and Turkish) and a Brazilian ethnic background. The distinctive varieties of English they encountered are sometimes called 'World Englishes' (Kachru 1985). In this sense, the cool medium of World Englishes contained low definition. Since the participants were more familiar with AmE and BE, they were also required to develop the level of their pragmatic English ability spoken in the present context. When CALD groups of people interact through the cool medium of World Englishes, intergroup communication can become unintelligible because they fail to recognize each others' utterances (Smith and Nelson 2006, 429).

It was not easy for the participants to develop their cool medium of English to the native-like level, although they had previously studied either American English or British English for a number of years at home and were socio-linguistically considered good users of English in Australia. Studies (e.g. Bamford et al. 2002; Kiley 2003) indicate that the results of English language proficiency tests cannot assure that their subjects have native-like language competence for communicating or native-like receptive ability. In part, this is because variations in English pronunciation are characterized by the influence of their mother tongue. Their interactive speech is described as language interference (Ellis 1999) or 'interlanguage talk' (Jenkins 2000 19) which refers to language phonological transfer from their mother tongue to the use of English. As such, unfamiliarity with 'World Englishes' may not be the only factor affecting their intelligibility. Jenkins further suggests that while interlocutors engage in the interlanguage talk, they must develop an ability to adjust their pronunciation based on the communicative context.

They must also accommodate their listeners. Concurrently, listeners must learn to deal with a certain amount of mother tongue transfer and not to expect target pronunciation.

Given that it takes some time for participants to develop their cool medium of English, Peng and Joo (described in Theme one) may in turn expect their Australian tutors, lecturers and classmates to adjust their speech to accommodate them (Giles and Coupland 1991; Jenkins 2003). Yet, they did not, although they could have modified their speech rate, pauses, utterance length and phonological variants to display their convergence (Burt 2005). This may suggest that on one hand the Australians were speech maintainers (Giles, Coupland and Coupland 1991) making little or no effort to make lectures and class discussions more comprehensible for non-native-English students. On the other, although there was no situational norm in the present context that the Australians had to adjust their speech for non-native English students, their speech behaviors were seen as violating the students' expectation. Burgoon and Hubbard (2005) call this negative interpretation as expectancy violation. This means the Australians may be unaware of or neglect nonnative English speakers' expectations. They may be unmindful of communicating competently (Gudykunst 1993; Ting-Toomey 2005). As such, the participants felt uneasy and unmotivated about participating in the classroom. The unmindful act and the maintaining of speech caused Peng and Joo to feel insecure in their identity because these features impinged on their ability to engage in the classroom. This may suggest that English makes the participants' identity security obsolete if they expect the Australians to linguistically accommodate them.

In theme two, some participants struggled to actively participate in the classroom because they could not say something intelligible to the Australians and they were directly asked to repeat what they had said. Conversely, their inability to actively participate made their feelings of comfort obsolete because they felt uneasy about asking the Australians to repeat what they had said which suggested that there was no speech convergence (Giles, Coupland and Coupland 1991) in their two-way interactions with the native. Neil, as a speaker, and Fong, as a listener, particularly became unmotivated and unconfident in speaking in class. This suggests that it is not simple for non-native-English students to develop their cool medium of English to be converging speakers or to speak English in a way that will accommodate the Australians.

Secondly, repetition resulting from the low definition of the cool medium of English constructed a perception of linguistic inability and identity negotiation incompetence which made their positive feelings obsolete. However, repetition for Gai as a speaker enhanced her self-concept-related motivation (Dörnyei and Clément 2001) to develop her pragmatic language ability instead of feeling inferior, indicating a higher degree of identity security (Kim 2001). However, speech convergence, a strategy by which an individual adjusts his or her speech to accommodate others, appeared to backfire as mocking behavior (Thornborrow 2004), when native speakers imitated Abdul's English accent. English in this sense made the participant's identity security obsolete.

As shown in theme three, Nelcy was the only person whose confidence helped her to actively participate in and out of the classroom. Confidence in herself and her English irrespective of how well she could actually perform, in turn, enhanced her identity security. Lack of confidence and perceptions of their pragmatic English inability appeared to affect the rest of the participants' personal feelings which further rendered twenty two participants to feel consciously insecure (although five participants denied this effect, they may subconsciously feel insecure as well). This may suggest that those participants who felt insecure experienced what Tananuraksakul (2009, 49) called 'World Englishes shock, a mental state of disorientation and frustration due to an exposure of alien varieties of English, which extends insecurity in [them]'. They also experienced 'repetition shock…a mental state of disorientation and frustration, but it tends to be a result of an exposure of unfamiliar variety of Australian English' (ibid). Their negative feelings in turn elicited identity confusion (Furnham and Bochner 1986, 48) suggesting that World Englishes shock and repetition shock resulted in identity shock. Concomitantly, identity shock impinged on their process of intercultural identity negotiation because they could neither integrate both knowledge and positive affect creatively nor practice them mindfully (Ting-Toomey 2004). The participants ineffective negotiation of their intercultural identity during their intergroup interactions with CALD peoples may suggest that they encountered intercultural identity negotiation shock. Similar to World Englishes shock and repetition shock, the term 'intercultural identity negotiation shock' can be defined as a mental state of disorientation and frustration because of the effect of going through a process of transforming identity when crossing cultural boundaries.

The role of English as the cool medium and the cool message discussed above is conclusively crystallized by McLuhan's (1988) tetrad: Firstly, English can enhance the participants' identity security if they are confident of actively participating in their social and academic lives regardless of how well they can actually communicate in the language. Secondly, English can make their identity security obsolete if they expect native speakers, especially the Australians, to adjust their speech to the level accommodating them. Lack of confidence and motivation in developing their pragmatic English ability can also make their identity security obsolete. If they further perceive that they are unable to develop their pragmatic English competence to speak with CALD people meaningfully and appropriately, their identity security can be obsolete as well. Their perceived inadequate English competence may further reduce the importance of their mother tongue and may confuse their identity security because they are in the English-medium context where their first language is recast as foreign. Third, English can retrieve confidence and identity security once they perceive they can manage to communicate with CALD people meaningfully and appropriately. The developed pragmatic ability may also create a sense of belonging and a desired identity socially sharing with CALD people. Finally, English can reverse into a more powerful global medium of communication significantly attractive to non-native-English speakers. This however may endanger their mother tongue and engender a more globally cultural homogeneity.

The present CALD context may be considered taboo following Allan's and Burridge's (2006) definition of taboo. They argue that taboo is "a proscription of behavior for a specifiable community of people, for a specified context, at a given place and time" (p.27). There is no written rule of what is taboo in any culture but taboo occurs when individuals' act to bring discomfort or harm to themselves or to others. Therefore, there is no consistent symptom resulting from the act of taboo. Being silent toward it is common although the use and meaning of silence in communication vary from culture to culture. For example, many Western people, especially Americans, interpret silence as lack of interest (Samovar, Porter and McDaniel 2007) while Asian people see it as a means of avoiding conflict and embarrassment (Chan 1998). Krajewski and Schröder (2008) argue that taboo discourse (topics that are not generally talked about) and silence are interdependent because they are part of individuals' daily life situations.

Since taboos are culturally and unconsciously based, individuals tend to misunderstand and feel uncomfortable continuing a conversation with their interactants. They become silent, which brings an uncomfortable feeling not only to themselves but also to others. A taboo will become visible, reveal its symptoms and what is sacred when individuals violate it by means of speaking about it consciously. Taboo violations are essential for social development because they raise an awareness of what is considered taboo in a certain society.

The encounters of barriers in the cool medium of both AE and World Englishes appeared to be taboo in a way that impinged on the participants' feelings because those encounters brought them feelings of discomfort (described in theme three). In turn, they responded to such barriers in different ways. Peng, Joo, Neil, and Fong, for example, reacted to barriers by being silent when it came to class discussions. Neil only queued at a window where a bank teller with a Middle Eastern look was on duty and he only chose to shop in an Asian supermarket where he could culturally identify himself with the shop assistants. In stead of turning into silence, Jose would deliberately respond by saying 'what?' while Cathy said 'never mind' and Gai requested name and address spelling.

Conclusion and recommendations

The study qualitatively examined how the use of international English affected non-native English students' security after moving from the familiarity and security of their homeland to unfamiliarity and insecurity of Australia. The number of subjects was small in representing the target group of non-native-English students enrolling in postgraduate programs in Australia. Yet, it gave an indication that the theoretical lenses of McLuhan's aphorisms shed light on the effects of English in the present context on the students' psychological well-being. English played the cool medium and the cool message itself in that when the students perceived a failure of communication with CALD people, they generally felt negative with themselves which may or may not lead them to insecurity and identity confusion. The negativity concomitantly affected their social and academic lives.

Regardless of being good users of English, without an adequate ability to communicate in English inside and outside the classroom, the students could not make sense of the world

meaningfully and appropriately. This linguistic inadequacy was influenced by the lack of accommodation in speech. Both speakers and listeners from native and non-native English backgrounds did not converge their speech as a compromise to create intelligibility. No matter how well or poorly they could actually communicate in English, self-confidence appeared to neutralize their actual English ability. This implies that self-confidence is the key characteristic leading to a success in intergroup communication in the present social context. Helping nonnative English students to improve their self-confidence can help them adjust to academic and social life more easily.

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