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Debating standard language ideology in the classroom: using the 'Speak Good English Movement' to raise awareness of Global Englishes

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Abstract

In this article, we describe and evaluate an innovative pedagogical task designed to raise awareness of Global Englishes and to challenge standard language ideology in an English language classroom. The task encouraged the learning and debate of the controversial Speak Good English Movement, which campaigns for Singaporeans to use a 'standard' form of English rather than the local variety, 'Singlish'. The debate was introduced as a Global Englishes-inspired multi-lesson task at a Japanese university with 108 students in four classes. Data were collected in the form of written reflections, in which learners stated their own positions and beliefs. Data indicated that the majority sided against the Speak Good English Movement, viewing Singlish as a legitimate variety of English with important cultural attributes, which contributed to a national identity. Results showed that the debate achieved the aim of encouraging students to critically reflect on standard language ideology in both English and Japanese, their mother tongue. Overall, the activity was successful in raising awareness of the diversity of English, and encouraging critical reflection on the complexities surrounding standard language beliefs. This was seen to be essential given the dominance of the 'native' speaker episteme in Japanese language curricula.

Keywords

Classroom innovation, Global Englishes, Standard language, English Language Teaching, World Englishes, Japan, Singapore

Introduction and Key Concepts

The growth of English as a global language has challenged some of the fundamental assumptions that underpin English language teaching (ELT). Proposals for change in ELT have emerged from research within a number of related paradigms, which showcase the mismatch between the English taught in ELT classrooms and the English that is used in today's multilingual world. Scholars within the fields of World Englishes, English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) and English as an International Language (EIL) highlight the need to educate students about the current sociolinguistic uses of English, move away

from sanitized native speaker norms and prepare students to use English in a globalized world. World Englishes research, in its exploration and legitimization of English variation, has sought to expand classroom models of English to include those outside traditional norms, with recent calls for World Englishes-informed ELT (Matsuda, 2016). English as a Lingua Franca research, in its exploration of English in and between linguistic communities, has suggested that ELT curricula needs to move “beyond the singularity that typifies current approaches in order to better encapsulate the diversity and plurality of communication” (Dewey, 2012: 63). Likewise, Jenkins (2006) notes that learners need to learn not only about linguistic variation, but also how these differences relate to issues of intelligibility and identity. EIL scholars such as McKay (2012: 71) have argued that EIL materials need to highlight the fact that English no longer belongs to speakers in the Inner Circle, and thus should “examine standards of correctness in relation to language use, and address issues of language appropriateness”.

We use Global Englishes in this article as an umbrella term to unite the shared research fields of ELF, EIL, and World Englishes (see Author and Author, 2015, for a lengthier explanation of this field). We acknowledge, however, that our preference for the term Global Englishes may be congruent to other scholars’ wider definitions of World Englishes, which also showcases the plurality of English, challenges standard language ideology, and problematizes English language ownership.

Purpose of the Awareness-Raising Innovation

Despite calls for change in ELT, and for a reconceptualization of the ‘E’ in ELT, there is a general lack of research that examines the effects of innovation in classroom practices. Attachments to ‘standard’ English have also been identified as one of the main barriers to implementing such proposed changes (Author 1 and Author 2, 2015). ‘Native English’, the so-called ‘standard’ variety of the English language, continues to dominate ELT, even though theory shows it is varied and difficult to define. In order to bridge this theory-practice divide, and encourage students to be critical of ‘standard’ English, an awareness-raising pedagogical episode was introduced in the form of a debate activity. The episode was studied to evaluate students’ responses to the issues surrounding the debate and to examine whether a raised awareness of Global Englishes would impact their views of ‘standard’ English.

The activity required learners to research and debate the Speak Good English Movement (SGEM) in Singapore, in order to bring issues surrounding standard language ideology to the surface. Singapore was thought to be a good case for the classroom activity, as it is a well-known example of a nativized English that has been applauded and criticized for its unique linguistic features and local flair (see Bokhorst-Heng, 2005 for an overview of this debate). Language policies in Singapore have positioned English as a unifying language, in order to linguistically wed a multilingual and multi-ethnic national population. It has been stated that 80 per cent of the country has some command of English (Rubdy et al. 2008: 80), and census figures show

that the use of English as the main language of the home is on the increase. As we have noted elsewhere “English may be the mother tongue of many Singaporeans, but the use of English that reflects a local or shared identity that differs from ‘standard’ English is not recognized by the government and is discouraged” (Author 1 and Author 2, 2015: 109). The SGEM is a prime example of this discouragement.

Singaporeans use different forms of the English language ranging from its basilectal variety (representative of a localized and colloquial form) to its acrolectal variety (representative of the established, standard, and widely accepted form). The SGEM aims to promote ‘standard’ use of English in the face of the widespread use of Singlish—a term used to identify the basilectal variety of Singapore English. The campaign views Singlish as inferior to Standard English, due to its unintelligibility for speakers of other varieties. Thus, SGEM encourages “Singaporeans to speak grammatically correct English that is universally understood” (SGEM, 2016: para 2). The movement has attracted a lot of public attention through its various activities, debates, and videos, available on its YouTube channel and website. It has also attracted criticism (e.g. Rubdy, 2001; Seargeant, 2012: 110) due to flaws in the logic behind the policy. In short, the movement epitomizes the standard language ideology debate, and thus was viewed as a convenient context in which to situate a classroom debate. Furthermore, the publicly available sources of online information surrounding the movement provided adaptable, authentic classroom materials upon which to base the debate. Teachers interested in learning more about the SGEM are also able to consult a number of good academic sources (e.g. Rubdy, 2001; Lim et al., 2010; Bokhorst-Heng, 2005).

Teaching Context (Participants and setting)

The debate activity was conducted at a university in Japan that specializes in language education. All participants were 3rd and 4th year English majors who were enrolled in a course specifically designed to teach concepts connected to Global Englishes. The students had all been educated in the Japanese school system, which has been noted to position General American English as the desired norm for study (Matsuda, 2002). The level of proficiency among the students was at a B2 level in the Common European Framework of Reference, although many students bordered on B1 criteria.

The Global Englishes course was taught twice a week for 13 weeks by one of the researchers. The course was repeated in four consecutive semesters, each containing a different cohort of students. In total, 108 students—averaging 27 students per cohort—took the course. During the course, the learners engaged in a number of awareness raising activities, which have been reported elsewhere (e.g. Author 1, 2013; Author 1 and Author 2, 2014). This paper, however, reports on the effects of an isolated multi-lesson activity, which culminated in a debate on standard language ideology.

Innovation Procedure (Method)

The debate activity involved separating the class into two groups: those for the SGEM and those against it. Students were instructed to independently use online resources to research the movement and to locate evidence to support their side of the debate. They were encouraged to watch an existing debate available on YouTube after the launch of the SGEM, other online videos connected to the movement, as well as numerous newspaper articles and editorials written on the topic.

After the debate, students were required to write accounts of their own beliefs, in order to reflect on what they had discussed, and where they stood on the issue of the acceptability of language forms such as Singlish. These hand-written reflections were converted into electronic text files, then qualitatively analysed according to themes. We were particularly interested in analysing reflections on standard language ideology.

Effects of the awareness raising (Findings)

Comments from the reflection papers revealed that students valued the debate as an awareness raising activity. All students commented that it was a good opportunity to learn about the use of English in Singapore. They also felt they were able to discuss and evaluate multiple facets of SGEM through the interactive activity. One student commented that:

We need some different angles so that we have a lot of opinions to persuade opposite side. And sometimes it needs to change own idea after listening to another opinion. Debate gives us chances to think deeply, to know new ways of thinking about the topic, to say original opinion. We can see opposite opinions that make us think about it more. (Participant 21)

Seven students commented that the random assignment of sides of the debate was difficult if their true opinions were different from the one assigned to them. One student for example commented: "it was difficult, because sometimes I agreed with our enemy's opinions" (Participant 46). Such a comment indicates students may benefit from the provision of an opportunity to voice their actual opinions after the debate, or to be allocated a side of the debate that as much as possible matches their preference. Overall, however, comments indicated that students saw the assignment of sides to be valuable in fully exploring the issues surrounding the SGEM, noting they were able to "listen [to] a lot of opinions" (Participant 5), and "to learn different aspects from the research and debate" (Participant 6).

Another positive outcome of the debate was that it was an opportunity for students to explore English in use in Singapore, an important example of how the English adapts in different ways according to context. Comments indicated that the learning of historical and linguistic features of Singlish sparked an interest in better understanding how other varieties of English were formed. Others noted they had learned the importance of dialect as a marker of a speaker's culture, although others struggled with how much variation could exist before intelligibility would be affected, as illustrated in the following two statements:

I learned that Singlish is very different from the English which I usually listen and speak. When I listened to it, I couldn't understand I felt that people who are not native people in Singapore might not understand it. At first, I thought Singaporean should not speak Singlish because it's confusing for foreigners. However, I learned that Singlish is one of the Singaporean culture and one of the types of English. (Participant 18)
However, it's also true that they need to know standard English for business and communicate with foreigners, so it's very difficult to decide if they have to learn standard English or not. (Participant 2)

Overall, students reported being surprised by many of the facts they had learned, of which they had been unaware prior to the debate. They did not know, for example, the extent that English was used in education in Singapore, or that it was influenced by the various languages of the region, or that policy and the use of language could be the subject of such divisiveness. This sparked reflections on the downside to having a global lingua franca and reflections on how English has been influenced by other languages in other contexts.

Finally, the students had to reflect on where they stood on the SGEM debate. While forcing choice is a simplification of the multi-faceted issues surrounding the debate, we were interested in how the debate task had shaped opinions on standard language ideology. The reflections revealed 76.5% were against the SGEM, with only 9.5% for it and a further 14% undecided. This seemed to refute previous research on ELT in Japan, which noted a strong attachment to standard English.

Those against SGEM, noted the cultural importance of Singlish to Singaporean people, and also emphasised that it was not the government's position to force people to use language in a particular way. They suggested that Singlish was no different to other types of English, such as Australian English, which do not come under the same scrutiny for being 'incorrect'. One student noted that:

I think there are no Standard English. There are many kinds of English, for example: Indian English, British English and so on. Why do only Singaporeans have to throw away Singlish? For Singaporeans, Singlish is natural and I think they don't need to throw [it] away (Participant 5).

Another compared Singlish to Japanese, stating that it is Singaporeans' mother tongue, just as Japanese is the mother tongue for Japanese speakers, and thus it is the language in which they are best able to express their identities and feel a "sense of belonging" (Participant 46). This sparked reflections on the ownership of English. A few learners also suggested that the exercise had helped them see the beauty in the linguistic features of Singlish, and had prompted them to learn more about it.

Those who supported the SGEM highlighted the importance of Standard English for professional settings and international communication. One student noted that Singaporeans might be better advantaged in life if they learned to use 'both' Singlish and Standard English:

I do not mean to prohibit Singlish. I just think it is absolutely better to be able to speak both Singlish and one English which a lot of people can understand. Singaporeans do not have to give up Singlish. In my opinion, they would have more opportunities in their future like their business, if they speak understandable English for many people. So, I think it is good to promote them to study English which a lot of people can understand. (Participant 10)

Other comments mirrored those of the SGEM, such as purporting that the use of Singlish in formal settings would cause communication problems with those unfamiliar with its linguistic features, prompting reflections related to intelligibility concerns.

Finally, a number of students (14%) were undecided whether the promotion of Standard English in Singapore was a good or bad movement. One student noted that the issues surrounding the debate were “very deep, complicated and difficult”, making it impossible to say who was right (Participant 42). Another student noted the inherent contradiction in feeling support for the use of Singlish in an informal setting, which she saw as essential to preserve it, while seeing intelligibility of Singlish as problematic in business contexts, especially when communications involved English speakers from diverse linguistic contexts.

The debate allowed students to reflect beyond the Singaporean case study, and critically reflect on their stereotypes and beliefs about standard language ideology. Many reflected on their own language—Japanese, which has also been subjected to political standardization. One student noted, that “as we Japanese have dialects, English has dialects, and Singlish is a kind of English” (Participant 46), thus noting the naturalness of all languages to vary in certain ways. Another participant reflected on the importance of dialects to identity and community, stating:

When we think about Japanese, we have some dialect and there are a lot of people who are not be able to understand these dialects.

However, most Japanese people think we should keep dialect and even some people are envious of people who can speak dialect.

(Participant 20)

Another student reflected on the impact of history on a nation’s language, noting that, in Japan, the belief that American English is ‘standard’ is related to the US occupation after the Second World War, just as Singaporeans may view British English as ‘standard’. Another student took the opportunity to reassess what was a desirable model of English for her, concluding that “It’s almost impossible to speak Standard English like a native [speaker], so all the people who speak English have the same problem, I think” (Participant 1).

Implications for English language teaching (Conclusions)

The activity presented here is only a small task designed to incite debate over the concept of ‘standard’ English in a context where the native speaker episteme dominates ELT. In much of the ELT industry there is a contradiction in the treatment of the English language: While linguistic evidence shows language to be highly adaptable and constantly changing, ELT is underpinned

by a version of English that is portrayed as static and more resistant to change. Widdowson (2003: 41–42) highlights this illogicality in noting, “The very idea of a standard implies stability, but language is of its nature unstable”.

Nevertheless, the belief in the existence of a ‘standard’ English, and the promotion of this idealized form is not only pervasive in ELT, but is deeply rooted in wider society in general. This overly prescriptive, standardized view of English is not only presenting a false stereotype of English, but it is not helpful for students, who need to be prepared to use the language as a lingua franca with speakers from various linguistic backgrounds. This task demonstrated the benefit in problematizing standard language ideology. Recent research within Global Englishes encourages learners and ELT practitioners to engage in the debate of what English is and who owns it (Cogo, 2012); this activity also clearly encouraged students to critically reflect on the ownership of English. The SGEM case was a useful way to package the complexities of the debate on English standardization in an understandable and researchable case, which had ample online materials for classroom adaptation. We would encourage teachers wishing to carry out a similar debate in the future to make full use of these resources to ensure students are well-informed and prepared to debate issues surrounding the topic. We would also highlight the need for a debriefing session after the debate, where students can discuss their real opinions on the issues, and the teacher can use these discussions as teachable moments to raise further awareness. The activity also demonstrates how Global Englishes can be incorporated into an everyday ELT classroom in a country like Japan, where ‘native’ norms prevail.

We conclude that this classroom task is one way to help teachers and learners to realize that standards are imagined benchmarks, and that it is the actual use of a language that indicates its legitimacy. Milroy and Milroy (1999: 45) state, “standardisation is never complete because, ultimately, a language is the property of the communities that use it ... It is not the exclusive property of governments, educators or prescriptive grammarians, and it is *arrogant* to believe that it is” (emphasis our own). We would concur with this statement but add one amendment that, for educators it is also *irresponsible* to believe it is.

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