Life in the contemporary world brings almost everyone into contact with people of other languages and other cultures. From my own experience as a language learner and teacher as well as a traveller I have found that there are many problems and misunderstandings, which arise when we attempt to communicate across cultures. This paper explores the characteristics of cross-cultural communication in the 21st century and strategies used by successful intercultural communicators, drawing on data from a doctoral study of a number of users of English as an international language (EIL).

The paper also discusses the present status of English as an international language and argues that it is time to consider the implications of this not only in terms of appropriate pedagogies and instructional materials used in English language teaching/learning, but also in regard to the notions of ‘native speaker’ and ‘real situations’. It is argued in this paper that studying English will help learners become successful bilingual and intercultural individuals able to function well in both local and international settings (Alptekin, 2002:63).

It is 2004 and it is a fact that many people in today’s world are actively brought into contact with people from other cultures. One must also consider hidden effects of globalisation, such as passive exposure to ‘the otherness’ via mass media and films. As Lustig and Koester put it, “the twenty-first century is upon us, and competence in intercultural communication is an absolute necessity” (1999:ix).

Although commentators vary in attitudes towards the present status of English, it is widely regarded as having become the world’s major lingua franca. English is widely used in business, television, education and press. It has also become a default language among tourists all over the world. English is increasingly used by people with different levels of proficiency and diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Given this, it seems timely to empirically explore the characteristics of intercultural communication with the use of English.

**English in the 21st century**

- **Raihan (Bangladesh)** – English is the language, which is the mostly used worldwide – so it that sense it’s international.

Twenty years ago Kachru described the uses and users of English in terms of three circles. Briefly, the circles model captured the global situation of English in the following way:
1. The inner circle comprises the old variety English-using countries, where English is the first or dominant language (e.g. Great Britain).
2. The outer circle comprises countries where English has a long history of institutionalized functions and standing as a language of wide and important roles in education, governance, literary creativity, and popular culture, such as India, Nigeria, etc.
3. The expanding circle countries are those in which English has various roles and is widely studied but for more specific purposes than in the outer circle.

(cited in Kachru and Nelson, 2001:13)

Many talk about the limitations of the above model in relation to the current configuration of English in today’s world (Bruthiaux, 2003). It is argued nowadays that the demarcation lines between the circles in Kachru’s model are obscure. The concepts of ‘nativeness’ and ‘non-nativeness’ have become questionable (Bruthiaux, 2003, Yano, 2001, Kachru, 1999). Crystal (1997:56) has noted that “the distinction between ‘second language’ and ‘foreign language’ use has less contemporary relevance than it formerly had”. A number of researchers (Graddol, 1997; Lowenberg, 2002) make the point that the majority of the English language users belong to Kachru’s expanding circle. Pennycook (2001:79) comments that it is this group which is “the hardest to estimate but clearly the fastest-growing section of world speakers of English”. Several researchers have attempted to modify Kachru’s model (Yano, 2001, Modiano, 1999, etc.). Bruthiaux suggested a different approach where the focus is on ‘how’ speakers of English use the language:

In brief, the model should make it possible to represent speech practices based on patterns of interaction and communicative, not historical, factors […] (2003:175).

The common belief among all these writers is that English is more and more used as a major language of global communication.

This paper reports on some preliminary findings from research focused on the characteristics of intercultural communication with the use of English as an international language (EIL). The study attempts to take into account a wide range of contextual features. This paper draws on data from interviews with twenty users of English from seventeen countries. All the participants have different cultural and linguistic backgrounds, a variety of experiences when communicating with foreigners with different levels of intercultural communication skills, and different expectations and strategies in situations of intercultural communication. Four participants are native speakers of English. Sixteen have learnt it as a second or foreign language. Most of the participants have travelled extensively and some lived in foreign countries for prolonged periods of time.

The common assumption is that English is called an international language, or lingua franca, when communication involves no native speakers (Jenkins, 2003:35). Yet discussion of participants’ experiences of intercultural communication revealed that the use of EIL was not limited to non-native speakers only. Data suggests that native speakers of English also consider themselves to be users of EIL in particular situations. And these situations do not necessarily involve non-native speakers. An
Australian participant, Chloe, commented that ‘going to the States is sometimes like speaking a foreign language’. An American participant also talked about occasions when she used English internationally, occasions which did not necessarily involve non-native speakers of English:

Rachel (USA) – I do think about it [English] as an international language usually in the context of teaching, or if I go to the conference, or give a talk in another country, where the first language is not English. I think about it here, in Australia, because American English and Australian English are not exactly the same. […] And in England it’s different again.

How does one know when English is used as an international language?

Characteristics of intercultural communication with the use of English

Johnson (Sri Lanka) - That’s English but then that’s not international English!

Features of the cross-cultural communication process depend on the individuals involved, their cultural and linguistic backgrounds, their level of language proficiency and intercultural competence. In the context of the international use of English the intercultural communication process acquires particular characteristics; some terms of intercultural communication theory may require clarification in this context. For instance, in the context of EIL, the actual place of communication plays an important role in decisions about the language to be used and the behaviour patterns to be followed. Nowadays communication in the English language is not limited to Inner Circle countries. Moreover, it mostly takes place between non-native speakers. This also contributes to the nature of such communication.

When a language is used internationally by people with different cultural and linguistic backgrounds, traditional concepts of ‘culture’ no longer play such a crucial role in communication. The notion of ‘culture’ becomes modified to suit the context of use. Many participants talked about English and culture in terms of ‘common interests’:

Mara (Brazil) - I don’t know…but there has to be some aspect of similarity, I think. If I find people who like languages and like reading, they can come from Bangladesh and then we have something in common, and then we’re speaking English – great! We can talk for a long time. So you have to have common interests.

Elena (Russia) - And also interests, group interests as well… If you don’t have any common points, the fact that you speak the same language… you won’t communicate…

The majority of participants agreed that culture in the communication with the use of EIL is multinational. Most of the participants questioned whether aspects of daily life and local culture of Britain and the USA were important in the context of English as an international language. English is universally spoken nowadays and participants talked about multiple cultures, some kind of a ‘melting pot’ of cultures belonging to those engaged in the communication in the English language:
Jemima (Namibia) – I think… there are different cultures into English… But now English doesn’t necessarily belong to them [British] anymore. I mean, there are other versions of English and there are other cultures in the world. They do speak English.

Peter (New Zealand) - English is everywhere, spoken by native speakers and ESL speakers. The culture of it is…it’s really one of the many cultures as well… I mean… It’s very diverse.

Several non-native speakers of English argued that English is a means to express their own cultural identity. They said that it was very important for them to learn English in ways that enable expression of their own culture. Many participants insisted that ‘everybody should be proud of his culture’ and that speaking fluent English is possible without ‘dismissing’ one’s culture. Others argued that English can be a means of connecting people in a huge world of shared cultural understandings:

Johnson (Sri Lanka) - With a global language and if you want to teach the objectives, you have to look at why you’re teaching the languages so people can learn about the world, to be connected to the rest of the world. Because it’s a big world and, sorry, but England is not the only country, there are so many other places in the world.

Some participants talked of a ‘here and now’ culture element in communication with the use of EIL. They talked about the ‘polarising’ effect of focusing on original cultural backgrounds of those involved in communication with the use of English. Many participants consider themselves cosmopolitan individuals, only partially belonging to their country of origin. Participants said that one of the characteristics of communication with the use of EIL is a kind of acquired cultural anonymity. People do not always want their cultural identities to be present in communication; they want to be individuals in ‘here’ and ‘now’.

Some participants suggested a notion of ‘international’ culture, shared by all involved in the communication process. In this ‘culture’ each interlocutor brings particular components, which are then mixed. Many participants also stressed that the culture of the setting can be equally and sometimes even more important than individual cultures of those involved in interaction. On the whole, culture of communication with the use of EIL was described as dynamic and changeable.

The place of interaction is also mentioned when participants talked about standards in the international use of English:

Jemima (Namibia) - Standards are only set where you are, in the places you go to. Each place has its different standard so if you consider yourself internationalized or so, you would attire to the standard of that place. You can’t just bring your own stuff. […]… if you’re considering yourself internationalised you should be able to fit into any environment and be able to communicate with people, no matter what level they are.

In situations of intercultural communication where the participants come from different cultures and meet at a location unfamiliar to them, it is very important to establish common ground. Participants described this as a level where all interlocutors feel comfortable. The English language was seen to be both a major tool
for creating this common ground and part of the common ground itself. That is, it is both means and content:

**Jemima (Namibia)** - You can’t just decide to be all Russian and I can’t just decide to be all Namibian so… somewhere we have to find a common ground. […] Of course, your background is important but if you want to internationalize, globalize yourself you would have to accept others the way they are as well and know that they are different.

Although a common perception is that English no longer belongs to Inner Circle countries anymore, data suggests that some basic features, commonly associated with inner circle language use, should be considered even in situations where no native speakers take part. For instance, participants from different countries specified a ‘typically English’ feature of ‘politeness’:

**Angah (Indonesia)** - If I compare between Australian and Indonesian culture and ‘thank you’, Australian culture has more ‘thank you’ than Indonesia.

**Mara (Brazil)** - In English you use more ‘please’ and ‘thank you’ than in other languages so be polite.

Participants argued that in order to communicate efficiently in situations of cross-cultural communication, these grammatical structures of politeness have to be employed:

**Peter (New Zealand)** – […] So, effective communication and English as an international language would be essentially where you adopt these grammatical structures of politeness rather than just using your own language structures and just basically transliterating, translating into English what you’d be saying in your own language.

This ‘politeness’ provides a foundation for the successful communication process. These features create a sense of equality and balance in the unfamiliar situation.

One of the characteristics of the truly international use of English was that one’s ‘level’ of English changes depending on one’s interlocutor:

**Elena (Russia)** - When you speak to a person who knows English very well, you naturally ‘pull nearer’, try hard somehow, use more or less beautiful language. And when you speak with someone, whose accent is very strong and who uses very simple locutions, you think ‘If I use complicated locutions he might not understand me’.

The non-native speaker participants clearly distinguished between two variants of communication in English depending on the interlocutors: (1) situations when one/some of the interlocutors are native speakers; (2) situations where English is used between non-native speakers exclusively. All non-native speaker participants were proficient in English and could freely express themselves. Nevertheless, during the interviews with non-native speakers, native speaker interlocutors were often criticised and said to be ‘impatient’, ‘dominating’, ‘unintelligible’ in the context of EIL:
Angah (Indonesia) - They [native speakers] still can use their slang words, you know, it’s hard… But when they come across me or other people from international background… The international communicators still can’t communicate with local people, I mean the native speakers.

Communication events where all participants used English as their second or third language were characterized as more ‘democratic’ than the ones with one or more native speaker participants:

Anja (Finland) - It’s funny that even if I speak or understand German or Swedish but if we are in a multinational club so we choose to speak English because that’s when everybody somehow equal. […] Using English language is somehow supporting democratic communication.

In the communication process, where users of international English are non-native speakers, all have similar problems of expressing themselves, being slow, looking for the right words. Therefore they have better understanding and greater tolerance towards difference:

Elena (Russia) - A non-native speaker of English will understand a non-native speaker better than a native speaker. And better than a native speaker will understand a non-native speaker.

Although all participants characterised EIL as diverse and multicultural, they also maintained that ‘getting the message across’ was still the primary goal of communication. Therefore it is the responsibility of everyone to work towards this goal of effective communication:

Johnson (Sri Lanka) - You can’t completely say ‘This is my accent and this is beautiful’. It’s all well and good but it’s not going to get you from point A to point B, you will have a lot of obstacles. So, it’s basically about you. You have to look at it and you have to try and address the problem.

Having said that English plays an important role as common language, several non-native speakers mentioned drawbacks such as inability to express themselves clearly due to lack of proficiency. Participants also talked about the limitations of a common language, when one has to compromise and make discussions ‘thinner’ in order to make oneself understood by everyone. Participants stressed that sometimes one has to ‘imagine what might be behind’ another’s words. On the whole the communication process with the use of EIL is highly interpretive.

Taehee (South Korea) - There’s always… there are always words and expressions that you’re not quite sure about and you don’t really have to ask to make sure … So I do my own interpreting… And because we are non-native speakers we use the words not correctly sometimes… But I can tell that he meant ‘this’ and instead of correcting him or asking I’d just think ‘Oh, I guess he meant ‘this’ and that keep the conversation going on and it prevent communication breakdowns…

In general, communication with the use of EIL can be described as highly context-dependent. This requires well-developed intercultural communication skills of all
involved. Lustig and Koester (1999:280) state that “competent interpersonal relationships among people from different cultures do not happen by accident”:

They occur as a result of the knowledge and perceptions people have about one another, their motivations to engage in meaningful interactions, and their ability to communicate in ways that are regarded as appropriate and effective.

There are different ways of making communication successful and participants suggested a number of strategies.

**Strategies used for successful communication with the use of EIL**

**Angah (Indonesia)** - So it must be in English if you want it for everyone…[...] So luckily, we have English…I mean international language…Otherwise we cannot reach such kind of understanding!

Due to the contextual diversity of the international use of English, the word ‘difference’ and its derivatives was used constantly throughout the interviews. Participants talked about understanding differences, accepting differences. General awareness of difference was considered a crucial factor when communicating across cultures with the use of EIL because in this context participants face all sorts of accents and manners:

**Johnson (Sri Lanka)** - You have to be willing to accept that they are all different and you have to learn not to impose your values on other people. Like, they might have other ways of doing things, which is great, which is fine. You have to accept that people do things differently.

Being **open** was mentioned along with being **understanding** and **tolerant**. Interlocutors have to be accepting and patient when communicating with people who are not fluent in English:

**Johnson (Sri Lanka)** - It doesn’t mean they’re bad communicators, it only means they’re different communicators. You have to be willing to accept the accent, the intonation, the way of speaking.

**Elena (Russia)** - The culture of communication with the use of EIL is more tolerant towards the manifestation of other cultures. Because only by being tolerant we can communicate with those who (in our opinion) does not behave himself in accordance with our culture, has other cultural values.

Being **positive** or **positive-minded** was also seen to be necessary. In general, participants talked about the conscious effort needed to be efficient communicators. Non-native speakers seemed to be more aware of the need to think of communication with the use of EIL in wider terms than mere acceptance of linguistic differences. Many talked about using body language, and even ‘performing’ to show what is meant. Participants saw **a smile** as key to success:

**Mara (Brazil)** - Smile. If you are open to people… You usually get what you give so if you’re polite and you smile and you’re friendly that’s usually what people give you.
May (Thailand) – First of all you have to smile when you meet somebody. That is, like, more than fifty per cent 😊

Expressing oneself and being true to oneself was also seen to be a vital part of successful intercultural communication. Participants talked about a strategy of being ‘proud and loud’ about personal identity:

**Johnson (Sri Lanka)** - The key component for everyone is that you have to be proud of your culture, to be proud of who you are, and you have to make your voice be heard, not matter how you speak it, no matter what accent you have, what intonation you have.

The above does not mean that we compromise is unnecessary. Again, the place of communication was mentioned by participants in relation to the concept of **adapting**:

**Johnson (Sri Lanka)** - To some degree you have to look at the majority. You’re trying to express yourself, you’re trying to communicate with people in a new country. Then you’re a minority, you have to adapt to a new country. Adapting doesn’t mean loosing your personality, it simply means that the way you communicate… You improve your communication skills.

Peter (New Zealand) insisted that intercultural communicators should be ‘more aware of what the accepted behaviour seems to be’. Constant learning by thinking and observing was mentioned more than once in relation to discussion of the adaptation process:

**James (China)** – Well, when in Rome do as Romans do. Yeah, observation first…and then…following and then… maybe it’s not like kind of mechanical following…You got to think why you do this. Think while you’re observing, why they do this or what’s the purpose of doing this.

The participants noted that it is not always possible to have knowledge about the cultural and linguistic backgrounds of all interlocutors when communicating in English:

**Elena (Russia)** - Because you never know if it’s a different personality or different cultural communication. You shouldn’t think you’re always right. Maybe in your country in such situation you can be 100% sure that you right But when you’re in a different country you should observe more, you have to pay attention, you have to watch.

Situations of English use vary greatly and one cannot always rely on previous knowledge. Participants talked about being sensitive in the context of international use of English. Being careful was also described as a strategy:

**Anja (Finland)** - I’m a guest or I’m a visitor here, in this culture, and here the rules are different and I try to make it in a modest way. Just say carefully something and then see what the reaction and then continue. This is my strategy.
Although asking questions was ‘natural’ for some of the participants, it was not easy for many of those involved in intercultural communication. They said they were afraid to re-ask and double check because they did not want to appear stupid. This seems true not only for non-native speakers, but also for native speakers. **The ability to ask questions** was said to be extremely important because there was always a need to double-check or ask for clarifications if the other person involved has a strong accent or speaks too fast. It was also important to be willing to answer questions of other, less proficient interlocutors:

**Elena (Russia)** – If you don’t understand another person, you ask again. And that person, if he’s re-asked all the time, asked to explain or expand, doesn’t show his irritation openly but tries to give his time and answer the questions. Not like when someone says ‘You don’t know it and it’s your problem, I don’t want to help you’.

Although participants talked about accepting ‘any English’ and tolerating anyone no matter what, **improving language skills** at a personal level was listed among the strategies needed for successful communication. Participants suggest that international use of English does not require very fluent or highly-idiomatic language. Despite this, users of EIL must monitor when he or she is not being understood, analyse the reasons for this and use this information to make improvement:

**Johnson (Sri Lanka)** - And if accent is one of the things, you have to work on it. […] It’s an effort from both sides: you have to make an effort to try and understand them, but then, they have to realize ‘Look, it’s a hindrance to me, it’s not helping me, so I need to take steps to do something about it’.

Diverse contexts of English language use result in situations where all interlocutors come from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. For communication to be successful participants must all develop skills in the use of strategies such as those outlined above.

**Users of international English or internationalised users of English?**

**Maisha (Tanzania)** – To me, when you say something international’, maybe because all people can understand each other, but not because of their pronunciation, not because of vocabulary. It’s international language because all the people can use it.

Most non-native speakers considered themselves speakers of EIL ‘by default’ but the data suggests that this is not always the case. For instance, speakers of English as a second language (Kachru’s Outer circle) may also come across as ‘less intelligible’ in an international context. This can happen in former colonies where English is an official language in government and higher education domains and is used mainly for internal communication. It can rarely be explained as lack of language proficiency. For instance, the language of African English speakers was described by participants as ‘very rich’. Pronunciation was given as one reason for poor intelligibility. Three participants (a native speaker among them) stated that ‘Indian English’ was difficult to comprehend. They explained this by the speed of delivery and what they saw to be a strong accent. Participants argued that, although some of these difficulties may
gradually disappear, this kind of English was ‘not ‘right’ because people did not understand it in contexts external to the society in which it developed, and ‘it was not international anymore’.

It was felt that whether native speakers used EIL or not depended on different circumstances. Non-native speakers of English maintained that a native speaker’s professional background was important. Teachers and university lecturers were mentioned more than once as intelligible and willing to understand, which made their English ‘international’. Bus drivers and staff at supermarkets were often given as opposite examples:

Raihan (Bangladesh) – My teachers, my colleagues at Monash University, the Australian colleagues and teachers do not talk to me like a bus driver would or…someone at McDonald’s, or KFC, or…Coles. It’s quite different. And this difference comes in pronunciation, but also in the choice of words and jargon, you know, the slang which is used here…

In this study Kachru’s (1985) model is modified in order to present a picture of the use of English as an international language in today’s world (see figure 1). It seems appropriate to illustrate the spread of EIL as crossing national and geographical boundaries. The shape of a triangle represents the extent to which English is used as a lingua franca by people belonging to the three domains of English language use.

Figure 1. Use of international English across Kachru’s circles.

We should consider more than a dichotomy between native and non-native speakers in the context of successful intercultural communication with the use of English. According to participants, an efficient user of EIL can belong to any of Kachru’s circles (1985), as long as he/she possesses the qualities of a good intercultural communicator and is aware that English is used as an international language:

Jemima (Namibia) – [An] international person will take the person’s cultural differences into consideration and speak in the way that communication goes, you know.

Melchers and Shaw (2003) classify speakers of English according to the scope of their proficiency and distinguish between four proficiency levels: internationally effective, nationally effective, local proficiency, ineffective. An internationally effective speaker ‘is able to use communication strategies and a linguistic variety that is comprehensible to interlocutors from a wide range of national or cultural backgrounds’ (Melchers and Shaw, 2003). Byram (1995, cited in Bianco, 2004) uses a similar concept of an ‘intercultural speaker’:
An intercultural speaker is someone who can operate their linguistic competence and their sociolinguistic awareness of the relationship between language and the context in which it is used, in order to manage interaction across cultural boundaries, to anticipate misunderstandings caused by difference in values, meanings and beliefs, and thirdly, to cope with the affective as well as cognitive demands of engagement with otherness.

In today’s world most of us need to be intercultural, or internationalised, users of English. Llurda argues that the ‘vast majority of the many millions of non-native speakers of English are not conscious of being speakers of EIL’ (2004:320).

Participants also talked about the difference between a non-native speaker and an international speaker of English:

**Jenima (Namibia)** - International speaker obviously takes all the consideration of intercultural differences and so on, whereas a non-native speaker could just be somebody who just learnt English but is not aware of all the different cultures. So when speaking to somebody else he would just speak anyway, because the English that he knows is non-native.

World spread of English has become a matter of profit and a reason for national self-satisfaction for its native speakers (Widdowson, 1997:135). However, in today’s world the international use of English is distanced from Inner Circle norms and cultures. It is crucial for native speakers to learn more about the international status of English. Llurda (2004) maintains that native-speakers of English may lose control to non-native speakers, when the latter become aware of their rights as users of EIL:

> When it happens, native speakers will need to learn the conventions of EIL in order to communicate successfully with the larger community of English language speakers (Llurda, 2004:320).

**Conclusion**

Pennycook (1994:325) remarks that “the spread of English, if dealt with critically, may offer chances for cultural renewal and exchange around the world”. Gimenez (2001:297) makes the point that “the value of knowing English lies not only in the ability to access material things, but also in the possibility it offers for creating acceptance of, and respect for, the World’s diversity”.

I argue that, in order to develop learners’ intercultural competence in the outer and expanding circle countries, English should be taught as an international language. Moreover, native speakers of English need to become aware of the consequences of the new status of their mother tongue.

I believe that learning any foreign language enables us to be a part of more than one culture, thus giving us different perspectives and insights which help to make us more tolerant and versatile individuals. There is a growing belief amongst language professionals that the future will be a bilingual/multilingual one, in which “an increasing proportion of the world’s population will be fluent speakers of more than one language” (Graddol, 1997:4). Given the recognized function of English as an
international language it may become a universal means to learn more about the world around us:

English is by no means the magic wand for international understanding, but it can contribute to it if the language was presented appropriately and used effectively. (Matsuda 2002: 436)

It is 2004. I argue that it is time for all English speakers all over the world to understand the significance and consequences of the current spread of English and to internationalise themselves. While not denying multilingualism as a better way to communicate across cultures, I have no doubt it will be an advantage if a person’s first, second or third language is the world’s most popular lingua franca. If this is the case, it is my hope that speakers of this language will engage with it as internationalised users.

References
