A Critical Analysis of the Mainstream Standard English Education: a Korean EFL Teacher's View

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Abstract: This paper discusses the main tenet of teaching so called 'standard English' with an inner circle native speaker model in English language education. Moreover, it explores the actual status of NESTs in ELT professions and the role of TESOL programs regarding standard English education

Introduction

The official website of ETS(English Testing System), the developer and distributer of TOEFL(Test of English as a Foreign Language), states the rubric of the writing section is designed to measure examinees' ability to use standard written English correctly and effectively(http://www.ets.org/toefl/pbt/about); and here, the 'standard English' indicates standard American English of course because the test is originally designed in the United States to evaluate if a candidate has appropriate English proficiency needed for studying in American universities. Indeed, when we examine writing samples that ETS provides for modeling, it follows criteria which are based on typical writing styles and spellings of American English.

However, American English must not be the only standard English. Then what is 'the Standard English'? I found that there is neither agreed-upon definition of 'standard English' nor clear dichotomy of standard/non-standard or native/non-native English, but these issues still remain controversial. According to Kachru(1985), regions of world English can be categorized into three sectors: the inner circle, the outer circle, and the expanding circle. In expanding circle countries like Korea, therefore, most schools and institutions regard inner circle English, especially American or British English, as the target of instruction in their classrooms. In this vein, native English speaking teachers(NESTs) from North America and the UK are counted as the best providers of standard English models, and English teachers who do not have inner circle native English speakers' English accents and competence, especially many Korean non-native English speaking teachers(NNESTs), are considerably discriminated and considered inferior to those native English teachers.

As an English teacher and educator, I think it is necessary to keep thinking about what would be the best for my students and my colleague teachers by reflecting on what has been practiced in TESOL pedagogy without being problematized for a long time. Would teaching only so called standard English, which has been defined as inner circle English in many countries, really result in beneficial consequence for our students and teachers? And what causes this phenomenon in TESOL pedagogy? Is it really true that the only appropriate models of a language are from native speakers? I believe adherence to standard native-speaker model in English education have negatively influenced on NNESTs' professional identity because this tenet does not recognize English varieties but consider them inferior to Standard English.

In this paper, I will discuss the following; 1. Main tenet of teaching so called 'standard English' with an inner circle native speaker model in English language education, 2. The status of NESTs in ELT professions, 3. The role of TESOL programs regarding standard English education.

Standard English and Native-likeness in TESOL

There has been prevailing tenet which emphasizes native speakers' proficiency as the norms of a language. Even though Chomsky's theory, Universal Grammar, was not argued for second language acquisition, many SLA researchers integrated this theory in order to explain critical period hypothesis(CPH), which claims only learners who have begun learning their second languages before puberty can achieve native-like mastery of the languages(Patkowski 1980; White 2003). When Selinker(1972) explained his SLA theories with terms like 'fossilization' and 'interlanguage' to indicate non-native English speakers' defective output which is deviant from the target language norms, he acknowledged that native-speaker model is indispensable in SLA process. Long(1981) also emphasized the role of native speaker model as a crucial condition for acquiring second language proficiency, claiming that to have conversation with native speakers is an essential condition for learning a second language.

On the basis of those theories and assumptions, English Only Movement which claims using native languages in English teaching hinders successful English learning has been widely accepted by ESL educators. Following this tenet, still many ESL/EFL classes prevent students from using their L1 as their axiom even though there have been many research which opposed to this tenet(Auerbach 1993, Phillipson & Skutnabb-kangas 1996). Another trend is early-childhood English education which encourages learning English from very early age for the purpose of achieving native-like proficiency. Actually, research found that students who had had an early start in learning a second language could achieve native-like mastery which was indistinguishable from native speakers(Johnson & Newport 1989). When learners' goal of learning a second language is to achieve native-like mastery of the language, the research finding of Johnson and Newport would be meaningful. However, considering the usage of English among largely increasing populations of expanding circle countries, the ability to use English for communicative purposes would be more reasonable and meaningful goal for most of English learners in EFL context.

Unfortunately, most of the international English proficiency tests like TOEFL, IELTS and TOEIC foster the inclination of pursuing native-speaker models. Those tests which intend to evaluate proficiency level in the inner circle Standard English have lead English teachers and learners more interested in getting high scores in those tests than in communicative ability in the global contexts because those tests are supposed to assess Standard English proficiency. Many English teachers in the outer and expanding circle countries are obsessed by this misleading tendency because they believe higher scores in those 'standard tests' indicate nearer achievement of native-like proficiency in English. However, they do not realize the hidden agenda of lucrative test institutions of the United States and the UK that promotes inner circle English varieties as the global cultural/linguistic capital which are to be turned into economic capital(Pennycook 2001). Also, it comes from 'educational imperialism' in which Phillipson argued(1992) that inner circle countries try to control local educational decisions so that they promote their educational ideology and hegemony.

In the same regard, many teacher educators implicitly and explicitly have recognized that NESTs provide better teaching than NNESTs because they can present native speaker model with competence and proficiency to learners(Stern 1983) and NNESTs themselves are not proficient users of English like NESTs, which might be problematic for their students(Raves & Medgyes 1994). When it comes to variety of English pronunciation, research found that EFL learners preferred native varieties, especially American and British. More significant result was that the student participants linked teachers' pronunciation to their teaching ability, which means they counted teachers who had native-like accents were superior in teaching to those who did not(Jarvella et al 2001; Forde 1995).

However, all those assumptions and practices are based on the premise that all second language learners' ultimate goal of learning is to achieve native speakers' proficiency, which makes all SLA methodologies and teaching practices captured by 'comparative fallacy'(Bley-Vroman 1983), judging all aspects of learner language by comparing them with native speaker norms. This phenomenon which is pervasive in all areas of TESOL has lead to preference for NESTs in EFL/ESL institutions.

There has been academic literature which questioned the general belief about the role of native speakers and standard English in TESOL and these issues became quite controversial. Nevertheless, the tenets of preference for a native-speaker model and adherence to standard English proficiency are still prevailing in the teaching field. Teaching practices and teacher employment in ELT institutions are still operated under these false prevailing assumptions. There is a considerably huge gap between academic works and field

practices; research keeps problematizing false assumptions but has had little impact on policy makers and teachers in the field.

Ownership of English and Status of NNESTs

Another negative consequence of adherence to standard English is native speakerism and denial of non-native English speakers' ownership of English. However, the concept that English is no longer belong to native English speakers but all English-speaking people in the world has begun to be wide spread. Following Bourdieu(1977)'s claim, all learners of English should claim ownership of the language to consider themselves legitimate speakers. Actually, the majority of English users in the world are non-native English speakers and native English speakers have become minority in the world English speaking community(Crystal 1997; Kachru 1985).

Likewise, as there are a lot more NNESTs than NESTs, the notion that NNESTs are to be no longer marginalized and second-class members in ELT professional communities but should become central participants has been recognized by TESOL professionals(Pavlenko 2003). Recently researchers have begun to examine the dichotomy of native/non-native English speakers and its socially constructed irrationality(Kachru & Nelson 1996; Davies 1991; Liu 1999). Also, research found NNESTs' effectiveness as TESOL professionals in that they can provide a good learner model, understand learners' difficulties, teach learning strategies effectively and use the common mother tongue with students in monolingual settings(Phillipson 1992; Medgyes 1994, 2001; Llurda 2005).

However, there are still many NNESTs who have difficulty in establishing confident self-esteem as English teachers, influenced by the native speaker fallacy; They still feel inferior to NESTs, possessed by the old value of viewing the NS as perfect model of English use(Medgyes 1994; Cook 2002, 2005); There is still certainty in English teachers' perception in general that native speakers' English, especially inner-circle English - American or British - has been the norm to follow for international communication(Jenkins 2007). Therefore, until quite recently, NNESTs have been regarded as an inferior group to their native-speaking counterparts in their knowledge and performance(Llurda(ed) 2005).

When NNESTs have negative self-perceptions, their teaching practices and even their students' learning and motivation can be affected negatively(Butler 2004). Research found that this tendency is more prominent among NNESTs who teach primary school students rather than secondary school students(Llurda & Huguet 2003), who do not have extended period of living experience in English-speaking countries(Llurda 2008), and who are not aware of EIL-related matters in TESOL(Safakis & Sougari 2005).

Studies on NNESTs have focused on not only NNESTs' self-perceptions but also students' perceptions of NNESTs(Moussu 2002; Liang 2002; Cheung 2002; Mahboob 2003). Contrast to the teachers' perceptions of themselves, students generally had positive attitudes towards their NNESTs and were aware of both NESTs' and NNESTs' respective strengths and weaknesses in their teaching practices; NNESTs received positive comments from their students in their linguistic factors, teaching factors and personal factors except for their oral skills and cultural awareness of English speaking countries(Llurda(ed) 2005).

In spite of many studies that found that students appreciated NNESTs' strengths in teaching, administrators in many educational institutions are still possessed by the idealization of NESTs so that they discriminate against NNESTs in the process of recruitment for teaching positions(Mahboob et al., 2004; Clark & Paran 2007; Sharifian 2009). When defining identity within the relations and interaction with the world from sociocultural point of view, the social recognition is also a non-negligible factor to reckon; the preference for NESTs by employers in ELT jobs can make NNESTs' social identity to be considered as second -class position in TESOL education.

Status of NNESTs vis-a-vis EIL

As for the non-native speakers' competence in general, I agree with Medgye's statement; "for all their efforts, non-native speakers can never achieve a native speaker's competence"(1992; 342) even though there are special exceptions like Joseph Conrad's case. If all EFL learners have future possible self-images as the ones who possess native English speakers' competence, it would not effectively help the learners' motivation

or self-esteem because they are not realistic future possible selves which they can perceive and achieve in their actual circumstances(Dörnyei & Ushioda 2009).

Of course, NNES EFL teachers should have sufficient English proficiency because they should be successful language learner models for their students. However, if we teach and learn English as an International Language(EIL) purpose, I believe these statements show EFL learners' realistic goal of learning English: "Learners may well need to be able to talk 'to' native speakers of English, but they will not need to be able to talk 'as' native speakers of English(Gnutzmann 1999; 27)."; "People need not 'think' English to speak English(Ibid.;25)." In other words, EIL teachers' goal in teaching is to make learners become successful communicators with all kinds of world English users, not only with selected groups of native speakers of English, which is different from existing ELT trend which emphasizes only the inner-circle varieties and disregards NNS English varieties(Sharifian 2009).

There have been gatekeepers who try to protect NS English as the only legitimate, appropriate English among mainstream SLA researchers, publishers, examination boards, and government institutions; They make policies to regulate what is good and correct English and what is bad and broken English; They assume all English learners learn the language to be like native English speakers eventually; They regard NNES English as either interlanguage or fossilization(Jenkins 2007). Unlike other foreign languages, however, English is more often used for communication among the non-native rather than between the native and the non-native, which means English should be treated as an international language and NNESs whose English proficiency is not native-like should not to be regarded as failures.

In this regard, Llurda claimed that the only way to empower NNESTs is to choose EIL as their paradigm to aim for because it acknowledges the wide variety of English among its users and does not exclusively rely on monoculturalism of western English speaking world so that NNESTs are not to be discriminated but given considerable authority to teach the language(Sharifian(ed) 2009). If authenticity of a language depends on native-speaker patterns and their cultural behaviors which non-native speakers can hardly acquire, it is inevitable to admit the privileged status of NESTs(Widdowson 1994). Therefore, it would be better to focus not on contexts of use but on contexts of learning which is informed by learners' cultural world(Ibid.) because it is a way of establishing positive professional identity and its subsequent condition, NNESTs' self-confidence, will be enhanced in this power-related ELT professions.

However, research found that NNEST themselves' attitudes towards EIL were not so enthusiastic and they regarded the NS as their norms and source of authority, not considering their local sources as possible models(Jenkins 2007; Tsui & Bunton 2000; Sifakis 2004). Even though they support EIL in theory, they are still in favor of NS English because NNS English is still treated as broken English among main stream researchers and linguists, which might be caused by local hegemony rather than imperialism(Jenkins 2007). It is certain that there is a big gap between theory in academics and practice in professions.

False Dichotomy of NESTs and NNESTs

While most of the critical literature about NESTs and NNESTs' power relations have dealt with problems of illogical dichotomy of NEST/NNESTs but has not considered subcategories of each group, there exist further classifications among ELT teachers. Among NESTs from inner circle countries, teachers who are from South African or New Zealand are treated discriminately because of their accents which are different from American or British accents. In fact, therefore, English teachers' remunerations are decided according to their nationalities in ELT institutions and teacher recruitment companies in Korea. As I was involved in hiring process as an administrator in English schools in Korea and China, all the administrative staffs had tacit agreement to hire teachers from North America or the UK when needed to hire NESTs. This employment practice was based on the false supposition; if our students were taught by teachers with different accents other than American or British, they would learn non-standard English which would be harmful for their English pronunciation. Furthermore, we believed that young learners once acquired wrong accent, it would be fossilized and they would never learn the standard English. Unfortunately, this wrong assumption is the common perspective of most of Korean parents and school administrators, and I believe it must be not a tendency which exists only in Korea.

Likewise, there is discrimination among NNESTs in Korean ELT professions as well. Korean teachers who have studied or have long-term living experience in the States or the UK are favored by school administrators to those who have learned English in Philippines or Malaysia, not to mention those who studied only in local context. They are discriminated mainly by spoken English because it is the most salient feature among all the skills and capabilities of an English teacher. It is a significantly prevailing perspective in Korean ELT profession even though it sounds unreasonable from critical point of view.

All those aforementioned criteria for judging teachers overlook what should be really required for a good teacher; the capacity of engaging in ideologically and morally grounded critical reflections for their profession and the ability of making every student respected, valued, and heard in their classrooms (Brookfield, 1995).

Teacher Education in TESOL Programs

In this challenged situation for NNESTs, postgraduate TESOL programs are required to help future or current NNESTs to establish appropriate self-esteem for their professions as legitimate language teachers so that they can be prepared to cope with the challenges as NNESTs in the fields. When they are aware of their strengths in language teaching, their confidence and motivation for teaching English would be enhanced(Moussu & Llurda 2008; Sharifian 2009).

Statistics say 80% of the English teachers in the world are NNESTs (Canagarajah 1999), and accordingly, a big portion of postgraduate TESOL student teachers are NNESTs. In this context, TESOL programs should concern about the issue of NNESTs' self-perception for prospect and current NNES educators - teachers, teacher-trainers, school administrators, and ELT book editors - to help them establish appropriate professional identity construction (Kamhi-Stein 1999).

To make NNES TESOL student teachers establish constructive professional identity, the awareness of critical issues in teaching English has to be developed (Llurda in Sharifian 2009). When they realize lots of issues and complexities behind TESOL professions by reading and discussing, NNESTs' awareness of teaching English as an international language will be developed and as a result, their perspectives about English teaching will be transformed (Sifakis 2004). Since there is still discrimination against NNESTs in ELT professions, student teachers should build up professional self-confidence to face their future difficulties.

For this purpose, having direct experience of diverse English usage, conscious reflection on the power relations and the ownership of English language, and perceiving current trend towards multilingualism are recommended for NNESTs to build up professional self-confidence (Llurda 2008). In this regard, all TESOL pre-service and in-service programs should explicitly address these issues because lots of NNESTs are not aware of them (Sifakis & Sougari 2005). When they realize that their assumptions which they have taken for granted and put into practice in class accordingly should be called into questions, they will not repeat what is given from the past without conscious thoughts and reflect on what they have done and what can be done in their classes now and in the future.

Therefore, I believe teacher education programs should include not only modules related to critical issues but also the ones for teachers' critical reflection. When teachers who have learned about the habit of critical reflection, they would realize that the power-related unreasonable practices have been regarded as common sense in the field and think of what would be best for their students not for the minority who has the power; "Teachers who have learned the reflective habit know something about the effects they are having on students. They are alert to the presence of power in their classrooms and to its potential for misuse(Brookfield 1995; 26)." Indeed, teachers' instructional decision-making and practices are based on their beliefs, so it is more effective for student teachers to provide them with opportunities of reflecting on their professional values rather than to try to change their teaching practices first(Tatto 1999). When teachers have critical knowledge and discernment, they can consider not only their own teaching contexts but also broader dimensions of TESOL pedagogy and furthermore, they will be able to raise their students' critical awareness (Troudi 2005).

Conclusion

English is an international language and maintenance of its core standards is needed for intelligibility and cause of international communication. However, I think that Standard English is not to be regulated by a few inner circle countries' native English speakers who claim to have the power to preserve the standards but constitute only a minority in the global community.

In this regard, international English proficiency tests which are based only on native-speaker model, especially American or British norms, are not appropriate for evaluating competence in international communication which is the majority of cases in global contexts. Many cases of English communication in English speaking institutions are between NESs and NNESs or among NNESs. For instance, there are rapidly increasing number of international students at U.S. colleges and universities, 32% more than a decade ago and about 20% of total enrollment is international students(Institute of International Education 2011). Therefore, the native speaker fallacy and native-speakerism which is pervasive in many ESL/EFL classes should not be repeated for the good of their students' future. I believe the one of the primary causes of continuance of those false ideologies in ELT pedagogy is the typical international English proficiency tests like TOEFL and IELTS. These tests should reflect reality in the international contexts and improve their test validity. Unless those tests are not changed, it would be hard for ELT teachers not to focus solely on American or British English and introduce other varieties in their teaching because those test scores may significantly influence on their students' opportunities for higher education and other qualifications.

When we overcome the gatekeeper's false assumptions and accept English as an international language, English speakers in outer and expanding circle countries can assert their ownership of the language and at the same time, NNESTs' professional identities can be positively developed. Even though the custodians of standard English claim that if the diversity of English is admitted, the language will fall apart and end up with the condition of mutually unintelligible, so to speak, Back to Babel(Widdowson 1994) situation, a language is like a living thing so that it cannot be confined as the gatekeepers want. We need to find a way to adjust and meet the agreement, accepting the diversity. For this purpose, TESOL programs for pre-service or in-service English educators among whom are future or current policy makers and classroom teachers should take a responsibility to make their student teachers be aware of critical issues in TESOL and have balanced perspectives.

All in all, I think that typical international proficiency tests like TOEFL and IELTS, current teaching and employment practices in ELT professions, and teacher education programs in TESOL all together need to be realigned for the best of our students and teachers, considering the concept of standard English and its impact on overall TESOL pedagogy from the critical point of view.

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