Speaking Anxiety and Learner's Own Variety of English

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Abstract

In this increasingly globalized world, English is the most widely used international contact language as it has spread to different parts of the world. Due to its wide use by speakers of many different languages, English has been influenced by many different factors including diverse ways of pronunciation. Therefore, it is not surprising that such pronunciation varieties have obvious classroom implications, especially among the nonnative teaching-learning communities. In most contexts, the nonnative teacher-learners are under pressure to conform to any of the native varieties, which, this paper argues, isresponsible for creating language anxiety among the learners. Reviewing selected works by Crystal, Bolton, Canagarajah, Farooqui, Jenkins, and Sharifian's that address the way "power," "hegemony," and "politics" operate behind the promotion of such native varieties, the present paper probes into the relationship between speaking anxiety and the enforced native varieties on the nonnative ones of English. It concludes that there is little rationale behind such enforcement as English is increasingly becoming a contact language, which enables the nonnative speakers of English to equally own the language as their native counterparts. It also suggests that promotion of the nonnative varieties in language classes will encourage the learners to use the language from their own comfort zone, and will eventually decrease their speaking anxiety.

Introduction

English is no longer the language of the UK and US only, but has become the most widely used language of the world. It is now the language most widely taught as a foreign language – in over 100 countries, such as China, Russia, Germany, Spain, Egypt, and Brazil – and in most of these countries it is emerging as the chief foreign language (Crystal, 2003, p. 4). In other words, English is no longer limited to its origin due to its increasing heterogeneity, and thereby its use is not confined to any particular speech community (Canagarajah, 1999, p. 211). The fact is, "for better or worse, by choice or force, English has 'traveled' to many parts of the world and has been used to serve various purposes" (Sharifian, 2009, p.1). This expansion of English language has resulted in a popular demand to acquire "proper" English that regulates the status of the language with serious linguistic, ideological, sociocultural, political, and pedagogical implications among the nonnatives (Karunakaran, Rana & Haq, 2013, p. 555).

Therefore, as far as teaching English, especially the spoken variety, is concerned, a native standard of pronunciation has become quite trendy, but, quite logically, it could not escape

criticism, especially for the last few decades (Ferdous, 2012, p. 1). That the practice of prioritizing a native variety of the target language over making successful communication in it (Barman, 2009, p. 19) has developed into a moot point, which, arguably, leads to speaking anxiety in the language classrooms (Farooqui, 2007, p. 106).

According to Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986), speaking anxiety among international students has three main reasons: a) communication comprehension: the feeling of uneasiness of communicating in a second language b) fear of negative evaluation: the unacceptability of the language mistakes as a part of the very process of learning and considering them as a threat to successful communication, c) viewing oral production more as a testing than learning situation (as cited in Zhiping & Paramasivam, 2013, p. 3).

As far as teaching spoken English is concerned, Jenkins (2010) believes that the primary reason should be to enable learners to function in it; imitating the natives or conforming to what people call a "standard variety" can never be the purpose. In other words, an ESL or EFL learner does not necessarily have to adapt their ways of speaking according to the so-called native speaker (NS) norms; what they need to do instead is to make adjustments to suit an audience of primarily nonnative speakers (NNSs) (p. 308).

In other words, an absolute conformity to a particular standard of speaking is neither possible nor necessary (Sparkman, 1926, p.228). For example, a given community of speakers may have their own way(s) of speaking English including but not limited to a slow pace of production, accented pronunciations, use of a different set of everyday vocabulary not commonly used in a native context, inconsistent use of fillers, pauses, hesitations, repetitions, etc. (Ferdous, 2012, p. 3). In fact, these may be the characteristics that could be associated with the identity of the nonnative speakers, which they do not need to change until and unless those impede communication in a given context. This leads to the argument that teaching speaking should focus only on mutual intelligibility and nothing else (Jenkins, 2010, p.308).

The Myth of Standardization: Do We Need to Follow One Single Standard?

Lippi-Green's Arguments: It's All About "Power." The fact that there are different varieties of speaking due to their unique features and embedded contexts is not always accepted by many. In fact, there is a tendency to define "Standard English" in a way that dismisses the existence of different standards for speaking and using it. There can be at least some truth in the statement that people are very comfortable with the idea of having one single standard language, so that they have no trouble in defining and describing its features in one single way as Lippi-Green (1997) referred to Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary (tenth edition, 1993) for the definition of standard English, which is,

> That English, with respect to spelling, grammar, pronunciation and vocabulary (being) substantially uniform though not devoid of the regional differences is well established by the usage in the formal and informal speech and writing of the educated, and (it) is widely recognized as acceptable wherever English is spoken and understood. (p. 53)

The above definition itself sets the "spelling," "pronunciation," and "ways of speaking" on a

common footing which makes the generalization that "Standard English" is the language of just the "educated," which does not recognize the variants of the "uneducated" (Lippi-Green, 1997, p. 55). In other words, the definition clearly reveals that it has been set by a privileged group or authority which assumes the power to decide who are "educated" and who are not and are therefore in a position to distinguish "standard" from "non-standard" (Lippi-Green, 1997, p.55). In this connection, Matsuda (1991) said that like the "feminist" and "race" theorists, the issue of speaking and its accents can also be seen within a relation of power as he said, "People in power are perceived as speaking normal, unaccented English. Any speech that is different from that constructed norm is called an 'accent'" (as cited in Lippi-Green, 1997, p. 59).

The truth is, every variety has its own system and, therefore, its own unique features, which lead to unique speaking styles and ways. To be more specific, a variety might share some features with other varieties, but no two varieties have the same sort of speaking styles (Imam, 2005, p. 471). Therefore, it can be said that there exists no one single variety of the so called "standard" English to be taught to the nonnative learners of the world as, for the latter, their so-called "accented" variety is a part of their identity. This particular argument has drawn people to each opposing side: in favor and against it. Such differences of opinion lead to the next point.

Native Standard of Speaking: The Advocates and the Critiques

According to Crystal (2003), if English is one's mother tongue, s/he will have mixed feelings about the way English is spreading around the world; s/he may feel pride but his/her pride may be tinged with concern when s/he realizes that people in other countries may not want to use the language in the same way that s/he does. On the other hand, Crystal also added that if English is not one's mother tongue, s/he may be strongly motivated to learn it but at the same time s/he knows it will take a great deal of effort to master it (p. 3). Therefore, the fact is that no matter what ESL learners feel at heart, they have the mindset that learning "good" and "proper" English is very important. In this regard, Sparkman (1926) said that a good speaker of any language is similar to being well-dressed; it is the outward semblance of culture and refinement in matters of speech, and it should be a thing of pride to any one because it is one's principal badge of honor and recommendation to the natives of that speech (p. 227). In a similar vein, Kreidler (1972) opined that the teaching of English to speakers of other languages has, in recent years, rightly given emphasis on student's mastery of the natives' system of the language, and therefore, we must learn to attach great importance to the student's systematic listening while teaching them speaking (p. 3). Researchers like Gorun (1958) also talked about the importance of teaching English systematically following either the British or the American standard. Gorun (1958) said that it is important to do so because the rapid influx of the North Americans and other English speaking people have consolidated the status of English as an official language throughout the world (p. 513) and echoing this view, Hamid, Sussex and Khan (2009) made the point that since English continues to spread across the globe, governments in "low proficiency" countries should reappraise its importance and respond to the changing global order of English by emphasizing the teaching of speaking according to the dominant system (p. 281).

However, researchers like Baldwin (1927) said something different regarding teaching the native variety of speaking that may have phrases like "Now say it in this way – now notice!" However, this can never be the ideal way of teaching speaking. That is to say, to provide the learners with only the correct way of speaking the language is not likely to get far enough. No one can be made to learn the others' way of speaking since everyone has their own ways. As a matter of fact, in some nonnative contexts, having English proficiency is like possessing an Aladdin's lamp, as it can bring material prosperity by ensuring access to education, international business, science, and technology (Tran, Moni & Baldauf, 2012, p. 3). They also added that although this high degree of importance accorded to English is creating a strong motivation for students to learn English but whether this motivation is strong enough to help students to regulate themselves in managing their anxiety, or whether it is negated by their anxiety is worth considering (p. 3).

What Tran, Moni, and Baldauf meant was imitating the natives to learn their ways can be of little help since learners have their own ways of making utterances in their respective contexts. Therefore, L2 learners all over the world should learn speaking in their very own ways considering their varieties of speaking as the ideal or the standard. In this regard, Canagarajah (2006a) said that since English has now become a contact language for a wider range of communities (outside the former British Empire), the priority should be given to the use of the local varieties to recognize the new role of English as a global contact language (p.197). Practicing their own variety may help the ESL and EFL students overcome their speaking anxiety in foreign language classrooms. The learners may be encouraged to think that English is as much as their language as the natives'. This leads to the issue of linguistic ownership.

Ownership of Varieties of the Language and its Speaking Styles

According to Crystal (2003), English as a global language has traditionally become an international language for one chief reason: the power of its people – especially their political and military power (p. 9). However, as to the ownership of English, Widdowson (1994) said that today the situation is such that both NSs and NNSs have the right to claim the ownership ofEnglish language (as cited in Sharifian, 2009, p. 102). Over the last 25 years, the terms "world Englishes" and "new Englishes" have come into play to refer to the localized forms of English as found throughout the world, particularly with reference to the Caribbean, West and East Africa, and parts of Asia (Bolton, 2005, p. 69). That is why the vast majority of the teachers of English of today's world do not belong to the so-called native speaking lands, and, therefore, the teaching of speaking should not only be based on the native-speaking ideology (Bolton, 2005, p. 78). The truth is when English is learned by millions of bilingual speakers as an additional language for international communication, it is necessarily denationalized and thereby acculturated to specific local needs (Sharifian, 2009, p. 82). Hence, it is quite unacceptable that only NS-based norms would prevail and serve as the yardstick for measuring NNSs' speaking accuracy/fluency (Sharifian, 2009, p. 82). In other words, when the ownership of English has been divided up among its users, the hegemony of the native ways of speaking is seriously challenged. Therefore, in real classrooms, teachers can raise awareness of different varieties of speaking for diverse settings without presupposing that AmE (American English)

and BrE (British English) are the sole benchmarks against which the rest of the varieties should be measured (Sharifian, 2009, p. 67). Creating such awareness could be one possible way of overcoming speaking anxiety in foreign classrooms.

Therefore, the promotion of different varieties can start from the ESL and EFL classrooms where the ultimate motive will be to equip students with their own varieties of speaking. This is again because through this, they will not only be able to promote their own identities but will also be able to make successful confident communication within their particular contexts. This will be elaborated further in the following section.

Appropriating English to Promote Identity: Can it be a Trend to Overcome Speaking Anxiety?

Unlike reading or writing skills, speaking has always been a neglected skill to be taught in a nonnative speaking context like Bangladesh. However, whenever speaking is taught, there is pressure on the students to follow a native standard. As a result, whenever it has been taught, students face various problems due to the anxieties that arise at the time of learning (Bhattacharjee, 2008, p. 15). Different problems pertaining to speaking anxieties have been discussed briefly by Bhattacharjee (2008) in her paper. One type of problem is saying out something in front of the fellow students. This is directly related to high anxiety; students are quite embarrassed and feel inhibited when opportunities arise for them to speak (Bhattacharjee, 2008, p. 15). Similarly, if learners find their peers are more proficient in speaking compared to them, they tend to become anxious, and it results in remaining silent and having "nothing to say" (p. 15). Besides, some students are very conscious about their limited proficiency and feel very insecure. They prefer not to talk so that they can avoid being ridiculed or corrected in front of the whole class (p. 16). Bhattacharjee (2008) said that first and foremost, the problem of speaking on the part of the students is fear and lack of confidence (p. 16). The fear is most acute, especially in rural areas of Bangladesh, where 70% of the total population live and, to the students of this area, English is an alien subject to study. Their fear of English is so deep rooted that if you ask them a very simple question like "what is your name?" they become embarrassed and stop talking (p. 16).

Islam & Ahsan (2011) also said that the students get nervous because they feel that other students know better English than them; and finally, they feel that the other students will laugh at them if and when they speak English (p. 217). Therefore, to help the learners learn the class instructions properly and more effectively, the teacher must try to reduce the anxiety level to an acceptable level (p. 217). Similar conclusions have been stated by Frieberger (2010) where he said that ESL classrooms are potential factors in case of increasing speaking anxiety because learners do not feel safe to make mistakes, they cannot learn the language in comfort (p. 10).

According to Canagarajah (2006b), since the classroom is a powerful site of policy negotiation, the pedagogies practiced and texts produced in the classroom can reconstruct policies grounded up (p. 587). However, the truth is, teachers and learners are helping to reproduce monolingual ideologies and linguistic hierarchies within the classrooms (Canagarajah, 2006b,

p. 587). What he means is that the classroom policies in most of the ESL and EFL countries are such that they promote the establishment of the dominant standard of teaching and learning, and thereby establish the natives' models as the ideal. He also discussed how teaching is done without taking the local varieties into account and how the entire school system helps maintain and sustain the social hierarchy between the natives and the nonnatives by following the mainstream pedagogy (Canagarajah, 1999, p. 24). Thus, as stated by Canagarajah (2006b), students do not seem to develop "communicative competence" for "real world" needs because classes based on monolingual pedagogies disable them in the contexts of linguistic pluralism (p. 588). Similarly, Karunakaran, Rana & Haq (2013) stated that

> Classrooms of EFL and ESL learners experience anxiety that results in stuttering and fast heart beating. The widespread use of English language and the use of communicative language teaching have increased the demand to have a good command over English but existence of such anxiety prevent, most of the time, them from achieving the expected goal. To achieve the desired goal, the responsibility of a language teacher is deemed highly important in order to assist the learners. As a result, learning English as a foreign language has always been a difficult job for many countries like Bangladesh. Here students try to expose themselves in English only in a language class. Most of the students express their tension, anxiety, fear, feeling of uneasiness etc. against learning English as a foreign language. (p. 554)

Hence, Canagarajah (2006b) advocated for English to be appropriated according to the preferred interests and identities of the speaker through classrooms because this is not only a condition for gaining voice but also the most effective way of developing proficiency (p. 588). A similar view has been expressed by Sharifian (2009) who said that a strong emphasis should be given on envisioning English in its multiplicity, on recognizing the utility of local varieties and on the formation of identity in the use of English as an L2 (p. 58).

In a similar vein, Canagarajah (2006b) believed that appropriating the speaking by confidently using it to serve one's own interests according to one's own values, helps develop fluency in English (p. 589). He also believed that this can be done within the classrooms if multilingual people make adjustments to each other as they modify their pronunciation to facilitate communication to serve their own purposes (Canagarajah, 2006b, p. 593). In this regard, it is important to note that it is generally believed that NNSs are naturally inclined to diverge from NS-based norms to be in favor of localized linguistic features (Sharifian, 2009, p.82).

However, the truth is, though the stigma attached to world Englishes is changing, yet these varieties are still treated as unsuitable for classroom purposes. The L2 teachers are in a dilemma in choosing the identity they should be projecting in the classroom. In case of the nonnative English teachers, such dilemmas are really complex given the wider range of identification and self-representation options (Sharifian, 2009, p.139). This is again because both L2 teachers and learners are facing a lot of challenges in their way to appropriate English to serve their own interests and also to promote their own identity to the rest of the world (Canagarajah, 2006b, p. 598) which is an obvious obstacle to overcome the speaking anxiety of the learners.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be said that with English having different varieties in different parts of the world affecting its speaker's pace of speech, use of grammar, and choice of vocabulary, etc. There is little rationale for the native varieties to be the only acceptable benchmarks as far as language proficiency in English in general, and speaking proficiency in particular, are concerned. In the changing reality, English has become more of a contact language than a language that one can claim ownership of. Therefore, the issue of linguistic ownership gets problematized, and both native and nonnative users can declare English to be their own language. This has obvious implications on the ESL/EFL learners all over the world with specific reference to their language anxiety. Due to the pressure to conform to a native variety of English, learners' level of anxiety or affective filters become high, which has a very negative impact on their learning. On the contrary, when these learners are encouraged to practice their own varieties to meet their different communication needs focusing on mutual intelligibility, their language anxiety reduces, and they become more confident speakers. However, many a time, the nonnative teachers of English suffer from a strange identity issue, i.e., they are yet to decide on their linguistic identity to be playing out in classrooms. This can be lessened by a significant amount by recognizing the different varieties of English internationally, and by creating a more inclusive ambience for the teachers, learners, and the users of English.

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