Standard Language Ideology and Its Impact on English Language Teaching

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ABSTRACT

The multifarious World Englishes paradigm distinguishes certain varieties as "native" Englishes, such as British English and Australian English, from others, known as "New" Englishes, such as Chinese English, Korean English, that are influenced by the "native" varieties. Although there is widespread acceptance of the diversity of regional Englishes in the modern world, many studies have found that "New" English varieties are still labelled as "incorrect", "deficient", or "illegitimate" by some groups, and this is not just held in native communities, but also in outer and expanding circles such as Singapore, Japan, etc., as demonstrated by their adherence to Received Pronunciation (RP) and General American. This article aims to clarify the distinction between an "English" and "Standard English", to explain the origins of Standard English ideology in modern society in the context of its historical roots and discuss the implications for future teaching practices.

Keywords: Standard English, Standard English ideology, World Englishes

1. INTRODUCTION

With more than 350 million learners [1], Chinese English learners make up the largest group of English learners in the world. Combined with some mandatory standardized testing, we use the dictionaries and grammar books to promote literacy and to enhance all other aspects of standard form of English. Everything seems to be standardised and through this procedure, we believe that we have acquired a complete view of "English". However, does Standard English stand for "English"? This article seeks to promote the idea that learners should be provided with a more comprehensive understanding of what the term "English" means and how to assess Standard English and its associated ideology from a sociolinguistic perspective.

2. ENGLISH AND STANDARD ENGLISH

According to Horner and Weber [2], "English" is just a label that represents the name of the language, and under this label are some varieties of the language that are actually used by people in everyday life, and more importantly, varieties such as British English, American English, Singaporean English and Gambian English, or sub-varieties within a specific nation like Yorkshire English and Birmingham English (so-called "dialects")

are all equal, neither variety is superior or inferior to the other. Similar to the way people used to define "dialect", the boundaries between different varieties in English are not determined by linguistic phenomena, but by regional, political and other social factors, and as one of the variety spoken by the upper class in southeastern England, Standard English emerged in the late middle ages [2]. By the logic above, Trudgill [3] concludes that Standard English is merely one of a number of varieties of World Englishes.

However, Standard English has been discussed and positioned quite differently throughout history. During King Alfred's reign there were early attempts to standardize the official language in court in England, and several centuries later the Chancery Standard was introduced [4]. As a result of the standard written form of English established by dictionaries, the monarchy and the wealthy classes of the UK developed a special accent known as the Received Pronunciation (RP) that is of great importance and still regarded highly to this day, not to mention its pivotal role in the development of the standard language ideology of the 20th century [5]. It was only decades ago, during a debate between Randolph Quirk and Braj Kachru, that new insights were gained. Quirk [6] strongly asserts that all non-native learners of English should be instructed in a single standardized form of English based on British English, with Kachru

[7] holding a contrary view and arguing that there are many varieties of English, all of which are linguistically equal and classified English varieties according to this now famous "three circles" model, also called "the inner, outer, expanding circles". Seeing the significance of the plurality of English varieties, Kachru established a field of study known as World Englishes. Nonetheless, the concentric circle model was subject to some criticism over a short period of time, among which was the view that although there are multiple varieties of English, all of equal quality, the inner circle variety is the most beneficial to learners [8]. Consequently, such views further laid the foundations for standard language ideology in modern society in conjunction with its historical roots.

3. STANDARD LANGUAGE IDEOLOGY

An ideology of standard language refers to the way society views language standards, typically with notions about the type of English that is considered correct or incorrect [9]. As Galloway and Rose [5] suggest, English is an unstable construct and cannot exist in a vacuum, as many other dead languages do, it draws upon the resources of other languages, speakers, cultures, and societies to create new varieties and fill in the World Englishes paradigm Kachru [10] has established to showcase English's pluricentricity. However, a central characteristic of standard language ideology represented by Quirk is that it is always intended to halt or slow down linguistic change by enshrining a particular language in dictionaries, grammar books, and textbooks [2].

Based on the results of a study conducted by Starks and Paltridge [11], American and British English were rated higher by Japanese students than New Zealand English. In addition, study results show that with the powerful impact of standard language ideology which are permeating their daily lives, some speakers even have an unfavorable attitude towards the variety of English spoken in their own accent, with a number of popular books have been published in Japan that address the topic of "overcoming" Japanese-style English. Japan is not the only place where issues of this nature arise. There are also instances where the adherence to native-speaking norms is reflected in official language policies. The Singapore government launched a "Speak Good English" program in 2000, with the intent of eliminating Singlish, which was considered to be a "bad" language [2]. As a result, this initiative failed to achieve the desired results as the government overlooked the strong ties between Singaporeans and Singlish. Similarly, the government and business community in Hong Kong (SAR of China) prefer the use of Standard English in formal correspondence compared with Hong Kong style of English which is regarded as "bad" English and it has been observed that the majority culture in Hong Kong exhibits a kind of linguistic purism in which standards are

viewed as mainstream and deviations from the norm as a sign of cultural or linguistic inferiority[12].

Another study conducted by Galloway [5] highlights two reasons for Standard English's popularity among outer and expanding circles. The first reason is that in some areas Standard English is considered to be the only "legitimate" one among the others. Secondly, the media and advertisements have perpetuated the stereotype that Standard English is the only criterion that can be used to measure English proficiency, and there are a number of reports documenting the effects accents can have on a person's life and career. This is especially true for the language policy of Singapore, in which the government aims to promote the use of Standard English in order to provide all Singaporeans with the best possible opportunities for employment and education in a competitive globalized environment given that Singapore is a highly multicultural country [2]. Jenkins [13] also stresses that American English is important in countries such as China and Japan, which may be influenced by their close economic relations with the United States. Accordingly, the long period spent by the Chinese English learners, such as those pictured above, in studying Standard English makes sense.

It is important to note that, in addition to Kachru [7] establishing the dynamic concept of World Englishes, this scholar [7] also elaborates on three stages leading to social acceptance of non-native varieties. The first phase is characterized by the local community not being familiar with the local variety of English as they prefer a native one, which is in line with China and Japan. In the second stage, both the local and imported varieties coexist, but the inner circle variety remains the favourite, particularly for formal functions, as is the case in Singapore, for example. When a local variety has become accepted as a norm and is fully acceptable by society, a third phase occurs. In other words, the development and formation of the "New" English varieties are not instantaneous processes that can be accomplished automatically, the speakers should be given more time to contact and accept it. And as Horner and Weber [2]concludes, from a social and cultural perspective, despite the fact that the logic of standard language ideology may have certain flaws, Standard English does indeed hold a significant social and cultural significance, compared to other varieties of English. Consequently, as the standard language ideology is shifting in direction towards the fluid, dynamic ELF paradigm, greater consideration should be paid to the role Standard English plays in national diplomacy, the educational system and the everyday usage of citizens in various circumstances.

4. CHALLENGES IN EFL CLASSROOM

A significant number of scholars have argued that the emphasis placed on the standard form of English as the path to proficiency in English in the classroom has

negatively affected students' performance, with Poon [12] stating that in Hong Kong the inability to achieve the level of Standard English has discouraged many learners from communicating in English because tutors often criticized their minor pronunciation or grammatical errors. Another salient issue is whether Standard English will prepare students to communicate effectively with people of different nationalities who speak different varieties of English in international contexts. As Mckay [14] maintains, educators have the obligation to prepare students to cope with these potential challenges. However, obviously it is impossible for both English educators and learners to master all varieties of English in the world and local varieties are being emphasized more and more in recent years.

The "language variation awareness programme" proposed by Horner and Weber [2] may provide a positive solution to the paradox of educators' demands that standard tests should be used in evaluating learners' learning outcomes and students' actual needs of other English varieties. This programme allows students to preserve their vernacular home varieties as well as achieve an advanced level of proficiency in Standard English with the assistance of educators.

As an example, the English variety spoken in China has been described by three different terms: "Chinese English", "Chinglish", and "China English". According to Qiong [15], "There is no clear boundary between Chinglish and Chinese English on the one side and China English on the other: it is not possible to place them neatly into two categories. Instead, they are situated on a continuum and progressively merge". However, these two terms have been associated with social stigma for a long time and many scholars would adopt the term "China English" in research [16]. He and Li [17] discuss the features of China English on phonology, lexis, syntax and discourse pragmatics level and define Chine English as "a performance variety of English which has the standard Englishes as its core but is colored with characteristic features of Chinese phonology, lexis, syntax and discourse pragmatics, and which is particularly suited for expressing content ideas specific to Chinese culture through such means as transliteration and loan translation". Xu [18] concurs with Kirkpatrick [19] and discusses four possible advantages of China English instruction in China:

- It meets the needs of Chinese English learners in the future

- It provides contextualization of Chinese language learners' learning and teaching experiences

- It facilitates the use of mother tongue experiences;

- It enhances learners' understanding of their Chinese identity.

However, there are also a number of specific challenges in the implementation of this kind of programme. Take the phonology of China English as an example, less distinction is made between the /i:/ and /ɪ/, as well as /aɪ/ and /e/, so "smile" can be pronounced as "smell", "hit" can be pronounced as "heat" [15]. While this type of pronunciation may not directly affect listeners' understanding in actual communication, educators may find it quite difficult to be serious-minded when testing learners' standard English and allow them to retain Chinese English at the same time, as the programme requires. Apparently, a more balanced pedagogical model and the language variation programme is needed.

5. IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING

Local creativity should be understood as a resource rather than a hindrance by stakeholders and empowered accordingly [20]. As reported in Kirkpatrick [21], there are three dominant pedagogical models in East Asia, with the native speaker model dominating all approaches in English Language Teaching (ELT), which has long been the preferred approach among Chinese stakeholders. According to the current study findings and previous studies analysing similar contexts, many students feel self-deficient and lack confidence in the ability to learn English when the assumption that a native speaker is the only benchmark is applied [20]. Language attitudes may also affect the learners' sense of identity. As Gudykunst and Schmidt [22] said, "language and ethnic identity are related reciprocally, i.e. language usage influences the formation of ethnic identity, but ethnic identity also influences language attitudes and language usage".

Therefore, the most important implication for teachers is that teachers should design and implement curriculum to enable students to evaluate their assumptions, stereotypes, and prejudices that they have regarding their local variety of English, so that they become aware that no language variety is superior to another within the global Englishes paradigm, to be able to recognize the legitimacy of English and to understand its hybrid nature. Also, this is an appropriate way for language learners' identity construction.

The pedagogical shift towards World English paradigm should also be emphasized in tertiary education. According to a study conducted by Kirkpatrick and Xu [23] on university students in Beijing, students acknowledge the existence of China English and its evolution, but are skeptical about its acceptance by society and prefer native speakers in classroom. In a similar vein, He and Li [17] echoed Kirkpatrick and Xu [23] regarding the clear preference of mainland Chinese parents and teachers for NS-based

pedagogical models, but reported a trend towards a variety of China English experiences that were considered more legitimate to mainland Chinese parents and teachers. Gray [24] highlights that the values and practices of the 'new capitalism' are still reaffirmed in local and global textbooks. Educators in tertiary level should be aware of these issues and develop learners' agency in their English learning and usage [20].

6. CONCLUSION

A harmonious coexistence of some English varieties and Standard English is not supported by the current education system in some regions easily, but that does not mean educators are out of options. The educators should make good use of curriculum design and implementation to help students evaluate their own assumptions, stereotypes, and prejudices about their local variety to cultivate awareness of the fact that no variety of English is superior to any other one in World Englishes paradigm. Additionally, educators should convey to students the notion that all languages are in constant flux [5], and effective communication and adaptation to changes in a fluid context are the original purposes of language learning.

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