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# 'I learn English since ten years': The global English debate and the German university classroom

ELIZABETH J. ERLING

A report on German university students learning and working  
in English

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WHEN A student produces a sentence like "I learn English since ten years" it can be assumed that they haven't had a very good English teacher, that they may not, in fact, be very good in English despite the amount of time they've spent learning the language. However, some of my students may indeed produce a sentence like this. In the English Department of the Freie Universität in Berlin, I teach students who have already studied English for at least ten years by the time they enter university. And in order to study in our department, the students must pass a proficiency-level entrance exam. These students then have English as one of their major subjects, so their knowledge of the language is fairly sophisticated and their contact with the language regular.

My initial reaction to utterances such as "I learn English since ten years" was "This is wrong!" I decided that they do this because there isn't the same perfective/progressive system in the German language, and so it is hard for German learners to master the English tense and aspect system. I also concluded that because there is only one word in German, *seit*, for both *for* and *since* (in time expressions), German learners often confused these prepositions.

However, I am no longer convinced that the production of such a sentence is simply a 'typical German error'. After reading about certain features of New Englishes – the Englishes of post-colonial countries like Ghana, India, Nigeria, and Singapore – I noticed that several features of the so-called New Englishes were the

same as those manifesting in my classroom. Such linguistic features, which are apparently gaining ground in their native contexts, are considered errors when made by German students. In other words, according to the research, certain grammatical formations are now considered part of the standard in India, for example, but continue to be dismissed as incorrect in Berlin. Once I had realized this, I started to ask myself why, if standard versions of English are expanding, I should still be correcting a student when she writes, for example, "The story was touching me deeply"?

My moral quandary about what to count as

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*ELIZABETH J. ERLING is pursuing her PhD at the University of Edinburgh's Department of Theoretical and Applied Linguistics, writing her dissertation on Global English and the German university classroom. She moved to Berlin from Edinburgh in 1998 because of a university exchange, but wound up staying on to teach full-time at the Freie Universität's language center while continuing her studies via correspondence. She is particularly interested in the socio-cultural politics of English as a global language and in ensuring a critically responsible pedagogy of English that reflects its complexity and diversity. A native American who has lived and studied in Scotland and worked abroad for several years in both Germany and Korea, her English has become very Global indeed and she finds it impossible to teach anything but that. (berling@zedat.fu-berlin.de)*

correct or incorrect in my students' papers is a perfect example of the debate about standard English rearing its head in the second-language classroom – the so-called “widening standard language debate” (Bex and Watt 1999). The expansion of English and the continual recognition of other varieties of English make questions about correctness more problematic than ever before. What should we consider correct or incorrect in a world where more and more varieties of English are gaining institutionalized legitimacy? What form of the language should we be teaching to students who use English internationally? And, more pressing, where should I use my red pen?

In Germany, and perhaps in Europe in general, English educators need to reconsider our means of language teaching in order to reflect how English is currently being used around the world, and, equally importantly, to meet the changing needs of today's English learners. Within this global context of English, we need to keep in mind the uses that our students will be making of English. In today's world, it is conceivable that German English speakers will have to interact in English with all types of English speakers and in several different contexts, and their education should therefore prepare them for this.

### **A brief sociolinguistic profile of the students of English at the Freie Universität Berlin**

In order to assess the language teaching environment in Berlin, I have followed Ferguson's model of a sociolinguistic profile (1966). This type of analysis can provide: a description of an English-using community, the uses the members of such a community make of it; their attitude towards it; the model of English they choose to approximate; the degree of intelligibility they seek to achieve; and the kind of communicative competence in English they want to develop (cf. Berns 1992).

In Germany, English has no official status and there is no institutionalized domain for English. However, Germans often use English for interpersonal as well as professional purposes and do not have to wait to go abroad to use English and interact with English speakers. “Germany's post-war history with an abundance of American and British speakers present, their involvement in the European Community, and their connections with American

products and culture expose Germans across social groups to English” (Berns 1995:8). There are several international firms, such as Siemens, that use English for upper-level business communication, and it has been claimed that in Germany “you cannot pursue an international career without English” (Hutton 1999:1).

Germany also plays a central role in Europe, and English is progressively becoming the language of the European Union. Within the European Union, business contacts via the official political bodies largely occur in English, and English is sometimes considered as “neutral ground” for conversation among speakers of different languages (Görlach and Schröder 1985:227). In addition, the member countries of the European Free Trade Area conduct their business in English despite the fact that none of their member states has English as a mother tongue.

Berlin, now the capital of Germany, is an international city and English can be heard on almost every bus or subway. English-language television shows and films are still generally dubbed into German, but there is a strong presence of English language in society – there are plenty of English language bookstores and cinemas, and English can be found on shop signs, in menus, on the radio, in songs, in advertising, etc. These days mixing English and German seems to be a trendy advertising technique and certain advertisements even require some knowledge of English for their comprehension. (For example, the McDonald's slogan, “About this Frühstücksei lachen ja die chickens.”)

### **English education**

English is not the medium of instruction in most German schools, except in a small number of private and international schools. However, it is generally the first foreign language taught in school. Some primary school children are now starting to be taught English in the third grade (age 9), although most still start in the fifth and carry on at least until the tenth, depending on the learner's plan for future education and employment. At university, some seminar classes of English departments may be carried out in English, but in general, the language of the university is German. Students of political science, business, medicine, and law, however, need at least a passive knowledge of English, since much of the literature in those fields is written in English.

In the language center of the Freie Universität, we teach English only to students for whom one of their major subjects is English Philology, North American Studies, or English Pedagogy. These students are already proficient in English when they start their studies and my job is to teach them the subtleties of the language. I teach, for example, the conventions of writing and rhetoric; these courses actually have more in common with composition courses for native speakers than any other EFL courses I have taught in the past. Although there are some linguistic errors I pay attention to, the main concentration of the course is to force students to analyze texts, think critically and then respond to the texts in a well-focused, well-structured, and well-written essay in English.

Most of the students in our department encounter English in their daily lives – on the internet, at work, and socially. They write, read, and speak English everyday in both academic and social contexts. The students are also generally well travelled. Many of them have already studied or worked abroad for an extended period of time in an English-speaking environment: They may have been *au-pairs* in Chicago or worked for the summer at the Edinburgh Festival, but they also may have volunteered in a hospital in Calcutta, worked on a farm in Ghana, or studied for a semester in Singapore. If students haven't been abroad before they started university, many of them take six months to a year off to study or work abroad through the Erasmus/Socrates programs and other exchanges and international internships.

These students come back with authentic accents and vocabulary, marking the place where they have spent their time. One student, for example, has problems in her pronunciation class because she lived for some time in Dublin and pronounces *three* as *tree*. Another student, after volunteering in Calcutta for one semester, complained: "Living in India really screwed up my English."

When I asked her to clarify that statement she confessed that the experience had actually helped her with communications skills, but she thought that it had "spoiled" her grammar skills and made university grammar classes more difficult for her. I have also known students from Nigeria and Ghana, from "outer circle" countries (Kachru 1985), who failed the entrance exam to study English at university and were required to take a remedial course for a semester in order to boost their language skills in grammar.

And this is where my suspicions began to arise. Should students who have learned other Englishes be disadvantaged in the university system? Does the system simply have a bias for standard British or American English and no room for deviations from this model? And if this is so in Berlin, is it also true for most European institutions? In a world where English both functions as a global language and is appropriated to several different local contexts (including Europe: Jenkins and Seidlhofer 2001), it seems as if we are clinging to an outdated model of a standard ideology that is no longer possible or even useful to maintain.

### Features of New Englishes vs. features of German English

To demonstrate the blatant tensions arising in the widening standard English debate, I have picked a few features of New Englishes to analyze. What is puzzling about these features of English is that they not only span Africa, Asia and the subcontinent of India, but they also appear in many second-language classrooms around the world. The most prototypical features of New Englishes – the problems of non-count nouns and tense and aspect – regularly appear in the German classroom. These are features of English that courses in my department spotlight as typical problem areas that students need to work on. Some features of New Englishes that can be found in African, Asian, and South Asian contexts as well as in the German EFL classroom are:

#### 1 *The occasional loss of distinctions between count and non-count nouns* (Trudgill and Hannah 1985: 104):

- I lost all my furnitures.
- She gave me an advice that I'll never forget.

I previously thought that Germans produce the word informations, for example, because the word has a plural form in the German language. It is often explained that this type of noun is susceptible to pluralization in cases where the reason for their classification as uncountable is not obvious (Jibril 1982:78). There are no rules for the employment of these non-count nouns and no means of mastering them apart from memorization.

Crystal claims that "countability is a tricky area of English grammar, posing a problem regardless of the learner's language back-

ground” (1995:361). This means that information is not, as I had originally thought, “a typical German error.” On the contrary, the pluralization of words like *informations* and *advices* is perhaps found in all places where English is used as a second language. In fact, some are even being accepted as standard in New Englishes.

In spite of the variation in the pluralization of these words in other varieties of English, in our department a student would undoubtedly lose full points for the production of *informations* or *advices* in an exam. But if every outer and expanding circle member has difficulty with the pluralization of these words, is it really an essential grammatical matter that we need to fixate upon in the language classroom?

## 2 Variation in the usage of tense and aspect:

a The use of the present tense (instead of the present perfect) with phrases indicating a period from past to present. (Trudgill and Hannah 1985:109):

- I am reading this book since two hours.

b The use of progressive aspect with stative verbs (Trudgill and Hannah 1985: 110):

- She is having many shoes.

c The use of the present perfect instead of the simple past (especially with past time adverbs) (Trudgill and Hannah 1985:110):

- I have been there ten years ago.

The varied employment of tense and aspect is explained as a common “German error.” For example, because there is no progressive aspect as such in the German language, the typical German overuse of the progressive has traditionally been blamed on over-compensation. Similarly, in New Englishes, the divergences from so-called standard English have often been attributed to interference from the mother tongue which has a set of rules which are in conflict with those of English and which the learner of English frequently falls back upon (Jibril 1982:82). For example, in rationalizing why Nigerian English is different from world English, Jibril explains that “in Nigerian languages tense is not as important as aspect in the verbal system, and such distinctions of tense as are made are not as fine as those made in English” (1982: 79).

In our department, teachers spend a great deal of time and effort on correcting these ‘errors’. In fact, I have to spend approximately half of a semester in my grammar course going over the distinctions between the simple past, the present perfect, and the perfect continuous and the subtleties of the English system of tense and aspect in order to ensure that my students pass the university-administered final exam. But the discouraging fact is that even with eight weeks dedicated to the verb phrase in a grammar class, I am not convinced that the students make any improvement, or even if they need to. It seems as if the reason why students are showing resistance to learning these characteristics of English is not because they don’t have these features in their own languages, but because they are not “communicatively crucial” (Jenkins and Seidlhofer 2001). Students often make comments like, “I thought I was good at English until I took this course”. Previously they had not noticed that they used tense and aspect ‘incorrectly’, nor did they struggle to communicate when doing so. And I have noticed that students go back to using the tense and aspect system ‘incorrectly’ once their grammar course is over, and this does not seem to affect their communicative competence.

## Widening standard English

The common ‘errors’ of proficient German learners of English who have studied the language for at least ten years and use English regularly are similar to features of New Englishes. It has been noted that “there seems to be extensive international overlap between the so-called errors that non-native speakers make” (Crystal 1995:361). There are certain idiosyncrasies in English – like non-count nouns and the aspect system – which are likely to pose particular difficulty to learners. These idiosyncrasies are difficult for learners irrespective of the language family they come from. Since many non-standard grammatical features are widely distributed among second-language Englishes, the claim that these constructions occur because of interference from the mother tongue seems improbable. This implies that these ‘errors’ have been falsely analyzed. It is more likely that these common features are actually a symptom of a change in the language which is coming about in non-native contexts but is being held back by the standard English tradition.

Some features of New Englishes are being institutionalized in their native contexts, but they have yet to be acknowledged by the inner circle. It has been argued by Samuel Ahlu in a previous *ET* article that since most non-native speakers of English are ignoring the linguistic domination ascribed to them by standards, the rules of the standard should expand to accept New Englishes (1997).

### **German English as a New English**

Could German English be classified as a New English? Is Germany a place where English use is so established that its own variety is developing? A framework which may provide an answer to this question is Kachru's well-known model of the concentric circles of English (1985). These circles display the range of English uses in the world:

- 1 The inner circle is made up of places where English is used as a native language, which have traditionally been the norm-producing countries (e.g. Great Britain and the United States).
- 2 In the outer circle countries, English is institutionalized but its speakers have created indigenous varieties (e.g. Indian English, Singaporean English). The outer circle is norm-developing in the sense that "the role of English in these communities is fostering an internal standard of educated usage which has a status and dynamic of its own" (Berns 1995: 8).
- 3 In the expanding circle, English has the role of international language and is generally taught as a foreign language. It is norm-dependent in that learners are expected to acquire the norms of behavior appropriate to the users in the inner circle (e.g. Japan, Russia).

So, does Germany belong to the expanding or to the outer circle? Although English in Germany does not entirely meet the criteria, our sociolinguistic profile shows that Germany has certain qualities of its English use which make it more similar to outer-circle than to expanding-circle countries. For example, although English is not institutionalized in Germany, it does play a role in education, politics, business, the media and even interpersonal uses. Germans have much more opportunities to use English and more contact with the language than most expanding-circle members

do (e.g. Japan). Its own variety has not yet been recognized nor has it developed its own nativized literary domain up till now, but these developments may not be far off. Due to the wide use of English, "it is hard to dismiss English in Germany from the outer circle given the functions it serves in various social, cultural, commercial, and educational settings" (Berns 1995:9). Germany is also a key member of the European Union, and David Graddol argues that English in Europe plays such an important role as a second language that it is starting to resemble English in India. "The national languages are becoming demoted as sub-regional languages, while English becomes an important link language" (Graddol 2000).

### **Conclusion**

When reconsidering the role of English in Germany, we see that the language is now entrenched in the country. German students are already proficient in English by the time they get to university, in both academic and social settings, and for many of them, English plays an important role in their lives. They use the language daily in many contexts and they are regularly exposed to the diversity of English. Because of internet technology, the international air of Berlin, the EU and the popularity of travels and stays abroad, students have unrestrained access to the diversity of the language in all its global contexts. And if this is true of students of English in Berlin, it may also be valid for English students all over Europe and perhaps even around the world.

Since students acquire much of their English in non-academic settings and need it for exchanges with people from every circle, language teachers need to adopt a more flexible approach towards the standard which allows a wide range of styles corresponding to the various functions to which the language will be put. Teachers need a more accepting, creative, and dynamic methodology of teaching English to cope with the more fluid, ever-changing English language and to support students in their global uses of English. When analyzing the student body and the uses they make of English, it is clear that we need a broader interpretation of the standard to include the sociolinguistics of English in a global context. ■

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## Word Inflation

For all you fashion seekers  
Here's the latest trend in words  
Exactitude in speakers  
Is strictly for the nerds

The keyword is exaggerate  
Whenever there's a chance  
There's not a word you can't inflate  
Your message to enhance

So please don't say the market fell  
When you can say it *crashed*  
Don't say the room was all messed up  
When there's a word like *trashed*

The window's broken? Far too weak  
You're better off with *smashed*  
Their team was beaten? Rub it in  
By making use of *thrashed*

When politicians disagree  
The headlines say they *clashed*  
And when a price has been reduced  
The adverts say it's *slashed*

Enough of this digression –  
It should be clear to you  
Don't use a mild expression  
If a stronger one will do

For words aren't just devices  
To refer to something stationary  
They're similar to prices  
Prone to influence inflationary

— Roger Berry,  
Lingnan University, Hong Kong