

Prof: English sounds like one language, but it's really not

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Americans need to realize that English as they know it is not what the rest of the world knows, says a Purdue University English language expert.

"English is a hot topic right now because the United States is seeing a growing population that does not speak English, and other countries, such as China, are working very hard to make sure their children and adults can speak English," says Margie Berns, professor and director of Purdue's English as a Second Language Program in the Department of English. "The number of English speakers, and more importantly those who are learning English as a second language, is increasing around the world, and this will affect English as we know it."

As the language is picked up by other cultures, there will be differences in how things are pronounced, and the meaning of words and phrases can vary among cultures to suit local communicative needs, Berns says. American English went through the same process when it became distinct from British English in the 18th century.

"Take a simple greeting," Berns says. "In some African English-speaking communities, a person will greet another by saying, 'You have put on some weight.' Many Americans would be offended with this greeting, but in Africa, it is a compliment that acknowledges how healthy and prosperous a person looks.

"Failing to understand these differences can lead to problems in

international relations, business and even travel."

Scholars are working to better understand these differences. Berns is coordinating the 11th annual meeting of the International Association for World Englishes Conference on July 21-23, where about 200 writers, scholars and teachers in communication, language, education, rhetoric, sociology and political science will talk about language rights, economic and cultural globalization effects on language, English language media effects, literary creativity, English educational policies and linguistic purism and discrimination.

The Purdue conference, The Multiple Expressions of World Englishes, will specifically focus on the role English is playing in Third World countries.

"If lesser-developed countries want to become involved in the global marketplace, then speaking English is a perceived necessary tool," Berns says. "We need to understand what that demand means for these countries that have few resources to teach English to its citizens."

English, an Indo-European language that is rooted in Germanic and romance languages, originated in the United Kingdom. British and to some extent American colonialism in the 18th and 19th centuries played a key role in introducing English around the world.

"People may consider the United States and the United Kingdom as home to the English language, but communication is a two-way street, and we need to have a better understanding of how English is used in other countries and the effects the language has in different communities.

"Today, English is also at home in much of the South and Southeast and parts of Africa to that extent that we can speak of Malaysian English,

South African English, or Indian English as we do American or British English."

The language continues to spread to other countries as a result of international business and travel. However, more people speak Mandarin Chinese and Spanish as their first language rather than English. Yet, English is considered the language of the global marketplace.

"China is pursuing learning English with a vengeance so employees can interact more successfully in the business market," says Berns, who has traveled to China for the past six years to help English-as-a-second-language teachers adopt new teaching methods.

For example, she is encouraging teachers to include time for spontaneous speaking in classrooms rather than reciting dialogues, and using American print media to supplement texts written for language learning.

Graduate students in Purdue's English as a Second Language program are looking at how English is taught in rural Kenya and how government policy regulates the way English is taught in Eastern Europe. The graduate program, home to 30 master and doctoral students, was formalized in 1986 when Berns came to Purdue. The program also provides writing courses for non-native English-speaking graduate and undergraduate students, and many of the graduate students serve as instructors for the Oral English Proficiency Program, which is administered through the Office of the Provost.

Berns, a coordinating editor for the Encyclopedia of Language and Linguistics, has studied the role of English as a major world language. She also has researched the question of language standards and rights, including the movement in the United States to make English the official language and attempts to curb the use of native languages by immigrant

groups and the Spanish-speaking population.

Scholars attending the conference are from Australia, India, Ireland, Japan, Nigeria, Uganda, Hong Kong, United Kingdom and South Africa. The College of Liberal Arts, Department of English and the Interdepartmental Linguistics Program are supporting the event.

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