

Tolerance for Non-Standard English in EFL Classroom

Miwang Shao

Wuhan University, Hubei Wuhan, 430072, China

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Abstract: From the perspective of sociolinguistics, this paper illustrates the necessity and importance of non-standard English acceptance in EFL classroom. Tolerance for non-standard English in EFL classroom not only facilitates learners' language performance but also supports the call for respect for cultural diversity and recognition of pluralism in a globalized world. This paper attempts to shed some light on the significance of respecting for individual learners and their choices of language in EFL classroom.

1. Introduction

1.1 Standard Language and Personal Language

Usually a standard language is at prestigious position. Other forms of language, dialects, and language patterns, are usually at disadvantaged positions and are not thought as equally valid as the standard language. Standard English is the correct form of English teaching and learning. Mastery of standard English, especially of its pronunciation, is seen as an important indicator of learners' language or linguistic competence. However, everyone speaks a language of his own which identifies themselves. Actually in some occasions learners prefer to choose the non-standard language. Some researchers pointed out that it is important to take into account learners' preferences with regards to accent and identity construction (for example, Sung, 2013). Studies also showed that learners treated their peers' L2 accents as indicators of their degree of cultural and ethnic affiliation and accented speakers were regarded by these learners as being more loyal to their cultural group than non-accented speakers (Gatbonton, Trofimovich, & Magid, 2005). Therefore, given the importance of accent in English learners' identity, it is important to acknowledge their preferences regarding choice of pronunciation and their potential ability to 'accent-switch' (Pillai 2008: 42).

Therefore, in spite of language conformity and the guideline of teaching standard language, importance should also be attached to language variations and learners' personal choices and their implications to EFL teaching and learning. Individual differences, particularly, gender, ethnics, educational backgrounds and family backgrounds, should be considered into foreign language teaching and learning in classroom. Each of those differences might play a significant role in a learner' second language performance in school when a learner's language (dialect) is concerned (everyone speaks a language of his own group community. They are different dialects when a standard language occurs).

1.2 Non-Standard English in Efl Class

Despite the fact that native-level-like English teaching is presumably important for EFL learning, the varieties and diversities of languages among learners should be at least accepted and respected if not encouraged. Teachers may not be native speakers and learners learn language not directly through the target one. Although Sapir argued that “the gift of speech and well-ordered language is characteristic of every known group of human beings”, not all normal children can learn proper language, in the eyes of many (cited from Trudgill & Peter, 1984). Proponents of deficit theory discussed the developmental (including linguistic) retardation among poor children supposedly deprived of early stimulation and learning experiences. Thus the speech patterns of the disadvantaged learners are thought as not as valid as standard language and their dialects or accents are somewhat seen as not as good as being standard. In EFL classroom, those sociolinguistic elements are critical for teaching and learning.

Thus, as Sung (2013) argued that the differences between English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) and English as a native language (ENL) should not be exaggerated. He also suggested that there was a further scope for an enhanced awareness of language variation. In EFL classroom, it is necessary that tolerance for non-standard English keeps pace with the encouragement of standard English speaking.

2. Teachers' Stereotypes of Non-Standard Language

Class differences are crucial factors influencing language using. Since standard language is the language of learners' schooling, some students, from middle class for instance, must experience a kind of discontinuity from home to school. The discontinuity of children occur when they enter into different language settings, particularly, for disadvantaged children. Disparities of language using exist among learners from different backgrounds. Though children arrive at school with a well formed linguistic system, as thought by some linguists, speech patterns of non-standard or disadvantaged speakers are viewed as linguistically invalid systems. Non-standard English may be not the one encouraged or reinforced at school, it may be seen inferior and substandard. Besides, speech patterns of nonstandard speakers or disadvantaged groups are not without positive features in a social sense. Teachers are members of the society and their stereotypes bond with these dialectal and social biases.

Teachers' stereotypes resulted from the language differences have a significant influence on their forming of expectations for learners, and hence on the learning environment. Researchers found that the non-standard dialects or accents were valued less favorably on scales reflecting competence dimensions (Trudgill & Peter, 1984). Speakers of non-standard forms may viewed as trustworthy, friendly and warm, without being necessarily viewed as competent. Since views concerned with non-standard language are though as so granted and natural that those disadvantages and inferiority may be seated in the minds of disadvantaged learners themselves even without their perception. That is what sociolinguists call minority group reaction: members of a group seen as inferior in some ways to another adapt the stereotyped view of the dominant group.

Teacher may think some learners are not able than others based on their linguistic or language differences. They categorize learners on the basis of linguistic and other features, this categorization may influence the subsequent school progress of the learners and disadvantages may be perpetuated (Trudgill & Peter, 1984). Some learners may also in some ways try some efforts to remove stereotyped views, for instance the lames.

Therefore dialectal and social biases occur in EFL classroom. They together influences teachers' evaluations of and expectations for learners, which might have an effect on their language or linguistic performance and even some personal dimensions such as their attitudes and perception of

their personal languages and even personal dignity in classroom. Possibilities of remedial action may be changes made either by pupils or by school: “either the pupils must accommodate to the ideas and method of school, or the school must adapt to the ideas and methods of the pupils” (Trudgill & Peter, 1984).

However, any speech style is characteristic of a particular group’s backgrounds and life-style, and therefore serves as identities of and a bond between group members. It should made sense that one language is not better than another. One form of language, not standard as it, should not be resisted or eliminated though some learners may attempt to avoid its using in classroom. Diversities of language speaking should not be ignored in EFL classroom. Non-standard English, even if could not be supported and encouraged, should be accepted.

3. Tolerance for Non-Standard English in Efl Class

3.1 Considerations to learners’ Personal Needs and Language Choices

Advocates of ELF argue that the awareness of language variations should be enhanced and that the importance of learners’ choices and its implication to language teaching and learning in classroom should be acknowledged. In EFL classroom, as discussed above, some learners must experience difficulties in the process of learning a language and in speaking like a native speaker. Although learners have the ability to adapt and appropriate correct linguistic features of the standard English, sometimes they prefer to speak incorrectly. When they spoke freely among themselves whether inside or outside the classroom, they often used other forms that seemed to be influenced both by their individual L1s and by factors relating to English itself (in so far as they all favoured the same incorrect form regardless of their particular L1). In most cases, their use of these alternative forms does not impede their mutual understanding either during classroom discussions, role plays, ELF simulations, and the like, or in social settings outside the classroom (Jenkins, 2012).

Language and its use are of complexities. Analysis of learners’ individual needs and their choices calls for further attention of EFT and EFL in classroom. Especially from prospective of sociolinguistics, language is as identities of individuals and are intrinsically and inevitably interrelated to some critical social elements, which should bot be ignored in classroom teaching, since language stereotypes and social stereotypes related to language do exist as illustrated above. Learning of language norms does not contravene the practical necessities of language variations. As acquiring standard language is seen as linguistic competence, communicative competence requires for the awareness and perception of the diversities and varieties of language.

Tolerance for non-standard English seems to be tolerance of errors and incorrectness, but the cause most often seemed to be pronunciation related ‘interlanguage’ errors if classroom learning is still in progress, and ‘fossilized’ errors if it has ended (Jenkins, 2012). When it does not affect understanding, an ‘interlanguage’ approach might be relevant to language learning, where students learn English primarily in order to be able to communicate according to the contexts in which they find themselves. Learners have the need to be able to adjust or accommodate their habitual modes of reception and production in order to be more effective in interactions. For all non-standard speakers, the standard may be understood well, and it may be produced if the situations is seen to warrant it. Learners’ use of non-standard forms facilitates learning of standard variety. Learners who process a non-standard language when standard language is available to them may very soon come to use standard forms in their own speech. That does not mean, learners should abandon their varieties, their peers and communities would militate that. However, learners are aware of the differences, substantive and evaluative, between standard and non-standard when they become increasingly able to either as the situation demands. Thus that suggests that the use of standard forms need not necessarily eradicate learners’ varieties.

Advocacy of tolerance for non-standard language is about recognition of learners' awareness and choices-making students aware of different ways of speaking English, of language variability and change-and about offering choice to them, i.e. they can choose to speak like native speakers when and if they want to, but they may want to speak ELF and in certain situations, this may even be more appropriate. The adoption of an ELF perspective in ELT suggests that learners need to be introduced to language variation as soon as they are ready (Cogo, 2012). While descriptions of ELF and other forms of variation can be useful to raise learners' awareness of this aspect of English, they cannot be seen as the sole factor in determining the kinds of linguistic input that may be best for pedagogical purposes, since pedagogy is concerned primarily with attempting to meet language learning needs rather than simply presenting models of language use (Sung, 2013). Therefore, tolerance of non-standard language benefits learners' awareness of their personal speaking choices and does not impose stereotypes on the process of their learning a language.

3.2 Considerations to Linguistic and Cultural Diversities

Language and culture are intrinsically interrelated and Ward Goodenough talks culture as socially acquired knowledge. Culture as social knowledge is necessary for learners' communicative competence and more importantly for their identification in cultural communication. Creativity and flexibility of language use are critical in its application in real life interactions. Exploration into language variations in EFL classroom benefits teachers of understanding how they categorize language-related variables and how they classify the language speakers and circumstances. Even in classroom, the choice of a language varies much from domain to domain, that domains are especially congruent combinations of culture-social factors. Some linguistic and foreign language teachers believe that when learning a foreign language culture should be listed for one indicator of language skills, because language and culture are not independent on each other. If the student is required to fully master a language, culture should be contained in the course. It is a challenge for foreign language teachers to promote learners' awareness of culture in classroom. However, it cannot be denied that acceptance of language variations, coexistence of standard and non-standard language, advocates the perception of culture diversities.

Teaching a new language does not mean using a new language symbol, but learning a new language system. Culture is deeply infiltrated through the language. Thus it is not only about the language itself but a broader social cultural content. That is, through the different perceptions of language and perceptions of language boundaries and differences, learners achieve better understanding of the target language and meanwhile the culture identities. Language teaching is becoming more and more pragmatic. Social function of language and communicative purposes of language require for the recognition and acceptance of language variations. Supporting learners to become competent communicators can be complicated when they have speech, language and communication needs. It is necessary for learners to engage in culturally competent practice. Learners should be motivated to make personal choices in EFL classroom if context or situations warrant. Tolerance of non-standard language is consistent with the calling and demanding for culture identification and enhanced recognition and awareness of culture and language diversities. The coexistence of multiple cultures not only requires for cultural recognition but equal status. Tendency of teaching English as a lingua franca and a bilingual language responds to the respect of language and culture diversities.

The call for respect for cultural diversity and recognition of pluralism in a globalized world require for the support of a free, open and pluralistic classroom where the standard language coexists with the language variations. Language pluralism is more important than ever before in a world interconnected instantaneously by electronic communications and the widespread use of

social media. The differences between teaching standard English and teaching English as a lingua franca should not be essentialized and exaggerated. Linguistic systems between standard and non-standard English are not of dichotomy. Teaching English as a lingua franca is promoted by some researchers as a superior alternative to native-speaker norms. The argument that native English pronunciation is not optimum in communication contexts (Sewell, 2013) supports the view that these are not essential features of a language, they are a result of the characteristics of native speaker communities. Therefore the classification of languages on the basis of the essential structural properties is not practically useful. Speaking of natural language reflects a general trend towards an enhanced awareness of the contextual and interactional dimensions of language use. Students can choose to speak their accented English as an alternative to speaking like native speakers.

In spite of the stereotypes that the standard language is better than non-standard and that the non-standard is not valid as the standard, to large extent, language is not like science, the existence of standard English in classroom needs not necessarily eradicate the existence of other form of English. The emergence, acceptance, development and changing of a language are of complexities. Its relationships with culture and its powerful influence on the human thoughts and their social life, and the identification of language in globalization, culture and language diversities should be of illuminating importance for EFL classroom teaching. Respect for individual learners and their choices of language in classroom includes recognition of the beliefs they hold and the actions they perform in conformity with their membership in a culture.

4. Conclusion

As standard language is concerned, non-standard languages are usually of disadvantaged positions. When learners from different social background along with their language identities come into classroom, linguistic stereotypes and social stereotypes or discrimination related to language may occur. Speech patterns of nonstandard or disadvantaged speakers are viewed as linguistically invalid systems and they are seen as suffering dialectal deficiency which usually combines with social deficiency. Teacher may feel some students are less able than others and they thus unfairly add to learners' difficulties in their learning process through categorization based on inaccurate and ill-formed stereotypes and judgements. That categorization may influence the subsequent school progress of the learners. Therefore the class should not exacerbate the problem of the disadvantaged. Tolerance of non-standard English aims at a free, open and pluralistic classroom learning. It also argues for the respect for cultural diversity and recognition of pluralism and the respect for the individual learners and their choices of language in classroom.

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