

What is “Standard English”? Teaching the Pronunciation of English as an International Language

Abstract

The globalization trend in recent years and an increasing awareness of the reality of English as an international language (EIL) have brought the challenge to the notion of “standard English” into the field of English as a foreign language (EFL) teaching. This study analyzes a group of international students’ perspectives of “English accents,” reviews the existing theory of English as an international language, and discusses its pedagogical implications for teaching pronunciation.

Keywords: English as an international language (EIL), English as a foreign language (EFL), varieties of English, teaching pronunciation

Introduction

As a result of the increasing mobility of people, and the growing economic and academic exchanges across national and cultural boundaries, English has become the most important international language. One prominent feature of EIL is recognizing the diversity of English and the diversity of its users. This paper analyzes theories and studies of English as an international language as related to the teaching of pronunciation. By drawing on findings of a survey on international students’ perspectives of varieties of English accents, we discuss the gap between the “ideal English” and the actual English use and its implications for pronunciation teaching. The main challenges faced by language teaching professionals and policy makers in today’s globalized world are the varieties of English as a fact in daily lives, in actual communication of both first language (L1) and second language (L2) English users’ communities. Knowledge of English varieties and how the varieties are presented in teaching in an EFL context should be of major pedagogical concern for English teaching practitioners and policy makers.

The Under-realized Reality of Varieties of English

As cited in Walker (2010), Labov (1982) states that, “Heterogeneity is ... necessary to satisfy the linguistic demands of everyday life” (p. 9). Such heterogeneity of English is described in Mahboob (2010) as follows: “English is spoken and written differently by people in various parts of the world – this is true for both monolingual and bi/multi-lingual speakers of English. Language variation is a natural phenomenon and is observed in most languages of the world” (p. 8). A summary of academic discourse

on diversity of English (e. g., Holliday, 2009; Liao, 2005; McKay, 2002) indicated that most people are unaware of the following facts. First, the number of the “nonnative speakers” (NNSs) of English far exceeds that of the “native speakers” (NSs). Second, most English users, first-language (L1) and second-language (L2) combined, use English with NNSs. And third, in both L1 and L2 communities, people speak and write English differently. Therefore, there is a remarkable gap between the “standard English” taught in most EFL classrooms, and the diverse “real Englishes” spoken by L1 and L2 English users.

A Survey of International Students’ Perspectives of English Accents

As part of a larger scale survey, 57 international students in a Taiwan university responded to 15 four-point Likert-scale questions on their perspectives of English accents. The participants, who were from 12 countries, were all nonnative English speakers with proficient English to take English-medium classes at college level. As the first line user of English as an international language, the voice of international students reveals a mixed and even self-contradicting attitude toward accents of English.

For the purpose of this particular discussion, the results of the four-point Likert-scale survey were recoded into polar forms, with “YES” defined as “strongly agree” or “agree;” and “NO” defined as “disagree” or “strongly disagree.” To comply with the page limit regulation of this submission, a brief summary of the initial findings is presented here. And a more detailed analysis of the survey results will be reported in the conference presentation. In terms of the notion of “standard English,” although 40 percent of the participants did not think there was one “standard English,” 50 percent thought British English can be considered a model, and 60 percent thought American English can be a model. On the issue of English accent and communication, although 50 percent had experienced some communication problem attributed to accent, about 60 percent of those surveyed did not think English accent is a problem in communication in general. Over 87 percent believed everyone speaks English with some kind of accent. More than 60 percent agreed that accent showed where they were from. However, somewhat contradictory to the above findings, over 60 percent indicated that they “try hard to get rid of their accent,” and 84 percent wished their own English could be “accent-free.” This may indicate a conflicting attitude toward their own accents. On the one hand, they agreed that accent is something very common and not much of a problem. On the other hand, they also showed a strong identification toward the “native speaker” varieties of English. It suggests that the concept of “native variety as the standard English” still has strong influence on

international students' attitudes toward accent. Such ideology is quite common among EFL teachers and students in general, and it deserves to be addressed in EFL classes.

The Pedagogical Issues

Based on the above findings, pronunciation pedagogies consistent with EIL ideology should be designed to (1) Develop awareness of diversity in English and its users; (2) Explicitly teach systematic variations commonly heard, such as the vowel contrasts between different varieties and the contrast of rhotic vs. non-rhotic varieties; (3) Develop adaptive comprehension competence, involving suprasegmental, visual (non-verbal) and contextual cues; and (4) Choose to address appropriate varieties, since the "appropriate target models of English in different contexts of the world" (Young & Walsh, 2010, p. 123) depend on the needs of the learners. As EFL users, we should be sensitive to, and adaptive of, different varieties of English in communication. However, when it comes to the teaching of the language, we face the challenge of deciding "Which English to teach?" Certain norms are necessary for language learners to follow. The relatively "core" norms have been discussed extensively in some literature such as Jenkins (1998, 2000), and Walker (2010). And decisions have to be made as to which variety or varieties of English should be introduced. Of equal or more importance is the introduction to the notion of the non-uniform nature of an international language, and the ability to adapt as a user of such a language. In addition, some knowledge of the learner's first language is always helpful to, if not required of, the instructors in order to provide effective teaching of pronunciation to EFL students.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the issues in teaching EIL are beyond which variety of English to teach. They involve the knowledge of the commonality of varieties of English, of the importance of adaptive ability and communication strategies necessary for English-medium international communication to be effective. As such, the teaching of EIL is not limited to the matter of "which English" to teach but more of which norms to include and a matter of teaching awareness, competence and versatility. That is, knowing there are varieties, being able to comprehend and adapt to the varieties in order to accomplish the communication tasks, when the relatively "core" norms of pronunciation are being acquired. Though the discussion of this paper focuses on pronunciation teaching, it has implications for the teaching of other aspects of English as well.

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