EIL and Foreign Accent in ELT

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Abstract

English as an International Language (EIL) research, which is based on the number of non-native speakers in the world outnumbering the native speakers, is based on the idea that there is no need in insisting on native-speaker norms for proper English. Also, EIL allows a foreign English accent and the deliberate assertion of one's national identity through a foreign accent as long as one is intelligible enough to his/her interlocutor. Within an EIL perspective, this paper is an attempt to underline the recent trend of tolerating a foreign accent in ELT.

Introduction

Despite being approved by some and disapproved by others, it cannot be denied that English functions as a global lingua franca in today's world (Seidlhofer, 2005). It is the world's international language, used for international communication mostly among non-native speakers of other languages. As estimated by Crystal (1997), that there were 1,200-1,500 million people having reasonable competence of the English language, only 337 million of which were native speakers of English. Since 1997, the number of non-native English speakers has been increasing rapidly and the native speakers are currently only a minority. The concept of EIL, which has appeared as a reaction to the changing face of English, questions the strict adherence to native speaker rules and accent. Instead, the pronunciation reflecting the identity of the speaker is promoted within the EIL research movement. As pointed out by Monroy (2008), this movement requires the idea of language ownership, the incorporation of other varieties and standards of English, the de-prioritization of the classic (British-American) models and the non-rejection of other non-English accents provided they do not interfere with intelligibility.

In terms of intelligibility, Jenkins proposed a set of priorities for EIL pronunciation in her revolutionary book called "The Phonology of English as an International Language". She concludes the book with her following statement in the last paragraph of the book to highlight the relationship between L1 identity and English pronunciation:

> "…Pronunciation is one of the features of a language that enables speakers to preserve their L1 identity by accepting pronunciation transfer while at the same time promoting their intelligibility by selecting appropriately from the core in order to accommodate to the interlocutor…" (2000, p. 235).

EIL and Identity

With the changing face of EIL, some researchers started to question the traditional views in English language teaching. Aptekin (2002), for example, questions the so-called native speaker norms by claiming that the native speaker model is utopian, unrealistic and constraining in relation to EIL. Similarly, Seidlhofer (2000) criticizes the native speaker English by suggesting that the fine nuances of native speaker language are communicatively redundant or even counter-productive. Jenkins (2000) also argues that speakers do not need a near-native accent; instead, a way of speaking English taking account of the linguistic and cultural identities of non-native speakers of English should be adopted. In brief, within EIL perspective, English pronunciation seems to be switching from the adherence to native speaker norms to a pronunciation that reflects the identity of the speaker.

Characteristics of EIL have started to be compiled by a number of researchers. Jenkins (2000), for instance, has established basic phonological features for EIL and called them "lingua franca core". These phonological features focus on maintenance of local identity by speakers and mutual intelligibility, especially among non-native speakers, rather than the so-called native speaker models. She argues that certain phonological items have to be kept if non-native speakers wish to remain intelligible among each other. She has two lists of features as lingua franca core (necessary for intelligibility) and non-core (not necessary for intelligibility). For instance, all the consonants except for 'th' sounds as in 'thin' and 'this' and the contrast between long and short vowels (sit, seat)are under the heading of her lingua franca core while weak forms such as the words 'to', 'of' and 'from' ,word stress and pitch movement are in the non-core list.

Inspired by Jenkins, Walker (2001) set pronunciation priorities for Spanish Speakers of English and Çelik (2005) tried to do the same for Turkish students. Furthermore, VOICE standing for Vienna-Oxford International Corpus of English is a corpus of spoken EIL currently compiled at the University of Vienna to trigger more descriptive work. An example from the VOICE is that speakers of English as a foreign language do not often seem to use the third person singular present tense '-s' marking in their verbs and this does not lead to any misunderstandings or communication problems.

Considering such descriptive studies, it would be fair to claim that EIL research is becoming more and more popular and challenge traditional notions about standardized English ideology and nativespeakerness. One of the most important factors leading to EIL pronunciation and a foreign accent is English speakers' L1 identity. In order to define what identity means, Golombek and Jordan (2005) refers to Ochs (1993) who defined it as a cover term for a range of social personae, including social statuses, roles, positions, relationships, and institutional and other relevant community identities one may attempt to claim or assign in the course of social life. Levis (2005) approaches identity from two different angles as positive aspect of identity and the negative aspect of it. He states that if the positive aspect of identity is the desire to belong, the negative is the desire to exclude.

Brown (2000) establishes a relationship between identity and learning L2 (identity and L1 relationship is out of the scope of this study) by claiming that second language learning involves the acquisition of a second identity. Convinced by the close relationship between L2 accent and identity, Erling and Barlett (2001) suggest that non-native speakers are allowed to make English their own by adjusting the language for their own purposes, asserting their identities through English and seeing themselves as rightful owners of the language. Many other researchers (Gatbonton et al., 2005; Golombek and Jordan, 2005; Jenkins, 2005) studied the relationship between the English accent spoken by non-native speakers of English and the identity issue. For instance, Gatbonton et al. (2005) reveal the link between the ethnic group affiliation and one's pronunciation. In their study, learners evaluated their peers' accent as an indicator of their degree of ethnic affiliation. Levis (2005) also claims that accents are tied to speaker identity, group membership and social belonging. He states that the influence of identity on accent may be as strong as the biological constraints such as age and gender.

Golombek and Jordan (2005) have collected data from two Taiwanese teachers of English studying in an American-based TESOL MA program by interviewing and analyzing papers written by participants in reaction to articles written by the supporters of non-native speakers of English like Cook (1999) who calls them "multicompetent language users". One of the Taiwanese teachers' makes the following comment after reading Cook's work on "multicompetence":

> "Accent is a natural performance. ESL learners should not be ashamed of their accent…ESL learners and users don't have to speak like Americans…ESL learners should find their own English instead of becoming parrots".

By using the parrot metaphor, she implied that accents are natural and she would rather have her voice with her own background than just repeat after a native speaker of English. Despite positive reactions to studies like Cook's, it was generally found that

participants had multiple and conflicting identities as legitimate speakers and teachers of English. Therefore, researchers advise teacher education programs to help non-native speakers imagine alternative identities for themselves using awareness raising classroom activities to affirm their legitimacy.

Jenkins (2005) had an interview with 8 non-native teachers of English from different expanding circle countries and asked them questions regarding their attitudes towards native and foreign accents in addition to attitudes of others to participant's accents. She concludes that it cannot be taken for granted that teacher from the expanding circle obviously wish to use their accented English to express their L1 identity or membership in an international community. There are two very interesting statements by her participants:

> "I feel Polish…I don't want to sound like an English person, obviously not."(a Polish teacher)
> "…I'm proud of my accent…I don't want to be what I am not. I am Italian, I have my own culture, and my roots are Italian."(an Italian teacher)

On the other hand, Jenkins draws attention to the dilemma that the native speaker is still regarded by non-native teacher participants as "good", "perfect" and "original" whereas a foreign accent of English is considered as "not good", "wrong" and "not real". She assumes that their in-class and out-of-class experiences and the present situation they are in may all have had an influence on their attitudes.

Crystal (2007) suggests in his blog (Retrieved from http://david-crystal.blogspot.com/2007.07.01.archive.html) that if other people can understand what you say in a foreign language, it is not very important whether you speak it with a foreign accent or not. He thinks that the only people in need of developing a phonetic ability to the extent that their foreign origins are totally masked are spies. Moreover, he claims to enjoy listening to different accents:

> "…I don't find the Persian accent - or any foreign accent - 'funny" or 'bad' at all. If the sound system of a language has been mastered to the extent that speech is intelligible, then that suffices. I love hearing the range of identities that manifest themselves in English through foreign accents - a French accent, a German accent, a Persian accent, and so on. The accents convey the speakers' identities, and that is an important element in knowing who I am talking to…"

On the whole, rather than "parroting" the native speaker or teaching how to parrot them, we, as both teachers and speakers of English, should hold the idea that a foreign accent is only a regional accent variation and teachers or any English speakers should therefore be more tolerant of it. For negative attitudes towards foreign accents to change, teacher education programs have an important role to play. The tendency to teach native-speaker English might

be a result of the traditional teacher training programs that are in need of an EIL perspective as stated by Sifakis (2007). He suggests that teachers need to change deeply rooted viewpoints on many levels concerning the importance of standard English, the role of native speakers and the negotiation of non-native speakers' identities in cross-cultural communication. In the world where there are so many varieties of English and a tolerance for these varieties is necessary, these programs should be restructured with new goals and perspectives. Snow et al. (2006) suggest the following for an EIL teacher education program.

1. Expose teachers (learners) to varieties of English beyond the Inner Circle;

2. Help to deconstruct the myth of the native speaker

3. Integrate methodologies that are valued in the local context and reflect students' actual needs and interests

4. Foster language development through increased target language exposure, consciousness-raising activities, and feedback

5. Encourage collaboration between local and outside experts

6. Instill in participants the value of on-going reflective practice and life long learning endeavors.

Conclusion

This paper concludes that there is no point for these speakers in trying to speak like a native-speaker if most of the English speakers today use English mainly to communicate with other non-native speakers coming from various L1 backgrounds (Jenkins, 2004). Instead, it is advisable for these speakers to adjust to one model including features that are mostly based on their first languages and identities (Jenkins, 2000). As a result, it would be true to agree with Kirkpatrick' (2004) suggestions to the ELT world. From his perspective, variation is natural, normal, and continuous, and ELT professionals should develop tolerance and understanding of it. Also, there is a need for an understanding of the fact that prejudice against English varieties has no rational basis and one variety of English is not superior to another. Finally, specific teaching contexts and specific needs of learners should determine the variety to be taught.

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