

Emergence of Englishes and the Issues of Teaching English Pronunciation to Indian Learners

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Abstract

The focus of this paper is the emergence of various versions of the English language and the issues and challenges faced by the non-native learners of English in the English language teaching-learning context. These Englishes have been developed by non-native speakers/users of the language and they are identifiable by their distinctive linguistic features. The problem for teachers and learners of English as a second language is which version of the language they should deal with in the classroom. The differences among these Englishes are more in speech, especially in pronunciation, than in any other levels of linguistic representations. This study also examines the problems of teaching – learning of English in India where the situation is more complex because in the multilingual setting in India English language has developed several regional varieties. The differences at the phonological level have been studied with examples from some varieties of English. Finally, this paper argues that the pedagogical framework of teaching English in the non-native context should be restructured so that it can accommodate variations of vowels and consonant sounds of different versions of English. It would enable the learner of a particular regional variety of the English language to recognize the existence of other varieties of the same language.

Keywords: Englishes, non-native, pronunciation, teaching-learning

The main objective of this paper is to focus on the issue of emergence of varieties of Englishes variously termed as Postcolonial Englishes (Schneider, 2007), World Englishes (Braj

Kachru,1976) , etc. and the challenges faced by the non-native learners of English in the English language teaching-learning context. In last few decades or so in many parts of the world, English has diversified and grown various versions with regional identities. The global spread of English ascertains that all these Englishes around the world are valid and each of them can be recognized by its use of sounds, vocabulary and grammar. The English used in Great Britain and in the United States are two dominating varieties of the language and have been studied elaborately. Recent studies of the English language include new Englishes and all other varieties of English outside Britain and America. The concept of a standard model of the English language is challenged by the emergence of African English, Australian English, Caribbean English, Indian English, Singapore English and so on and they contribute to *“the linguistic mosaic which the speakers of the English language have created in the English-speaking world”* (Kachru,1976, p. 236). In Jamaica English serves the Jamaican ways of life, in India it is used to express Indian ways of life, in Nigeria it is used to meet the needs of Nigerians. The Englishes used in these countries have developed home-grown forms and all these varieties of English can be identifiable by their distinctive linguistic features. The local and indigenous population of different parts of the world *“have adopted and appropriated the English language for themselves, thus contributing to its diversification and the emergence of new varieties”* (Schneider,2007, p. 2).

The emergence of these varieties of English poses challenges to the language teachers teaching English to the non-native learners in a non-native teaching-learning context. These newly evolved forms of English do not always conform to the standard British or American English which are normally taken as reference points by most of the English language teachers. There are differences in vocabulary, grammar, spelling, pronunciation, usage, etc. among these several versions of English. This paper investigates how the non-native teachers and learners face difficulties to cope with these Englishes in the language classroom. The study also examines the problems of teaching English in India where the situation is more complex because in the multilingual setting in India English language has developed regional varieties like Tamil English, Marathi English, Bengali English, Punjabi English, etc. The focus of this study is restricted to the problems in relation to the pronunciation of these different Englishes in the teaching –learning context.

The challenge for an English teacher in the non-native context is multi-dimensional. Along with the usual difficulties faced by a language teacher, he/she has to consider the mother tongue influences of the learners coming with different linguistic backgrounds. Another significant issue is which model to follow: the British R.P or the nativized form of English. The nativized varieties are distinguishable and they, in many ways, differ from each other. The differences are more in speech, especially in pronunciation, than in any other aspect of the language. Let us go through some such distinctive features of some of these varieties at the level of phonology:

i) Phonological Properties of Australian English show some differences from British R.P.

- a) In certain words, the R.P. diphthong /ei/ is changed into /æi/ in Australian English. Thus the word *face* /feis/ is pronounced as /fæis/ in Australian English.
- b) The diphthong /əu/ is used in the word *though* /ðəu/, but in Australian English this diphthong is converted into the long monophthong /o:/ and the same word is produced as /ðo:/.

ii) Singapore English has certain variation from the British R.P.

- a) Long and short vowel distinctions are generally not observed in Singapore English. As a result, pairs of words which are quite distinct in R.P., often have the same pronunciation in Singapore English:

Sit and *seat* are pronounced as /sit/.

Likewise, there is no difference between *cot* and *caught*.

- b) The vowel sound /e/ is often pronounced as /æ/ in Singapore English.

Bed is pronounced as /bæd/. So *bed* and *bad* are pronounced alike.

- c) Vowel reduction is less frequent in Singapore English:

The word *affect* is pronounced as /əfekt/ in R.P., but it is pronounced as /æfekt/ in Singapore English.

American English is a dominating variety of the English language. It differs from the British R.P. in vocabulary, spelling and pronunciation. Americans use / æ / in place of /ɑ:/ in words like dance, grass, fast, etc. The vowel sound / i / is used in place of diphthong /ai/ in words like *either* and *neither*. Whereas /r/ sound is not uttered before consonant and at word final position in British English, in American English it is used in all positions.

Another important variety is Indian English. According to Parasher, “by the term Indian English (IE) we mean that variety of English which is learnt and used by a large number of educated Indians as a second language” (Parasher, 1991,p. 48).But the term Indian English is controversial. The multi-lingual context in India has made the English language develop its regional and social varieties. Indian English is a variety of South Asian English, and within Indian English there are distinct regional varieties, like Tamil English, Kannada English, Bengali English, Oriya English, Punjabi English, Marathi English and so on. Speakers of each variety of English are strongly influenced by their mother tongue linguistic habits. They differ from each other at different levels of linguistic representations. Whereas most of the basic components of grammar and morphology are taught and learned without much variation, there are certainly differences of pronunciation in these varieties of Indian English. Let us examine some such variations in different forms of Indian English:

Study of vowel and consonant sounds in Tamil English shows that pronunciation of these sounds greatly vary from British English. BE has twenty vowel sounds, but as Shanmugam notes, Tamil has five pairs of short and long vowels and two diphthongs. Again the diphthong /ei/ is articulated as the pure vowel /e:/ in Tamil English. So, the word late/leit/ is pronounced as /le:t/ in Tamil English. Another example is the articulation of the diphthong / ɔi/.In Tamil English it is produced as /a:i/.As a result the word boy /bɔi / is pronounced as /ba:i/ by a Tamil speaker of English.

English spoken by Assamese speakers can be marked as different from the British R.P. These points of dissimilarities may sometimes be considered as deviations, but they are, in fact , regional variations of the Indian English. Khammoun Phukan has pointed out that some words, used in Assamese English are pronounced in a different way by Assamese learners in English:

The word ‘enough’ /ɪˈnʌf/ is often pronounced as /eɪˈnʌf/. Similarly, ‘pie’ /paɪ/ is articulated as /pi/ by Assamese learners in English.

The problem of teaching English in the non-native context has become more complex because teaching pronunciation is very often neglected in the language teaching–learning curriculum particularly in the context of teaching English as a second language. If the learner’s general aim is to speak intelligibly in English, his endeavour should be to acquire some skill in pronunciation. Even when a second language learner’s grammar and vocabulary are good, he/she won’t be able to communicate effectively without attaining certain level of pronunciation skill. An Indian learner of English tries to learn pronunciation of English words by looking at their spellings and thus he/she learns incorrect pronunciation of many English words. Moreover, the learner’s mother tongue plays a vital role in the second language teaching –learning activity. In most cases second language learners are in the habit of transferring their L₁ linguistic habits while learning L₂. This is another very problematic area for the L₂ teacher. This is responsible for serious intelligibility problem. As a practicing English teacher in West Bengal, I would like to highlight some inconveniences faced by the Bengali speakers in the pronunciation of some English sounds.

The English sound /f/ as in *fan* is a voiceless labio-dental fricative and the articulatory organs used for its production are lower lip and upper teeth. But in the Bangla sound system, there is a similar sound /p^h/ which is a voiceless bilabial stop and the articulatory organs are two lips. Very often while producing this sound Bengali speakers change the labio-dental fricative /f/ into bilabial stop / p^h /.

Again, a Bengali learner of English may find it difficult to pronounce the English alveolar fricative /z/ as it does not exist in the Bangla sound system. Very often he/she converts it into palato-alveolar affricate / dʒ/. Thus, the English word *zoo* is pronounced as /dʒu:/ or *easy* is pronounced as / idʒi / by a Bengali learner of English.

Vowel length in R.P. also causes problem to the Bengali speakers of English. Vowel length is strictly observed in R.P. There are long *i* /i:/, short *i* /i/, long *u* /u:/, short *u* /u/ in English. In the written form of Bangla there are long *i* / dirgh^h-i/, short *i* / hr̥ss̥-i /, long *u* / dirgh^h-

u /, short u /hrɔssɔ-u/, but in the spoken form this distinction is not maintained. So very often *full* becomes *fool*, *fill* becomes *feel* in Bengali English.

Use of /s/and /ʃ/ is another area of difficulty for the Bengali speakers of English. They normally do not distinguish between alveolar fricative /s/ and palato-alveolar fricative /ʃ/. As a result, *save* may be understood as *shave*, *same* may be realized as *shame*. This may cause intelligibility problem.

The areas of unintelligibility noted above are only a few examples to the context. It is possible to identify several intelligibility problems, caused by inappropriate pronunciation by the Indian speakers of English. As there are sub varieties within Indian English, it is necessary for a language teacher to identify the areas of ‘ease’ and ‘difficulty’ of the second language learner. A contrastive study between the mother tongue and the second language of the learner may help the language teacher to know the possible reasons of wrong pronunciation. It is mentioned earlier that the multi-lingual setting of India has made the task of the second language teacher more critical. The varieties of English in India are being nativized by acquiring new identities based on regional, social, cultural factors. For each such variety appropriate measures are to be taken so that these Englishes are mutually intelligible and acceptable to the speakers of other English-speaking communities. It should be remembered that in India English will be taught by non-native speakers to the non-native learners to meet the need of the non-native users of the language. It cannot be expected that a non-native speaker will speak or write like a British or an American. Considering the pedagogical issue of teaching English to the non-native speakers, Smith comments,

The spread of English is not a homogenizing factor which causes cultural differences to disappear ... There is no desire among the members of the world community when using English to become more like native speakers in their lifestyle. Native speakers must realize that there are many valid varieties of English and that non-native speakers need not sound or act like Americans, the British, or any other group of native speakers in order to be effective English users (qtd.in Strevens, 2004).

Conclusion

Evolution of these varieties of English or the nativized versions of the language shattered the concept of standard, universal English. Speakers/users of the English language in different countries around the globe break away from the Anglo-centric view of English and the world now recognises not only the existence but also the importance of all these varieties of English. Expansion of the English-speaking world due to globalization needs reconsideration of the mechanism of teaching English as a second language in the classroom. A regional variety of English should be accepted as valid English and be strengthened so that it can be incorporated in the teaching-learning process. In India teachers face greater problems as there are many other varieties with regional identities. The pedagogical framework should be restructured in such a way that non-native learners of English should have exposure to other varieties and should learn as many accents as possible for effective communication with speakers of other varieties of English. At the same time the regional varieties need linguistic descriptions to be acceptable in their socio-linguistic settings and to establish themselves as varieties of English in their own right. More studies are required to develop a dynamic poly model which will accommodate variations of vowels and consonant sounds in different versions of English. It will help the teacher as well as the learner become aware of the existence of variations of the same vowel or consonant sound and the pronunciation of the learners of different forms of the English language will be mutually intelligible.

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