"Standardization" of Language in ELT Context

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Abstract: The debate on the concept of 'standardization' of English as the lingua franca of the world has been a still phenomenon in spite of the dramatic transformation of the world in many other ways around. The 'role set' of 'English language teaching' includes the learners, the teachers and the organizers/facilitators/promoters of the language education programs. Every member in the 'role set' tends to bring forth his or her own understanding of 'Standard English'. In view of the prevailing confusion created by the varying perceptions of the members in the 'role set', about the concept of Standard English, this article attempts to describe the standardization concept and provides a critique on the role of teachers in promoting 'intelligibility' in light of the equity drive brought forth by scholars like García, Kleifgen & Falchi (2008). Although the research based on the critical analysis of the discourse present in the existent literature takes the shape of an argumentative mode, the article maintains its objective and qualitative method in its narration.

1. BACKGROUND

It is unlikely an exaggeration to say that English language is the only subject that one can find as part of many of their courses in most of the institutions all over the world. The growing sense that the non-native English speakers have outnumbered the native speakers and the emerging English patois have been changing the scope of English Language and the English Language Teaching (ELT) Scholars like David Crystal have identified that the non-native English speakers have already outnumbered the native. "With native speakers a shrinking minority of the world's Anglophones, there's a growing sense that students should stop trying to emulate Brighton or Boston English, and embrace their own local versions. Researchers are starting to study non-native speakers' "mistakes"--"She look very sad," for example-- as structured grammars" (Power, 2013). The fact that Britain boasts more than 1.3 billion pounds and India more than 100 million dollars per year English teaching Industry clarifies the importance of English education that can lead to an English speaking world with its English in its varying forms as the language of commerce, technology and empowerment. In view of the expanding English horizon, a discussion on the concept of the standardization of English and the implications of the 'standard' forms of the language in teaching English as an international language can improve the teachers' understanding of the language that can enable them update their teaching techniques.

2. LINGUISTIC COMPETENCE, COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE AND PROFICIENCY

Being an important aspect of 'Linguistic Theory', 'Linguistic competence' refers to the ability of an individual to perform in a language in a communication context and 'proficiency' refers to the actual performance of communication in a language (Chomsky, 1965, p.3). *WiseGeek* clarifies that

> Linguistic Competence "applies to mastering the combination of sounds, syntax and semantics known as the grammar of a language. People with such competence have learned to utilize the grammar of their spoken language to generate an unlimited amount of statements…. Linguistic performance and communicative competence are concepts related to linguistic competence but are applied to language as it is actually used rather than as an ideal construct. Linguistic performance is the practical application of speech with the grammatical flaws and mistakes that exist among real-world speakers. This allows speakers to understand each other despite

grammatical flaws and differences in dialect. Communicative competence refers to the rules that govern the kinds of speech allowed within the cultural context." (What is LC?, n.d)

Proficiency doesn't mean a performance on a particular 'dialect' of a language, but in a language in general. 'Nativity' is, in general, taken for granted for proficiency in a language. But, as Chomsky (1965) mentioned, a record of a "natural speech," what many people call 'native speech' act performed by an "ideal speaker-listener in a completely homogenous speech community," a performance that is a "direct reflection of competence, shows false starts, deviations from rules, and changes of plan in mid-course and so on" (p.4). Wikipedia defines language proficiency or linguistic proficiency as the "ability to speak or perform in the acquired language" (Language Proficiency, n.d), but not in a specific dialect. The ability to perform is personal and so nativity is not a standard for 'proficiency'. Chomsky also maintains that the traditional 'structuralist' grammars failed in accounting for the creative aspect of language, and the irregularities, exceptions and the figurative use of English are discussed and explained in informal ways by using the rules like "ellipses" and "inversions." No perfect grammar is available to account for the generative processes of the underlying competence and so the concept of 'Standard English' continues to be mythical. The grammatical inadequacies are thus complimented with the concepts of "acceptability" and "unacceptability." A speech or writing that is easily comprehensible is acceptable and the one that is quite complex to understand, however, grammatical it may be, is unacceptable.

In contrast to Chomsky's mentalist view of linguistic competence, Hymes (1972) brought forth the concept of 'communicative competence' that reckons with the socio-linguistic view of language acquisition and proficiency based on the framework of "possibility," "feasibility," "appropriateness" and "done." A person's perception, understanding, acquisition and proficiency of a language depend on the developmental matrix in which he was brought up and the linguistic elements that he or she confronted with within that matrix. Misevaluation, misperception and misunderstanding of the innate abilities of a person are so common when a person moves from one developmental matrix to another where the communicative expectations are different. As mentioned by Hymes just confining to the innate capacities that were unfolded in the formative years of life, in judging one's linguistic competence, is a 'short-range view'. In a 'long-range view', a person's linguistic competence continuously keeps changing as he or she continues their socialization all through their life and so the competence

theory must go beyond the notion of ideal fluency in a homogenous community (ibid, p.287). And so competence theory should account even for the children who are disadvantaged and also those whose primary language is different from that of their school.

The inconsistency on what constitutes proficiency, the various pedagogical theories on proficiency and the diverse perspectives, needs and interests resulted in the considerable variability in the definitions of linguistic competence that have been incorporated into the American State Legislations, Federal Statutes and programs apart from the private organization and academic settings. Good and Wendy (2009) defined linguistic competence as

> the capacity of an organization and its personnel to communicate effectively, and convey information in a manner that is easily understood by diverse audiences including persons of limited English proficiency, those who have low literacy skills or are not literate, individuals with disabilities, and those who are deaf or hard of hearing. Linguistic competency requires organizational and provider capacity…. The organization must have policy, structures, practices, procedures, and dedicated resources to support this capacity.

In an EFL or ESL classroom context, when the aspects mentioned in the above definition like the 'provider capacity' and the 'dedicated resources to support' are made available to all the learners without any linguistic biases and prejudices, learning becomes more encouraging and learners can be more confident about their developing competence. Disparages and derisions from the so called 'native speakers' about another dialect can, undesirably and for no special benefit, stifle the communicative competence of some sensitive people who otherwise can be fluent and understandable enough in their own dialect. After all, the ""native speaker" is just a linguistic ideal" (Paikeday, 1985 p.88, 90) that can be considered in judging the other speakers in terms of the details like birth, parentage and country of origin that are in no way concerned with the proficiency in the language in order to distinguish native speaker as a 'good' and non-native speaker as a 'bad'. "The linguistic concept "native speaker" is that of someone who is a proficient user of a specific language, not of someone who has the language as mother tongue or first language" (ibid). One can identify and understand that no two people, how native they may be, can reflect similar accent style all the way. Just as a writer has his own style of writing, a film

director attains his own style; speech and accent are also styles of individuals.

3. ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHERS AND THE NATIVE FLUENCY SYNDROME

The linguistic atlas of United States of America could identify various regional varieties of American English enriched by different British Isles and other colonial languages, although the contributions from various immigrants from other parts of the world are excluded. Labov's(1972) Index of Linguistic Insecurity reveals the intensity of "Linguistic self-hatred" of the New Yorkers in their words like "horrible", "distorted" and the insecurity expressed by stating that the outsiders would think of all them to be 'murderers' and that it would be like a terrible slap in the face to be identified as a New Yorker. Labov also identified that the pronunciation differences in New York were not haphazard but were patterned in accordance with age, sex, social status and style of utterance and that the accents are dominated by power, and those who hold social power can also influence accents. He further revealed that the middle class women are more particular about their accent and they like to sound more like native. Whenever they find that their accent doesn't sound like the standard form they suspect insecurity and reflect 'hypercorrection' (Raven McDavid, 1968 and Jenny s.a). That is a tendency to use Standard English in order to be distinguished as more sophisticated, and so they are not less than the economically dominant class and shouldn't be equated with the 'lower class' or 'cockneys' (Ibid).

Behrens and Neeman (2004) contend that "teachers, especially in the lower grades, tend to come from middle class backgrounds and be women" reflect the Standard English as the prestigious form and so tend to be biased to the learners with other accents. A study on language attitude by Schairer (1992) as quoted by Behrens and Neeman found that "the listeners who are teachers were less tolerant than non-teaching listeners to the nativeness of accent, agreeability of voice and comprehensibility of speech"(p.41). Behrens mentioned that when she moved from New York to Connecticut her classmates felt difficult to understand her as she didn't use the Standard English dialect. Grill (2010) carries a similar kind of experience when she moved from Deep South to New York. In spite of her familiarity and regular use of the Standard English and another dialect she had to receive derisive stares from her classmates. Behrens and Mercer (2010) document the story of Maria who moved from Dominican Republic to New York city and her miserable failure in academics just due to the difference in the dialect that she spoke and the dialect of her classroom, in spite of her intelligence and acumen.

Maria experienced the classes by three teachers over a period of 5 years on her English writing. In her high school that went for 4 years, in spite of her average and good grades in other subjects she was graded poor in English writing. During this period in the beginning, as a bilingual she was very confident about her English, both spoken and written. In fact she could speak English with native fluency as well as she could speak her Spanish. By the end of her graduation her confidence levels went down as she always received the comments like "awk" (means 'awkward') in her assignments while she didn't receive any guidance from her teacher on what to correct and how to correct. With her second teacher, though it was only for a short time, she was encouraged well and regained her confidence. But again when she was shifted to another teacher she started getting negative remarks and started giving a thought to the teacher's intolerance of the regional dialects and in a fit of apprehension thought of complaining against the teacher. Maria's case is an indication of the teachers' lack of broader linguistic outlook of language. Sterzuk (2008) holds that the lack of fluency in a particular dialect that is imposed as 'standard' one in academics may lead to delays, lapses and interruptions for bilinguals in their way for mastering the literacy skills and even the subject matter. Misconceptions about 'linguistic democracy', especially when held by educators, academic administrative authorities and policy makers, can prove to be devastating and result in undesirable consequences that can threaten world peace and progress in the long run. Jenkin's (2005) observations revealed that the attitudes of teachers towards their own accent and their admiration to native accent are all due to combined effect of their "past experiences, the factors of their present situation and their assessment of their chances of future success."

4. IMPOSITION OF STANDARD DIALECT AS A ROUTE TO 'LINGUISTIC IMPERIALISM'

Phillipson (1992) identified the spread of English language from 'core' to 'periphery' and along with it the cultures and codes that have been thrust upon as indispensable for 'modernization' and 'nation building', riding roughshod over other local languages. Crystal (1997) believes that language succeeds and spreads because of power and though the spread of English is initially due to militarily powerful countries the later developments and its emergence as a lingua franca were due to economically powerful nations. The common view of most of the scholars finds the spread of English as a natural, neutral and beneficial consequence due to its global functionality that happened by chance (Burns & Coffin 2001). The evaluation of proficiency or fluency of a person based on a particular dialect and to discriminate against as inefficient for specific positions and consequently disparage the related cultures and people

certainly seem to be something uncivilized and inhuman that needs a greater attention for expurgation. Discrimination based on an accent is like saying "your eyes are small" (Jenkins, 2005) and so you are not suitable. Creese & Kambere (2003) mentioned the cases of Mapendo, Muhindo, Caroline, Kabugho, Nora and Mabunda to prove the way the concept of 'accent' has been used to disqualify and to socially marginalize the people with an accent, without troubling the "liberal discourses of equality" in Canada. In spite of their fluency in English, decades of their stay in Canada, higher education and relevant qualifications from universities in USA and Canada, they were denied the deserved positions just because of their accents. It's not about the lack of English knowledge, fluency in English or ability to communicate well but about the power, domination and subjugation. Mabunda expressed that the use of 'accent' as a tool is systematized in order to discriminate, racialize and marginalize and to put the others down. As a consequence all of them struggled for employment, went spiritually crippled, resisted the linguistic imperialist efforts in order to assert their identities and determined to continue with their own accent, something that cannot be separated from their bodies.

5. LANGUAGE AND ACCENT AS VARIABLES

Hauser, Chomsky & Fitch (2002) observed that human "faculty of language appears to be organized like the genetic code—hierarchical, generative, recursive, and virtually limitless with respect to its scope of expression." Accents are also affected, influenced and controlled by such genetic codons, which claims a heavy toll for transplantations and so accent variation is in a way genetically systematized. Kretzschmar (2008) brings us a story of the southern plantation accent's hegemony, during which pronouncing 'r' is scandalous, and its decline with the deterioration of the plantations. The people who once used to pronounce 'r' tended to change their accent and the culture, in tune with the plantation southern accent of the elites for whom pronouncing 'r' is unsophisticated and then a reversal to pronouncing 'r', as pronouncing 'r' is viewed prestigious as it's prevalent in Northern parts of America and in Standard English or the 'correct English' of schools in the USA. In Kretzschmar's view, the English of a region is 'normal English' and the English in schools is 'correct English', which is the 'English' of those "for whom everybody else's accent is a source of amusement - but not their own, even though Correct English advocates have to come from some place and tend to reveal it when they talk" (ibid). Trudgill (as quoted by Grill, p.360) holds a similar view in stating that "Standardized English is not a language, accent, style, register, or set of rules; It is itself a dialect of English". Accent is subjective and a reflection of personality and the sign of affiliation of the individual with his or her local culture. And a shift from the natural dialect looks like an affectation, which no one is comfortable with, and so is so artificial that no one loves conversing in it.

Idiolects, argots and jargons refer to specific uses of a language that can be identified with the styles of a person, group and community or particular field. Just as a novelist, poet, essayist and a movie director involuntarily keep developing their own styles reflecting on their works of art, every individual does have their own style of language and accent, which displays their personality, identity and culture. In the first glance all the folks of region or a country or a race viz., mongoloids, African, Asian, European etc., look alike for a foreigner. But it doesn't take too long, for one, to identify the differences in the facial features of any two people of a race. Similarly no two voices could be similar and so no two accents could be completely identical. The degree of variation may differ from individual to individual. Every individual should emerge with his or her own style of accent, voice, style, language, mannerisms and so on, in order to be identifiable. And the identities can be used both for integration of different cultures leading to world peace and also for subjugation, domination, marginalization and ultimately for exploitation leading to conflicts in the world. However, we hope that the world will move more towards unification and peace and teachers of English language worldwide will play a major role in fostering the democracy of the 'lingua franca'. And when the teachers are provided with an insight into the 'broader linguistic outlook' of language, the chances that the teachers would focus more on 'intelligibility' rather than on the 'Standard English' concept, and the chances that they become more tolerant and respectful to other accents, cultures and people may increase.

6. FINISHING REMARKS

When teachers are tolerant to varying dialects and encourage the learners to speak in their own way, simultaneously hinting on how the speakers of the target dialect speak, the teachers can see a greater improvement and compromise in their learners attitude and commitment to learn and their tendency to adjust to the target dialect and the culture. In their evaluation of assignments or judgments on the learners' pronunciations, the teachers can consider saying, "this would be pronounced like this, if a speaker from Northern America/Southern America speaks; it wouldn't be a problem as you are intelligible, however, these can be the benefits if you can speak like that", instead of saying or commenting "your writing is 'awk'; your speech is too heavy; I'm sorry! I can't understand you; I go imbalanced to this kind of accent; I can't bear the students with this accent in my class, etc." The fact seems

to be that just like most of the English language teachers many people admire a particular accent for its appeal to their senses similar to the kind of admiration one holds for the elegance of a building, the beauty of a model, the melody of a tone or the attractions of a landscape. However, nothing can be projected as a 'standard form' or an 'ultimate form' for universal acceptance. In view of the increasing bilinguals all over the world the teachers of English need to broaden their linguistic outlook and think of fostering the concept of "plurilingualism" (Council of Europe, 2007) for effective communicative practices. "A meaningful and equitable education will not only turn these English language learners into English proficient students but, more significantly, into successful bilingual students and adults" (Garc*ía, Kleifgen&Falchi, 2008, p.7)*

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