Sociolinguistic Factors in TESOL: The Least Teachers and Teacher Educators Should Know

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Historically, the focus of most methods and approaches to teaching English to nonnative speakers has been on some form of the language, including grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, or spelling to name a few. In the Grammar-Translation Method, which is certainly one of the oldest teaching methods, the focus was on language structures. In the Natural Approach, a relatively recent language teaching development in TESOL chronology, the emphasis was on language in everyday language situations and a silent period (i.e., no language production).

In contrast to these traditional approaches, the Communicative Language Teaching approach has been built on the assumption that being able to communicate in a second language involves more than mere grammatical competence. In fact, *communicative competence* (Canale & Swain, 1980) inevitably involves knowledge of discourse and sociocultural rules of language. In other words, it is important to know not only how to put together an utterance but also when this utterance should be used and by whom to whom.

As communicative competence has been emphasized in language pedagogy, there has been a trend to rely less on purely linguistic aspects and investigate sociocultural factors that affect second language learners. This trend has been so strong that our field is experiencing a "reconceptualization" of second language acquisition (SLA) research to enhance the awareness of "the contextual and interactional dimensions of language use" (Firth & Wagner, 1997, p. 285). Other scholars have introduced and established the importance of social identity (Peirce, 1995), sociocultural theory (Lantolf, 2000), and critical, ideological studies (Pennycook, 2001) in our field. For example, a recent seminal publication in the field of applied linguistics—*Handbook of Research in Second Language Teaching and Learning* (Hinkel, 2005)—dedicates chapters to topics such as language socialization, sociolinguistics and second language teaching, and identity in second language learning.

These recent publications all reflect the predominant belief that the process of second language learning never occurs in a social vacuum. Instead, research emphasizes that second language learners operate in very specific social settings. Moreover, language learners, as current scholars have illustrated through examining L2 speakers' textual experiences (e.g., see Pavlenko & Lantolf, 2000; Vitanova, 2005), are not autonomous and independent free agents as traditionally thought. Rather, language learners are engaged in an active negotiation of their identities with specific others, and this negotiation is affected by a number of social factors including gender, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status.

What does this increased interest in the sociolinguistic and sociocultural aspects of second language acquisition mean to ESL/EFL teachers and TESOL educators? It is clear that we need to consider much more than grammar rules, vocabulary lists, reading comprehension quizzes, or essays. With this in mind, many TESOL programs have added sociolinguistics courses to the traditional courses in methodology, curriculum, and applied linguistics.

Our goal in this paper is to outline what we consider to be the critical components of sociolinguistics for language teachers and suggest how these components benefit both preservice and in-service teachers. At the same time, we wish to make a case that knowledge of sociolinguistics is essential to the current English teacher, and that it should become part of the core curriculum feature in ESL/EFL teacher education programs.

Sociolinguistics in Language Learning and Teaching

The term sociolinguistics was first used by Haver Currie (1952), who commented on the absence of social factors in contemporary linguistics. Thus, early sociolinguists distinguished themselves from theoretical linguists, and specifically from Chomsky's overemphasis on a uniform speech community and an "ideal speaker-listener" (1965, p. 3). Such a speaker does not exist; speakers use a variety of language forms, depending on their regional location, socioeconomic status, race, or gender.

Today sociolinguistics is a large interdisciplinary field that, generally speaking, is concerned with the study of language in its social contexts. The aim of sociolinguistics is "to move towards a theory which provides a motivated account of the way language is used in a community, and of the choices people make when they use language" (Holmes, 1992, p. 16). The choices that Holmes refers to may range from linguistic forms of regional dialects, registers, or forms of gender identification. To a native speaker, these linguistic choices may be conscious or unconscious, but in all cases, at the moment speakers of English choose a linguistic form, they are not merely producing

phrases and sentences in a social vacuum. To sociolinguists, linguistic forms always encode social identities.

These choices and the social significance that they carry are often not transparent even to educated native speakers of English, who switch between registers and styles (formal or informal) on an everyday basis and without much conscious effort. For example, a native speaker of English intuitively knows when to say, "Open the window" and when it is more appropriate to ask, "Would you please open the window?" A nonnative user of English, however, will need to be taught about the underlying sociocultural nuances of different speech acts, along with their appropriateness. Thus, ESL/EFL teachers should be explicitly aware of the sociocultural rules of English and be able to articulate this knowledge to their students. In what follows, we delineate five of the most important sociolinguistic components that should be included in an introduction to sociolinguistics for second/foreign language teachers, namely dialects and register, speech acts, world Englishes, and gender.

Dialects and Registers

Theoretical linguistics is largely binary. In other words, a sentence is considered either grammatical or not. To sociolinguists, however, this binary nature of linguistics is limiting and artificial. Instead, the central focus of sociolinguistic investigation has been on the many degrees of language variation. Language variation refers to the fact that, because of geographic or social factors, no two speakers of the same language sound the same. Language variation may indicate a language (e.g., French, Spanish, or Korean), dialect, or style.

We are all speakers of a particular regional or social dialect. Geographic dialectology has a long history of investigation as both British and American regional varieties have been extensively documented since the nineteenth century. In contrast, the study of social dialects, that is, the study of dialects based on socioeconomic factors, was introduced much more recently, in particular by Labov's pioneering work with New York speakers' speech patterns (1966). Labov found that the pronunciation of certain linguistic variables, for example, the /r/ phoneme or the *-ing* ending, depended on other, nonlinguistic variables such as social class, occupation, and level of education. What is the significance of these regional and social phenomena to teachers of English and their students, and why should we be aware of them?

Implications for Teaching

There are several implications for the role of language variation in English language teaching. An obvious implication suggests that English language learners, particularly those who have studied in an EFL setting, may be confused by the diversity

they encounter in language use by native speakers of English. Having a basic understanding of the regional dialects in American English, for example, would enable a language teacher to articulate that regional variation in language is natural and that a native speaker in New York may sound different from a native speaker in Texas due to simple geography.

Unfortunately, when studying language variation, sociolinguists also frequently encounter misconceptions and intolerance toward regional and social dialects. A sociolinguistics course should also encourage language teachers to examine their own views about "correctness" and to disperse some common stereotypes about language varieties that are different from Standard English. For example, one widely held belief, even by educated speakers of English, is that only one variety of English, the Standard variety (either British or American), is the correct one. Such myths about language are, unfortunately, often transmitted to teachers themselves and to their ESL/EFL learners. Language teachers should increase their awareness of the social implications of language variation, and in turn, help their students assess and evaluate their own beliefs.

By becoming familiar with research on language variation, teachers would come to understand that regional and social dialects are not linguistically inferior to the Standard variety, and that, in fact, even Standard American English is a type of dialect. It just happens to be the dialect of the sociopolitically powerful class. Moreover, by exposing preservice and in-service teachers to different dialects (for example, through videos), teacher educators can demonstrate that although the Standard American English in New York does not sound exactly the same as the Standard American English heard on the local news in Texas, it does not mean that either of two is more accurate or more prestigious linguistically.

In addition to the variation among different speakers of a language (regional and social dialects), language teachers and their students should be aware of the variation that exists even within one single speaker of a language. Proficient speakers of English know how to position themselves on the continuum of language style; they know which speech situation requires a more formal rather than a casual speech style. For example, when preparing a speech for a class presentation, ESL/EFL students need to take into consideration the speech event and the audience to decide on the level of formality to employ. On the other hand, a speech situation involving classmates at an informal gathering will require a more casual style. Teachers of English should be able to help their students navigate the stylistic continuum depending on different social contexts and different interlocutors.

Speech Acts

The term *speech acts* refers to verbal behaviors that language learners have to use routinely in social situations, including requests, refusals, and apologies. According to Austin's (1962) theory of speech acts, these could be classified as locutionary (indicating the literal meaning of the utterance) or illocutionary (emphasizing the social function that the utterance performs). For instance, to a native speaker of English, the seemingly simple utterance, "It is cold in here" could signify multiple meanings depending on the particular speech event and the relationship between the speakers. However, it is rarely interpreted as a simple comment on the temperature of the room. The listener may interpret this utterance as an indirect request to close the window if the window is open or to raise the heat on the thermostat. The question, "Could you open the door?" is another example of an indirect speech act. It is not a mere inquiry about the addressee's ability to open the door; instead it carries the intended meaning, "pen the door." A solid body of research has shown that that illocutionary speech acts are culture dependent and their use may create a great deal of intercultural miscommunication for ESL/EFL learners. (See Wolfson, 1989, for a comprehensive review of this area.)

Implications for Teaching

One specific way for teachers to illustrate the multiple functions of speech acts and the socially appropriate ways in which requests, for example, are used could be through the teaching of modals. In traditional teaching, modals present a grammar problem, but teaching about these forms should be embedded in teaching the sociocultural rules of the language.

First, students have to learn the forms: *may, might, can, could, should*, and *must*. The first problem comes with learning the meaning because there is a good deal of overlap. For example, *could* is the past tense of *can*, but could is also the potential (conditional) form: *He couldn't open the jar* versus *He couldn't open the jar if she didn't help him.*

Almost every grammar book discusses the common syntactic mistakes that learners should not make. One rule says, "Use a base form of the verb after a modal, not the infinitive." (*It may rain.* Not: **It may to rain.*) A second rule is "Negate modals with not." (*He should not go.* Not: **He doesn't should go.*) A third rule says, "Do not conjugate modals." (*She can swim.* Not: **She cans swim.*)

Though the grammar lessons associated with English modals appear difficult, they are fairly straightforward. Modals, however, come with sociolinguistic rules that should be taught as well. Modals can be used to make speech more indirect, which is often viewed as more polite. This less direct and therefore less confrontational tone is especially important when talking to people that you do not know, such as on the

telephone or at a business, or when you want to sound polite. Notice how these utterances gradually increase in indirectness and politeness:

Spell your name.

Can you spell your name?

Could you spell your name?

Would you spell your name?

Some modals may appear to be semantically similar, but they can have different sociolinguistic usages. For example, the modals *should* and *had better* are similar in meaning. In fact, some bilingual dictionaries will even translate them the same, resulting in this example from an EFL teacher in Japan. A student, trying to tell the newly arrived teacher where to find a certain kind of food, announced in front of the entire class, "Teacher, you had better go to the small store by the river." The teacher was stunned by this rather aggressive sentence from one of his meekest Japanese students. The sociolinguistic lesson here is that in English, *had better* is used only by higher status people to lower status people. For example, parents can tell their children, "You had better eat all of your dinner." However, children would never tell their parents, "Oh, yeah? Well, you had better start cooking better food!"

English as a World Language

Due to historical and commercial reasons, the English speaking community has spread far beyond the borders of England, the United States, or Australia. In fact, more than one billion people all over the world speak some variety of English; there are three nonnative speakers for every native speaker (Kachru & Nelson, 1996). While linguists used to speak of the mother country, that is, England and the colonies, sociolinguists today recognize three large geographical groupings of countries where English is used, namely Inner Circle, Outer Circle, and Expanding Circle. Inner Circle countries where English is the dominant language (e.g., the United Kingdom, the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand), Outer Circle countries where English is an official language functioning with others (e.g., India, Kenya, Malaysia, Singapore), and Expanding Circle areas where English is used extensively for business or other specific purposes (e.g., China, Japan, Latin America, the Middle East).

Implications for Teaching

While numerous differences exist between these different Englishes, the important teaching point is that no single English is "correct." A language exists for specific communication purposes within a certain context. If Singaporeans can use Singaporean English to communicate successfully with each other or with Japanese tourists or with Australian business people, then Singaporean English is correct for

those speakers' purpose. (The term *successfully* here does not mean only the ability of speakers to explain their ideas but rather the ability to explain these ideas in a respected variety of language that matches the educational and socioeconomic status of the speakers involved.)

The most important consideration in the choice of which English to learn is the students' goal in learning English in the first place. To use the Singaporean example again, if a Singaporean EFL student planned to live in Boston, USA, then that student would want to learn not just American English but rather the accent associated with Boston. However, a Singaporean EFL student who planned to work in a bank in Singapore would be wise to learn a variety of English that will ensure successful communication with customers in the bank where the student works.

Gender

Gender is one of the most important social factors in sociolinguistics. Traditionally, the research in this area was largely variationist and quantitative. In a classic study, Trudgill (1975) found that the women he studied in Norwich tended to use more prestigious linguistic forms than the men in the study. For example, the women were more likely to use the complete *-ing* form rather than the phonetically simplified *-in*. Today, however, the research on the language and gender connection has become much more complex, and modern scholars believe that there is not a direct relationship between language use and gender. Instead, researchers have argued that each community constructs gender in a different way. There is not, for instance, any biological reason for girls and boys to use different language behaviors. Rather, they are socialized by particular speech communities to engage in gender specific roles (Cameron, 1996). Second language researchers have embraced this social understanding of gender (Piller & Pavlenko, 2001) and have applied it to multilingual settings.

We believe that language teachers need a better understanding of how scholars conceptualize gender. The relations between gender and language variation have social rather than biological roots. As a multitude of studies suggests, the role of gender differs in multilingual settings, and the acquisition of English as a second or foreign language depends on access to the language and on other sociocultural factors rather than on some innate ability. (For a comprehensive review on language and gender, see Ehrlich, 1997.) This awareness of the multiple contexts in which gender functions can help teachers avoid forming false stereotypes and expectations for their ESL/EFL students.

Sociolinguistic studies are concerned not only with the gender identity of the language learners but also linguistic features within the English language, especially sexist language and specific suggestions for avoiding it. Unlike other Indo-European languages, English does not have an elaborate inflectional morphology. Its grammatical

gender is marked in a few nouns, pronouns, and possessive adjectives, and the traditional grammar lesson involves learning the forms (*actor/actress, he/she*, or *his/her*). Nowadays, however, nouns that may have male/female counterparts tend to use only one form. Thus, actor is preferred regardless of the gender of the person. *Flight attendant* (instead of *steward/stewardess*), *chair* or *chairperson* (instead of *chairman/chairwoman*), and *host* (instead of *host/hostess*) are the standard, non-sexist terms. Having to learn only one form for a person's occupation or role—as in *doctor, teacher, lawyer*, or *nurse*—is certainly easier for second language learners.

Implications for Teaching

It is always difficult for both native and nonnative speakers of English to talk about a generic group because we never know if we should use singular or plural, and if we use singular, should we use *he* or *she*? Consider this short paragraph that a student wrote about encountering new vocabulary:

> When a student finds a word, he or she has to think about the word's possible meaning from the context if he or she does not know the meaning of the word. If there is time, the student can consult his or her dictionary, but what if he or she finds this word during a timed reading activity?

In English, it is awkward to use *he* or *she* repeatedly, but using only *he* or only *she* is not accurate because the class contains males and females. Traditional grammar has preferred the use of *he*, but this is inaccurate and sexist.

The solution to this is to avoid singular and use plural. Read this version of the same paragraph where every singular person reference has been made plural.

> When students find a word, they have to think about the word's possible meaning from the context if they do not know the meaning of the word. If there is time, the students can consult their dictionary, but what if they find this word during a timed reading activity?

This second pluralized example has only 49 words to the original version's 58 words, a remarkable difference of 15% for such a short paragraph. Using fewer words means fewer opportunities to make an error. In addition, the words now accurately reflect the fact that students in the class have a quandary when they find a new word, and this quandary has nothing to do with the gender of the learner.

Pluralizing the nouns eliminates two other errors. First, many students, whether their first language is a language close to English, such as Spanish or German, or a language more distant from English, such as Chinese or Indonesian, frequently confuse *he* with *she* and *his* with *her*. Pluralizing the pronoun to *they* eliminates this error.

Secondly, the most common verb error in English, regardless of the learner's first language, is omission of the *-s* on the 3rd person verb form (e.g., *I like, you like, he likes*). The more *they* is used instead of *he* or *she*, the more accurate our learners' present tense verb forms are likely to be since there is no need for the *-s* morpheme. Because using *they* also removes sexism involved with *he* or *she*, pluralizing pronouns and nouns has syntactic as well as sociolinguistic value for our learners.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Our learners' language goals and outcomes depend on more than learning a generic set of grammar rules or a list of vocabulary items though we certainly acknowledge the importance of knowing grammar and vocabulary in a second language. However, knowledge of sociolinguistics is essential for ESL/EFL teachers. As seen in the examples in this article, sociolinguistic knowledge can heavily impact the teaching of traditional areas such as grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation.

As MA TESOL programs all over the world are offering sociolinguistics courses, we urge teachers in training to take advantage of these courses. For example, a review of courses listed for MA TESOL Programs in the *Directory of Teacher Education Programs in TESOL in the United States and Canada, 2005-2007* shows that a great many programs offer sociolinguistics courses in addition to the traditional courses in methods, curriculum, and applied linguistics. We urge both current and preservice teachers to attend sociolinguistic-themed sessions at teacher conferences. Almost all conferences have multiple sessions that deal with learner variables such as motivation, attitude, age, or gender.

Finally, in addition to the sources already included above, we recommend a set of useful sources of sociolinguistic information that can have a major impact on the way instructors view language, their students, and ultimately themselves as teachers:

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