

English Language Teaching and Sociolinguistics

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Introduction

It might seem antiquated to talk in 2003 about the relationship between English Language Teaching (ELT) and Sociolinguistics when the latter has been informing the former for the last thirty years or so, at least since 1967 with Hymes' article "Why linguistics needs the sociologist" not to go back to Firth (1957), who first proposed a sociological linguistics in the thirties.

This paper is therefore aimed at North African teachers of English who may not be aware of the very existence of sociolinguistics, and its application to teaching.

As far as Algeria is concerned apart from the main universities – Algiers, Constantine, and Oran – which have qualified teachers of sociolinguistics, the majority of other universities and university centres do not offer any theoretical or practical courses in sociolinguistics. The same state of affairs obtains in Morocco according to Saib (1991) who pleads for the inclusion of sociolinguistics in American Studies Teaching at University level.

ELT in Algeria

By and large the only variety of English that is used in our schools and universities is the so-called British Standard English variety coupled with an RP (Received Pronunciation) accent – though how many of us do or want to achieve high proficiency in RP is questionable. On top of this, the approach used in teaching remains to a large extent a descriptive one, whereby teachers act as censors, prescribing corrections, modifications, additional attempts, etc. Ennaji (1991:25) reports that in Morocco:

... there is a great deal of concern among teachers about grammatical accuracy although there is more opening towards the communicative approach since the early 1980's. For example, the difference between 'should' and 'ought to' is still hammered into students' heads in first and second year of university...

Ennaji pleads or rather reiterates the wish often made in Morocco to introduce a course in American English and culture at university level, alongside with British English and literature. Though I agree entirely with such a proposition, I think, it is too restrictive. There are other varieties of English or other 'Englishes' (Kachru, 1992) that our teachers and students should be aware of and introduced to.

ELT and Sociolinguistics

Sociolinguistics tells us among a great deal of other things that language in general and English in particular are characterised by variation. This is the only point I will discuss in this very short paper in relation to English and English Teaching in the Maghreb.

There are at least four concepts of linguistic variability. One dimension of linguistic variability is the dimension of space. English varies from one region to another. We distinguish between British, American, Australian, New Zealand English (Es), etc., and sub-varieties within each of these major varieties (Northern, midland, and Southern varieties in the USA and the UK, and elsewhere). The intra-and inter-differences between these varieties involve features of vocabulary, pronunciation (accent), and grammar (morphology, and syntax).

A second dimension of variation is the dimension of class. English varies from one social class to another, from standard varieties (British, American, Australian, etc..) i.e. varieties used by well educated speakers, to non-standard varieties used by less prestigious social groups. Here also, the differences between these various social dialects or sociolects involve features of vocabulary, accent (among which RP or Received-Pronunciation, which is simply a social accent and not a social dialect i.e. standard English can be spoken with various types of regional accents), and grammar.

A third dimension of variation is the dimension of style i.e. in the range of ‘registers’ – the speech-repertoire – which a speaker needs to fulfil all his communicative purposes. The choice of register or ‘variety’ depends on the interlocutor (his age, sex, status, etc.), the setting, the topic, the channel, the message form, the mood or tone, the intentions and effects, etc. Stylistic variation involves mainly features of vocabulary and syntax but also ones of pronunciation.

Last but not least dimension of variability is that in time. As time goes by, languages change slowly but relentlessly, in pronunciation, in grammar and in vocabulary. Modern English has moved so far from old English that it is usually thought of a different language, despite the retention in some registers of some archaic forms (for e.g. ‘thee’, ‘thou’, ‘art’, ‘maketh’, ‘sayst’, etc.).

Implications and Applications

What are the implications of the four kinds of linguistic variation briefly discussed above to ELT in the North-African countries?

Before making some suggestions to this effect, let us reiterate the wish or plea for the inclusion of sociolinguistics in the curriculum at university level.

As far as variation in space is concerned, it would seem unreasonable to limit our teaching to that of British Standard English, a variety used by 15 per cent of the

British (Holmes, 1992:145), but also to major varieties of other Englishes, for reasons put forward by Kachru (1992), not to forget sub-varieties within the major ones such as Scottish, Irish, Welsh within British English. The reasons alluded to above are utilitarian and cultural, and because “World Englishes provide a challenging opportunity to relate three academic areas language, literature and methodology” (Kachru, 1992:9).

As for variations according to class, and style, the same arguments as above can be given. It is unreasonable and unrealistic to teach only standard, prestigious vocabularies, accents, and structures when the majority of native and non-native of speakers of English know and use only non-standard varieties even in literature (cf. for e.g. ‘The Catcher in the Rye’ by J.D. Salinger, ‘A kind of Loving’ by Stan Barstow, ‘A Raisin in the Sun’ by Lorraine Hansberry),...

As far as accent is concerned, it might not always be appropriate to force RP down the throats of recalcitrant students. Preston (1981) (quoted in Bern’s, 1990:348) reports the dramatic story of a Japanese learner of English.

“I just don’t know what to do right now, I might have been wrong since I began to learn English, I always tried to be better and wanted to be a good speaker. But I was wrong, absolutely wrong! When I got to California, I started imitating Americans... so my English became just like Americans... I must have been funny to them, because I am Japanese and I have my own culture and

background... I got California English including intonation, pronunciation, the way they act, which are not mine. I have to have my own English, be myself when I speak English”.

This does not mean that there is no room for formal spoken and written English, but why should we be satisfied with only one level of formality when more can be presented so easily? Bowen (1963:248) rightly points out that “a student familiar only with the formal language is likely to be lost when the situation is authentically informal”.

Finally, as far as variation with time is concerned, the teacher as well as the learner should be aware that English, more particularly its vocabulary suffers changes throughout the course of time and that certain words (and structures) are archaic and others literary, so they should be avoided in situations which are contemporary and non-literary.

Conclusion

To conclude, rather abruptly, this very brief examination of the relationship between ELT and sociolinguistics, we believe that at university level, the learner, like the native speakers needs flexibility and versatility as a listener/speaker. The teacher must provide multiple standards for all the legitimate variations of English and present these in a context of situations varied enough, to develop the kinds of adaptability that the student must achieve.

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