

On the College English Language Teaching and Learning in China

Gu Yue

School of Foreign Languages and Cultures, Beijing Wuzi University, Beijing, 101149, China
scarletta@163.com

Abstract - As English becomes more like a communication tool not only between native speakers and non-native speakers but also among non-native speakers, the attitudes towards English Teaching and learning should also be adjusted. Kachru's introduction of World Englishes shed some lights on the perspective on China's English education. Sound BBC and VOA accent shouldn't be the prominent standard to judge the competence of English. Chinese people should pay attention to the different varieties of English or English of different accents on the basis of the mastery of Received Pronunciation (RP), then, they will be sure to obtain better competences to have effective communication with the outside world.

Index Terms - World English, Varieties of English, English Teaching and Learning, Communicative Capability

I. Introduction

The phenomenon of World Englishes has long been studied for several decades by the western linguists, but the term is new to the most of Chinese English educators and learners. They teach and learn British and American English and have the mindset that the English spoken by BBC (or RP) and VOA is the Standard English they should study and imitate. Seldom do they think and hear of the other "varieties of English" that is existed and widely used by the people in other regions of the world.

When they communicate with the native speakers with other accent or foreigners from other varieties of English speaking countries, they cannot get their mutual understandings. One reason for this is that English is a foreign language in China, which belongs to the Expanding Circle according to Kachru's Three Circles of English. Although China has the most population to learn and speak English in the world, it is a taught subject in all the levels of educational institutions. Just as Gupta says that "In the Expanding Circle, English is predominantly a non-native language used in very restricted domains, and learnt in scholastics settings" (2006, p. 95). While Chinese is the native language that is rich in many dialects and accents for the Chinese people, English in China is a good image/reflection of Kachru's Six Fallacies of English on the English Language Teaching (ELT) in the Expanding Circles. He suggests that "(1) in the Outer and Expanding Circles, English is essentially learned to interact with native speakers of the language; (2) English is necessarily learned as a tool to understand and teach American or British cultural value, or what is generally termed the Judeo Christian traditions; (3) the goal of learning and teaching English is to adopt the native models of English; (4) the international non-native varieties of English are essentially "interlanguage"

striving to achieve "native-like" character; (5) the native speakers of English as teachers, academic administrators and materials developers provide a series input in the global teaching of English, in policy formation and in determining the channels for the spread of the language; (6) the diversity and variation in English is necessarily an indicator of linguistic decay"(Kachru, 1992, pp.357-359).

As English in China is only a tool of communication for the educated people and learners learn their English mainly in the English classrooms from their teachers and course books and imitate their pronunciation from videos and audios, movies or media of British or American English. The learners' performance in learning English is judged by the native-speaker's norms of language, and teachers with the sound BBC or VOA accent of English are welcomed and well judged by both the students they teach and leaders of the English educational institutions.

With this policy of teaching and learning English, even some capable learners can understand native-speakers with a BBC or VOA accent, but cannot communicate with speakers from other varieties of English speaking countries when they are on the occasions of international exchange. This kind of learning situation in the context of China speaks strongly for the phenomenon of Kachru's six 'fallacies' in ELT. So, there is an urgent need for Chinese English educators, advanced educational officials and learners to have an awareness of World Englishes at sociolinguistic perspective.

II. The Kachru's model of World Englishes

With the two diasporas of English resulting in the Britain's colonial expansion and subsequent emergence of the American power, the fast spread of English has made the English language a dominant role in the international communication and English language teaching and learning worldwide popular. Many varieties of English have emerged as the result of the fast development of technology and economic globalization. So English has been defined with the terms of English as a Native or First Language (ENL), English as an Additional or Second Language (ESL), English as a Foreign Language (EFL), English as an International Language (EIL) and English as Lingua Franca (ELF). According to the roles English plays geographically, Kachru (1992) proposes "Three Circles of English model" in which ENL and ESL correspond respectively to the Inner and outer Circle as a result of the first and second diasporas; and EFL corresponds to Expanding Circle which includes "the regions where the performance

varieties of the language are used in EFL contexts (i.e., varieties that lack official status and are typically restricted in their uses)"(Kachru, 1992. p.357), while in Inner Circle, English is spoken by first and native speakers and in Outer Circle, English is used as an official or additional language in addition to the local language.

Though there exists a debate about Kachru's rigid and static boundaries in "Three Circles of English", the phenomenon of Expanding Circle category is true of the case in China, and Kachru's first four 'Fallacies' in ELT clearly reflect the actuality of English language teaching and learning in China.

With the fast development of technology and wide use of computer, the world has not only become economic globalization, but also culturally and educationally globalized. People tend to communicate with all varieties of English frequently. Halliday *et al.* claim that "English is no longer the possession of the British, or even the British and the Americans, but an international language which increasing numbers of people adopt for at least some of their purposes, without thereby denying (at least in intention) the value of their own languages; and this one language, English, exists in an increasingly large number of different varieties..." (from Bolton, 2003, p. 23). In order to keep up with the trend of world development, the Chinese people should have the ability to listen and speak to the people of all varieties in English as a sound communication can make people get mutual understandings, increase the friendships, and also introduce Chinese culture and long history to the outside world and make Chinese voice heard by the people all over the world.

So the pressing need to enhance people's awareness of World Englishes is important for the Chinese English educators, advanced officials, English teachers and learners and it is also the main point I want to make in this essay.

III. The background history and the role of English language in China

The English history in China mainland can date back to as early as the times between 1720s and 1830s, during which pidgin English was used by foreign traders for the purpose of doing business in Guangdong, the southern part of China where it was the only place open to foreign trade and allow only male foreigners to live there. Some merchants set up factories there and employed the Cantonese who could speak pidgin English to work for them. In the mid 1860s, the first missionary schools were opened in the port cities of Shanghai, Guangdong, Xiamen and Ningbo by American and British missionaries, and knowledge of English had been spread quickly in those places of Treaty Ports. Many young learners were sent to the missionary schools where they learned English together with the knowledge of advanced western world of that time. "From around 1890, there was also a great expansion in higher education at university level, and around sixteen Protestant and Catholic colleges and universities were established and run by western missionaries in the period of 1890-1949" (Bolton, 2003, p. 192). In these agencies, the

curriculum included both English and Chinese subjects, but the teaching of English only occupied a small part of lessons and only a few missionary schools provided English lessons. For one thing, the missionaries thought the students should have the knowledge of native language; for another, there were strong oppositions to opening the English lessons by some Chinese educators and officials of that time. But one high official Zhang Zhidong "urged increased emphasis on the learning of the foreign language after China's defeat in the Sino-Japanese War in 1895. He maintained the philosophy that 'Chinese learning for fundamental principles, Western learning for practical application'" (Bolton, 2003, p. 241). Since the early 20th century, many non-missionary universities were established and most of them provided English lessons in their teaching curriculum, such universities as Tsinghua University, Beijing University and so on. And English of this time in these higher educational institutions were mostly influenced with the typical Characteristics of American English.

In the early period of the establishment of People's Republic of China in 1949, the foreign language that was prevalent in China was Russian because Russia was friendly with China and helped the new set-up China to build the country in every domain. Young men and young women had the enthusiasm to learn Russian so that they could go to Russia for further study. English lessons could not be found in all levels of educational institutions. From the years of 1960s, the top leaders of Chinese government found that English was especially important for the diplomatic affairs. English lessons were started from junior years in some high schools. And most of the English teachers transferred their majors from Russian to English. There was not any enthusiasm in learning English until the late 1970s.

The booming enthusiasm for learning English started since the open-door policy (China opened her doors to the western world) issued in 1978. The main aim of the nation's construction at that time was to realize "the Modernization of Industry, Agriculture, National Defense and Scientific Technology" by the end of 20th century, of which Scientific Technology was put in the first important place. And in early 1977 China regained the system of enrolling university students by demanding students to attend Nation-wide Entrance Examination. During this period of time, there appeared a fanaticism of English all over the country. In order to realize "the Four Modernizations", The Chinese Government sent young talented students or advanced scholars to such advanced western countries as America, British and Germany for further study each year. So the students or scholars with a good English competence could be chosen as the candidates. In the publishing field, English original novels, dictionaries, tape-recorders and textbooks in bookstores were the best-selling books. In the mass media, China's biggest and the most authoritative television station—China Central Television (CCTV) provided English teaching programs in several channels, and CCTV Channel 9 was, and is the English Channel with the TV programs spoken totally in English and some of programs were, and are hosted by the native speakers.

In education, English was the most popular major in the social and human science in the universities and colleges, as there were more candidates of English for entrance examination, but with the limited numbers of universities and colleges to enroll the English major students (the government set the numbers of enrolling students for each university). English was the compulsory course for all levels of educational institutions and it was one of the main subjects students must take for all levels of entrance examinations. In 1985, the Examination Committee of College English Test (CET) Band 4 and 6 was set up and in 1986 the Higher Educational Department of Ministry of Education commissioned the Examination Committee of CET Band 4 and 6 to carry on the English test on all the undergraduates in the universities around China. And the College English Curriculum required undergraduates should pass CET Band 4 during their four years of college or university studies so that they could be granted as the bachelor's degrees. In the job market, the score of CET Band 4 and 6 was, and is, used as one of the norms to measure students' English Competence.

With the deepening progress of open-door policy, China's economy has developed very quickly. Many foreign-own enterprises set up their companies and factories in China, and state-own companies and factories have more touch and cooperation with the foreign enterprises. So, professional talents with the good English competence are needed and welcomed by the employers. Therefore English becomes the threshold of success in the future careers of students. With these properties, English has become a big industry in China. Children begin to receive English education at very early age. Some British and American testing organizations such as Cambridge English for the young learners, IELTS and TOEFL set up their organizations in China. Many private-own English educational institutions such as New Oriental set up English schools in big cities. Children and young people are busy learning English in all kinds of classes at weekends. As parents know clearly that if their children have a good command of English, they could be enrolled into the best secondary schools and universities, and then a bright future may be waiting for them in their professional careers. All these things above reflect the important place English takes in China.

IV. College English language teaching and learning in the context of China

Although western English linguists and educators have studied teaching methodologies for over a century, the research on English language teaching and learning in China has not lasted long. Namely, the Chinese English linguists and educators began to do the research on the teaching methodology from the 1990s.

College English in China is divided into two divisions. One is College English for Non-English major, the other is College English majors which are divided into two types, English linguistics and literature and business English. As college English for non-English majors is the compulsory course for all the undergraduates in all the universities around

China, it can reflect the situations of the teaching all around China.

Although there had a fanaticism of learning English at the time of 1980s, the teaching method was the traditional one of grammar-translation. Reading skill was placed in the first important place in the National College English Curriculum (NCEC). The teaching purpose at that time was to "develop students reading abilities so that they can have the abilities to acquire knowledge and information by means of reading" (Revision group, 1986). In addition, Reading also weighed the most in CET Band 4 and 6 starting respectively in January 1986 and 1987. The English classroom was occupied with the teacher-centered activities. Usually teachers explained the new words and phrases and paraphrased the reading materials. The interaction between teachers and students was like this: the teachers gave sentences; the students translated them into English or Chinese. Listening and speaking activities had never been practiced in the classrooms of non-English major students. The teaching facilities were the course-books, a blackboard and a piece of chalk. There were limited listening and speaking materials, and listening and speaking lessons were opened only for the English majors. The ways to practice listening abilities was by means of listening to the unclearly radios of short-wave channel— BBC and VOA, listening to the tape-recorders with mainly the British English cassette, and watching the limited teaching videos of British make of "Walter and Connie" and American make of "Follow me". So it was not a surprise to see the once prevalent phenomenon of "dumb and deaf" English in China. One reason for contributing to the "dumb and deaf" English was that the learners of English only focused on reading and writing skills and grammatical structures and paid no attention to listening and speaking practice. They had learnt English for nearly ten years, but still could not listen to and speak English with native speakers or speakers from other varieties of English speaking countries when they are in the appearance of international exchange.

With the gradually wide spread of communicative approach from the late 1990s, the idea of communicative language teaching was familiarized and adopted by the English teachers in some of the universities in China. Although the NCEC was revised in 1999, reading was still put in the first place in weight. And the course-book was still compiled or revised underpinning the NCEC1999. The English classroom was only occupied with little touch of communicative approach as a result of the computer technology. As there appeared the language laboratories equipped with the computers for students to listen to English, the teaching method was still with more means of grammar-translation than that of communicative approach. Therefore, in 2003, under the leadership of the Higher Educational Department of MOE, the College English Pedagogical Reformation began. In 2004, the new NCEC, which was called College English Curriculum Requirements (CECR) piloting version, was issued. After the CECR had been in trial for two years in 180 chosen universities from each part of China, the CECR formal version

was published in 2007. The CECR put listening and reading in the first place in weight of four skills and the aims of College English is to “develop students integrative applicable abilities, especially the listening and speaking abilities” (Higher Educational Department of Ministry of Education, 2007, p.18). In order to promote the wide spread of College English Reformation, the government invest a large amount of money in the College English course to build digital multi-media language laboratories to provide modern teaching facilities for the purpose of enhancing students’ English applicable abilities. And all the teaching classrooms are equipped with multi-media facilities. Therefore, teachers can provide students with the audio and video clips of British or American films or TV programs and the language laboratory can offer students a good and nearly authentic self-access environment with the rich online resources. Learner-centered activities are a dominant method in the English classrooms now.

V. Discussion

Looking from the history and roles of English language teaching in China, especially the period from the open-door policy in 1978, English language teaching and learning has long been focused on and influenced with the native-speakers’ norm of British and American English. No matter what methodology is adopted, Students’ learning performance and English competence is measured by the testing results. And the keys to the testing problems are certainly fixed with the norms of British or American English. It is no wonder for Prodromou (1988) to question “ Why ‘a particular piece of “authentic” material may fall flat in the classroom; why the functional syllabus does not always function; why communicative methodology does not always produce much communication;”(Phillipson, 1992, p.14).

As English is a foreign language with the norm of British and American English and taught and learnt only in the English classrooms with little touch with other varieties of English speakers, how can learners be competent in listening and speaking, and get immediate understanding in the international exchange on an important occasion? The measures in the awareness and actions should be taken to reach good effects. First of all, much more needs to be done to raise “learners’ awareness of the diversity of English”(Ruanni and Tupas, 2006, p.181-182). And, it seems that there is a long way to make the general public in China aware of the world-wide reality of English. As English teachers, our responsibility is to make public information broadly available now of the ideas of World Englishes. English teachers or learners in China have to recognize that we can use English effectively without becoming like native speakers because we are widely confronted with different varieties of English used in Asia and other parts of the world. Just because of different varieties of

English used in Asia and other parts of the world, their different varieties of cultures are equally important to Chinese culture in order to have international communication. Second, the broader resources of teaching materials should be used to cover a wide range of varieties of English. Last, we should expose students to the opportunities to get familiar with the pronunciation, intonation and sentence structures of different varieties of English so that they can have the potentials to communicate with the people from all the varieties of English. This is an ideal and goal both for the students and teachers.

In a word, as long as, by improving their awareness and changing their attitudes, the Chinese people pay attention to more access to the different varieties of English or English of different accents on the basis of the mastery of Received Pronunciation (RP), they will be sure to obtain better competences to have effective communication with the English speakers of different countries whether from the Inner Circle, the Outer Circle or the Expanding Circle.

VI. Conclusion

With the fast economic, cultural and educational globalization, English is the best and effective means of communication for people all around the world. Even if there have existed many varieties of English, it is the reality we must confronted with. If teachers and students want to be better equipped with the abilities to face the increasing competitions and challenges, they should have the awareness of looking at the English as World Englishes and treating the language in societal perspective. Only when more and more English teachers and learners accept those ideas, can the striking paradigm shift in the teaching of English take place and make a great achievement in China.

References

- [1] Bolton, K. *Chinese Englishes — A Sociolinguistic History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.
- [2] Gupta, A. F.. Standard English in the World. In Rubdy, R. & Saraceni, M. (Eds). *English in the World, Global Rules, Global Roles*. London: Continuum. 2006.
- [3] Higher Educational Department of Ministry of Education. *College English Curriculum Requirements*. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching And Research Press, 2007.
- [4] Kachru, B. Teaching World Englishes. In Kachru, B. (Eds). *The Other Tongue*, Indiana: Indiana University Press., 1992.
- [5] Phillipson, R. *Linguistic Imperialism*. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language, Educational Press. Commissioned by Oxford University Press, 1992.
- [6] Revision group of College English Curriculum.. *College English Curriculum*. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Educational Press, 1986.
- [7] Ruanni, T, and Tupas, F. Stand Englihes, pedagogical paradigms and their conditions of (im)possibility. In Rubdy, R. & Saraceni, M. (Eds), *English in the World* (pp.169-185). London: Continuum, 2006.