

AN INTERVIEW WITH JACK C. RICHARDS

Native English no longer the best target for learners

Jack C. Richards, the author of the bestselling “Interchange” series and other popular textbooks used by many English teachers, believes that mimicking native speakers is no longer relevant to English teaching and learning for people in Japan and other countries.

“Over the 40-year period, the state of English teaching has changed a lot with a lot more influence of English in daily life through the Internet and so on,” the New Zealand professor said in a recent interview, reviewing what has happened—and what has not happened—to Japan, where he has been a frequent visitor since 1972.

“Forty years ago, somebody was learning English in Japan and, if they didn’t speak it perfectly or spoke with a Japanese accent, we would say they hadn’t learnt properly, but now we say that to speak with a Japanese accent is a sign of cultural identity,” he said. “So, the idea that you have to imitate a native speaker is sort of considered to be out of touch.”

Richards, who has worked in various parts of the world, including Canada, Hong Kong, Indonesia, New Zealand, Singapore and the United States, was invited by the Japan Association for Language Teaching (JALT), Cambridge University Press and Oxford University Press to appear as a plenary speaker in the JALT2011 conference held in Tokyo on Nov. 18-21.

“In our [communicative language teaching] course books, we also have to bring in all these different regional varieties of English. No longer [is it enough to have] just American English, British English. We have to have Singapore English, Indian English, Mexican English and so on—different varieties. So there have been a lot of changes over the period,” he said.

In his latest work, “Four Corners” published by Cambridge University Press, Richards emphasizes the power of the four “C’s”—“can-do,” “clarity,” “confidence” and “communication.” As the first American English course with its syllabus linked to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), it aims to develop each “student’s ability to effectively use English across the different modalities of speaking, listening, reading and writing, while systematically promoting personalization and cultural fluency in a variety of real-

life contests.”

The CEFR describes ability levels for those who have learnt a language, a system that makes it easy for employers and academic institutions to compare employees’ and students’ qualifications, “So, the Common European Framework is becoming more widely used as a reference point in teaching and testing,” Richards said.

“Even in Japan, some universities are now studying to see how the curriculum they have relates to the Common European Framework,” the professor said. “The message is spreading in Japan, and professional organizations like JACET (the Japan Association of College English Teachers) and so on are looking at the Common European Framework to see how relevant it is to Japan.”

Asked if an Asian version of the CEFR is viable, Richards said, “It probably is going to come.” But he immediately added, “I don’t know because the situations concerning English are so different in each Asian country. Hong Kong is so different from Korea. Korea is so different from China. I don’t know whether that concept will work. It may do, but you have countries with an EFL [English as a foreign language] tradition versus those with an ESL [English as a second language] tradition. I don’t know how it will work.”

By the way, is it really acceptable for non-native speakers like Japanese people to speak English with their own accent? The professor said, “Sure, of course, For Japanese people learning English, the person they are most likely to use English with might be a Chinese or a Korean or a German. They are more likely to be using English with another non-native speaker than they are with a native speaker.

“Native speakers’ English is not always the best target. Also, the way



Jack C. Richards

native speakers use English is full of idioms and a lot of stuff that you cannot teach non-native people [living outside English-speaking countries]—it is part of living in Australia or living in the United States. It is a waste of time to try to think that it might be a target. What you need to do is to use English in the Japanese context, where you might be in a meeting in which 90 percent of the people are Japanese speaking English in a Japanese way and the rest might be Germans or Spanish or whatever. That is the reality.”

Richards said Asia needs what he describes as “cosmopolitan English,” which is “English spoken fluently by people with many different kinds of input.” He added, “Who cares whether they sound like Australians or Americans?”

He referred to typical European cities such as Berlin that are full of young people from all over the world who live and work there. “Often the only common language they have is English, but they are not necessarily using the Queen’s English. They are using a sort of English they become comfortable with among themselves—it is perfectly comprehensible. Some might be with Finnish accents and so on. That is what I call cosmopolitan English.”

Richards acknowledged that technology changes such as the Internet “have opened up a lot of potential” in English teaching and learning. Furthermore, in the business world, for example, “instant communication” or “instant response” is now an increasingly common cross-border norm. As a result, “now there is more and more pressure to require them to learn through English,” he said.

He cited the case of Turkey, which he recently visited. “Most of the subjects—all subjects in sciences—are taught in English at Turkish universities. That is also happening a lot in Europe because as populations decline, universities cannot survive on their own. That is happening in Japan, too. You have to internationalize your university to bring in more students. So that means that they have got to teach in English. That is another trend of the idea of teaching through English. Because it is happening in universities, it will then happen at schools [such as high and middle schools].”

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