

“Paradigm Shift”: An Investigation of Preservice Teachers’ Perceptions of Teaching English as an International Language

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Abstract

The unprecedented use of English as a means of international and intercultural communication around the world has made it increasingly unrealistic and inappropriate to hold to the native speaker norms. This paper examines preservice teachers’ perceptions of teaching English as an International Language (EIL), employing qualitative methods. The participants were 31 teacher candidates enrolled in an undergraduate course “Teaching English as a Second Language” in the teacher education program of a public university in a Southwestern State of the U.S. The data sources included online postings, interview transcripts, and synthesis papers. This study revealed that although the participants were all aware of the heterogeneity of the English language and were willing to promote multilingualism, the majority of them still clung to the notion that “Standard” English is the only variety of English that should be taught in the classroom. This paper maintains that in order to raise classroom teachers’ awareness of teaching EIL, teacher educators should demolish American or British English as the orthodox and establish a new pedagogic model that de-emphasizes the native speaker norms and embraces all varieties of the English language.

Keywords: paradigm shift; teaching English as an International Language; preservice teachers; perceptions.

Introduction

It has been over two decades since Kachru proposed the conception of “paradigm shift” (1992, p. 362), a shift from the traditionally predominant native speaker norms to “English as a lingua franca” or “World Englishes” in the field of TESOL. In 2012, it was estimated that there were approximately 914 million people around the world who spoke English, among whom, 331 million were English-as-a-first-language speakers (Exploredia, 2011). This estimate means that for 2/3 of the people speaking English worldwide, English was their second or foreign language. Sharifian and Marlina (2012) resonated with this

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projection by pointing out that “Approximately 80% of the English-language communication in the world takes place between individuals from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds who are non-native English speakers and do not necessarily speak an Inner-Cycle “Anglo” English such as American English, British English, and Australian English, etc.” (p. 145).

Such unprecedented use of the English language around the world as a means of international communication has made it increasingly unrealistic and inappropriate to hold to the native speaker norms. Inevitably, it brings about direct implications in the ways in which English is taught and learned. Accordingly, an imminent issue that needs to be addressed is the pedagogical model to meet the demands of the diverse conceptualizations of the English language. In this backdrop, many TESOL scholars, following the footsteps of Kachru (1992), have argued for teaching English as an International Language (Elsheikh, 2015). As Matsuda (2012) claimed, “The international scope of learners’ English learning agenda should logically be matched by pedagogical approaches that teach English as an international language (EIL), in part through inclusion of varieties of World Englishes” (p. 719). This paper intends to explore preservice teachers’ perceptions of such “paradigm shift,” as their attitudes toward the TESOL pedagogical model will exert a profound influence on the English Language Learners (ELLs) and the prospects of the field.

Literature Review

Lewis (2005) once pointed out two contradictory principles that have informed pronunciation teaching: the nativeness principle, whereby learners model a standard dialect from the United Kingdom or North America, and the intelligibility principle, whereby learners seek to be understood despite speech being heavily accented. It is the native speaker model that has held sway traditionally, as the only internationally acceptable pedagogical models for TESOL instruction. As the variability of the English language used among speakers from different linguistic backgrounds grows, more and more studies have started to question the validity of the conventional model of English language teaching for its strict adherence to native speaker norms in the cross-cultural settings (Ketabi & Shomoossi, 2007; Krashen, 2003; Timmis, 2002). Instead, the “paradigm shift” to teaching English as an international language has been more and more acknowledged. As Alptekin (2002) suggested,

Real communicative behaviour ought to be redefined in relation to the reality of English as an International Language, entailing not only the uses of English that are real for its native speakers in English-speaking countries, but also the uses of English that are real for its nonnative speakers in communities served by languages other than English. (p. 61)

The native speaker model has not only failed to reflect the lingua franca status of English, but also shown to be unattainable and unrealistic for the majority of the adult nonnative-speaking learners. TESOL educators tend to assume that the native speaker model is a

reasonable and obvious goal for ELLs to strive for. However, some research studies have indicated that learners can acquire native-like proficiency only if they live in these countries for a long time or are taught completely by native-speaking teachers, both of which are almost impossible for the learners who immigrate to the countries as adults (Scales, Wennerstrom, Richard, & Wu, 2006). Moreover, the native speaker model carries power, implying a historical authority over other varieties of English. Alptekin (2002) argued that “one cannot claim that there is one correct and appropriate way to use English, in the sense that one set of language patterns is somehow inherently superior to all the others” (p. 59).

Therefore, a plenty of previous research has suggested a reconsideration of the objectives of TESOL as well as a reexamination of the assumptions underlying mainstream TESOL teaching methodology (Kirkpatrick, 2011). Interestingly, on the one hand, many TESOL professionals recognized the importance of teaching English as an International Language in preparing students to function as competent users of English; on the other hand, they resisted the “paradigm shift” and still favored and relied on native speaker model in their classrooms (F. Ali, 2014). Matsuda (2012) declared that “examination of English language teaching (ELT) practice in Japan reveals that English is still being taught as an inner-circle language, based almost exclusively on American or British English, and textbooks with characters and cultural topics from the English-speaking countries of the inner circle” (p. 719). This researcher also went on to put forward some recommendations regarding how World Englishes can be incorporated in classroom teaching, including (a) interaction with EIL users, (b) assessment focusing on communicative effectiveness, (c) teaching materials representing EIL users, (d) promoting teachers’ awareness of EIL through teacher education, and (e) educating the general public (Matsuda, 2012).

In the meantime, there are counterarguments that exist in some TESOL educators and researchers. For example, Smith (2018) stated that “it has been reasonably demonstrated that there are indeed inconsistencies between varieties of Englishes that...lead to miscommunication or misunderstandings in a cross-cultural setting” (p. 107). Essossomo (2015) elaborated on the many problems in attempting to teach Cameroon English in Cameroon, including the lack of curriculum and pedagogical materials about Cameroon English, the failure to represent the sociocultural realities of the entire country, and the shortage of support from the learners.

Though a considerable number of studies have been undertaken for the purpose of dissecting the issue of EIL (F. Ali, 2014; Jenkins, 2007; Liou, 2009; S. Ali, 2009), the contexts where the studies were situated in were mostly EFL countries. This article aims to focus on the native-speaking teacher candidates in a teacher preparation program in the U.S., in order to uncover their perceptions on the pedagogical model of TESOL, which is bound to be influential for the next generation of ELLs. The questions that guide this study include: What are the perceptions of the preservice teachers about the pedagogical model

of TESOL? What are their attitudes and beliefs about teaching English as an International Language? Where do they stand on the “paradigm shift?”

Methodology

Data Collection

This study employed qualitative methods, which were characterized by discovery, exploration, and narrative description. As aforementioned, the participants of the study were all preservice teachers in a teacher education program at a public university located in a Southwestern state of the U.S. Specifically, they were 31 students enrolled in an undergraduate course “Teaching English as a Second Language,” which was designed to introduce students to second language acquisition theory, teaching methods and techniques essential for their future teaching of ELLs. During this course, students discussed the notion of “teaching English as an International Language” vs. targeting at a single model based on English native speakership.

A Discussion Board was set up on Blackboard for students to post their perceptions. Individual interviews were conducted with ten participants on a voluntary basis. Each interview lasted approximately an hour, and was tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The interviews were semi-structured in the sense that they not only targeted the research questions but also allowed interviewees a maximum flexibility to maintain a natural conversation for the sake of generating more data. A synthesis paper was required at the conclusion of the course, in which students were encouraged to freely and thoroughly examine their personal philosophy of second language teaching. In summary, the participants’ online postings, interview transcripts, and synthesis papers all constitute important sources of data in this research.

Data Analysis

Qualitative researchers contend that research is value-bound, and should use rich and thick description to represent “reality” or get close to “reality” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Featuring “open-ended, experiential and quest-like qualities” (Conle, 2000, p. 50), “the desired outcome is not a generalization but a narrative which renders clear the meaning inherent in or generated by a particular subject” (Elbaz-Luwisch, 1997, p. 76). All the data were coded following Carspecken’s meaning reconstruction process (Caspecken, 1996), including constructing meaning fields, making horizon analysis, making validity claims, distinguishing backgrounding from foregrounding, and developing coding scheme. Because the data collection is recursive in the sense that it can occur at any phase of the course without a clear boundary between when is the beginning of writing and when is the completion of data collection, the analysis and interpretations were made continuously throughout the entire course of the study.

Credibility

Every attempt has been made to minimize researcher bias and increase credibility of the study. During the interviews, the researcher tried to let the interviewees take the lead while the researcher sought for clarification and expansion of what the interviewees said. Immediately after each interview was transcribed, the researcher read through the transcript over and over again to make sure all the confusing or eminent points, if there are any, would receive clarification from the interviewee through the follow-up emails or face-to-face meetings. Additionally, peer debriefing was used to confirm or disconfirm the authenticity of the content and render it as close as possible to the meanings indicated by the participants. The researcher also constantly shared her writing on a work-in-progress basis with the participants as well as her “response communities” by inviting them to read her work and responding in ways that helped her see other meanings that might lead to further retelling (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 60).

Results

Four emerging themes were identified and elucidated in the study: (a) awareness of different varieties of English, (b) lack of support for the varieties of the English language other than the “Standard,” (c) perceived superiority of American English over other varieties of English, and (d) advocacy of different varieties of the English language. Each theme is substantiated by the abundant data from multiple sources the study was able to obtain. They collectively unfurl the complexities of participants’ perceptions of teaching EIL.

Awareness of Different Varieties of English

First of all, all the participants acknowledge the different varieties of English, realizing that a large amount of communication using English as the medium happens across different linguistic backgrounds. The native languages of these users of English serve as a valuable source of personal and social identity. The majority of the participants indicate that they want to preserve and promote students’ home languages alongside the English language. One participant wrote the following words in her synthesis paper.

I will advise my students to always value their native language, and never attempt to replace it with a new one as English. I will suggest to my students to consider the target language as important and beneficial, and that they will be able to communicate with more people, but they should never try to forget their native language. (Jason, preservice high school science teacher, synthesis paper)

The cultural and linguistic diversity in ESL classrooms is also widely acknowledge in the participants. No matter in Blackboard discussion, interview, or synthesis paper, students all demonstrate sensitivity to students’ diverse cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic

backgrounds and respect for their language differences. Students all point out the importance of creating a culturally responsive learning environment when working with ELLs. One participant made the following remark in one of her Blackboard posts:

The world that we live in today is very diverse. People come from many different backgrounds and cultures. Educators need to be sensitive to the bias attached to students' native languages and cultures, and apply knowledge of effective strategies to create a multicultural and multilingual learning environment. (Victoria, preservice elementary teacher, Blackboard Discussion)

Lack of Support for the Varieties of the English Language Other Than the “Standard”

It would be logical to think that if the participants all acknowledge the cross-cultural use of English as an International Language and the different varieties of the English language, they would naturally reflect this notion in their teaching pedagogy. However, it is interesting to see that many participants do not plan to incorporate the various models of English into their classroom. A participant, Katherine, a preservice elementary teacher, wrote the following post in online discussion,

I will tell them (students) how us, in America, speak English. I would explain to them that other parts of the world have evolved their own varieties of English, however that you will be taught only the English that is spoken here, where you and I live.

Robin, a preservice secondary math teacher, resonated with Katherine's opinion by writing underneath her post, “English should be taught in a standard way everywhere in the world. We should make sure every student learns the proper way.”

When digging further into the data, it is found that students resist the classroom application of teaching EIL for different reasons. For Thomas, a preservice middle school English language arts teacher, “it is not a curriculum standard and I don't have time for it.” As for Michael, a future elementary teacher, “it would be off task and I don't see a place for it in my class.” One major reason behind their attitude against the “paradigm shift” in their classroom, despite their awareness of it, is the standardized testing requirement.

All public school students, including ELLs, are required to meet or exceed the state's academic standards as measured by state standardized tests. Like two swords hanging over the head of students, teachers, and administrators, the state testing requirements for English proficiency and academic content make the school curriculum and classroom instruction very testing-oriented. Teachers, who are held responsible for students' testing results, are under immense pressure to make sure students perform well in the tests. As one participant said in the interview, “They (ELLs) are all held to the same English language arts, math, science, and other content-area standards when they take the standardized test. Teaching ELL students the proper way will make them successful in and

out of school.” Another participant even expressed an extreme viewpoint by describing teaching various English models as “silly things.” His complete comments are as follows: *Honestly, with the standardized tests, I do not think I would have the time to deal with anything like that (topics related to teaching English as an International Language). Time is already against us as teachers and having ELLs in the class just adds more things to overcome. So wasting any time dealing with silly things such as the different version of English is a waste of time. (Adam, preservice middle school math teacher, Blackboard Discussion)*

For some other participants, like Jessica, a future elementary teacher whose home language is Spanish, knowing “Standard” English is tied to a greater economic and social status. She talked about how being proficient in “Standard” English has provided her with more educational and job opportunities in comparison with her parents and grandparents who cannot speak “Standard” English. She recounted how her mother experienced discrimination and mistreatment at her job. She said, “I believe this is because she does not speak correct English. I feel that when others are not able to express themselves to the majority using the Standard English, they are viewed as ‘dumb’ and are more likely to be mistreated.”

Following Jessica’s train of thoughts, Rebecca drove home the practical benefits of acquiring “Standard” English in her synthesis paper:

While I do agree that English should be seen as an international language not just used by native speakers, I think it should still be taught using a single model based on English spoken by native speakers. This will allow students to be taught a form of English that is seen as "correct" in many places. For instance, an ELL student that lives in the United States would get better reactions from people in his surroundings if he learns the inner circle form of English. Most likely, he would also get better grades since teachers in the US grade grammar and writing in essays/written work by their own standards. In short, ESL teaching should target the model of English that will give the most success to students in the areas they live in or will live in. t them know that the better their English is the more successful they can be in the work place. (Rebecca, preservice high school history teacher, synthesis paper)

Perceived Superiority of American English over Other Varieties of English

There are quite a few participants who reject the “paradigm shift” mainly because of the long-held obsession with the native speaker norms. Jenkins once asserted that the authority of American or British English over other varieties of English was deeply ingrained in the majority of English teachers, teacher educators and students, and examination board and publishing industry (Jenkins, 2006). Ten years later, unfortunately, it still holds true in not

only English teachers, but also preservice teachers in general in this study. Ellen, a future elementary teacher, wrote the following sentences in her synthesis paper:

I believe that English should be taught in the standard way no matter where the person is learning it. If different countries are teaching it differently than how we speak it in the United States, then English language will not be uniformed and it will not be only one language.

Stella, also a preservice elementary teacher, made the following statements in the interview: *Although the language (English) has been adapted throughout the world we would not want to lose the basis in which our language originated. I definitely feel that ESL teaching should target a single model based on English native speakership.*

Elaine, a soon-to-be elementary teacher, uttered similar opinion in the Blackboard discussion:

I would teach them (students) the rules and have them practice speaking the right way with no slang or mixture of their native language. Yes, they may mess up at the beginning which is normal and fine but I will correct them so they can learn English the standard way throughout their journey of learning the language.

Advocacy of Different Varieties of the English Language

Although a considerable rejection of teaching the varieties of the English language other than the “Standard” is perceived among the participants, it is comforting to observe some advocacies. Jason aptly remarked on the ownership of the English language in Blackboard discussion as follows:

I think that English belongs to everyone who can read, speak, and use it in the way that is right and appropriate regardless of how you acquired it, whether native speakers or non-native speakers. I have actually heard people say that the American English is better and more correct than British English and people say the opposite as well. I just think that when people don't pay whatever accent people have when they speak any attention and they just listen to what is being said, they will see that no matter what country's English is being used English belongs to everyone who is speaking it. (Jason, preservice high school science teacher, synthesis paper)

What has also stood out distinctly in Jason's comments is his endorsement for the global intelligibility model, which enhances communicative flexibility and allows learners to become more versatile in participating in a wide spectrum of international communication. The tolerance for different varieties of the English language is also found in several other participants. Victoria said in the interview, “I believe as long as the speakers are being comprehensible, we should not discourage them from using non-“Standard” variety of

English. It does not matter if it's inner, outer or expanding circle of English." Amy posted something similar in online discussion:

ESL teaching should not aim for trying to speak like native speakers. The goal for ESL teaching should be preparing students to be effective communicators (being able to understand what other English speakers want to communicate, and also being able to be fully understood by others.) The native speaker norm is secondary. (Amy, preservice elementary teacher, Blackboard discussion)

When being asked if he plans to incorporate teaching English as an International Language into classroom and if so, how, Jason made the following remark:

As a future teacher of ELLs, I will have a positive attitude toward all varieties of English. I will allow ELLs to hear, analyze, and compare key features among the different varieties. We will discuss their differences in the classroom so student can get acquainted with all versions of the English language. I will respect their identities as multilinguals. I will try to relate students' lives, issues and struggles to learning, and engage them in open-ended problem solving with real life issues. I will accept and empower their knowledge and values of different varieties of English in the classroom. (Jason, preservice high school science teacher, interview)

Discussions

This study has important implications for teacher educators whose responsibilities are preparing qualified teachers for today's highly diverse classrooms. More often than not, preservice teachers are taught how to teach phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, and pragmatics, the subsystems comprising Standard English language. Nevertheless, teacher educators seem to have overlooked the large variations in the English language used among speakers from different linguistic backgrounds and what it means to prospective teachers and their future students.

Though the importance of teacher respect for students' home languages has been commonly recognized, teachers' understanding and pedagogy associated with the various Englishes is long overdue. Through having adequate knowledge about English language variations and implementing culturally and linguistically sensitive methods, teachers can help language minority students develop a sense of pride, family value and connection, and a positive self-identity. In the meantime, acknowledgment of the varieties of English language also allows teachers to better reach out to these students and help them bridge the gap between home tradition and school culture.

Globalization and immigration have made the world smaller and have given rise to the issues educators may not have to tackle in relatively homogeneous classrooms decades ago. Nowadays, many questions related to teaching EIL are worthy of consideration by preservice teachers before they are placed in classrooms with a large number of ELLs. For

example, in a multicultural and multilingual classroom, how should teachers perceive the variations in the English language that students speak and write? How willing and ready are they to recognize the existence of the varieties of English in cross-cultural communication? How much emphasis will they put on the native speaker norms? To what extent will they remain loyal to Standard English? How will they deal with language comprehensibility and accuracy in student output and achieve a balance between the two? There may not be right or wrong answers, as many factors play a role in teachers' perceptions on these questions, e.g., teaching contexts, students' specific learning goals. However, engaging preservice teachers in the discussion of this topic can help them expand their vision and knowledge on something most of them probably have never thought about, and their future teaching perceptions and practices will not only affect ELLs but also native-speaking students.

Concluding Remarks

As the globe becomes more and more interdependent with English as a medium of international communication, it can be foreseen that the call for the "paradigm shift" will become more and more pressing. This study brings to surface that although the participants are all aware of the heterogeneity of English in today's shrinking world and willing to promote multiculturalism, the majority of them still cling to the notion that "Standard" English is the only variety of English that should be taught in the classroom. As Holliday (2005) predicted, such a shift in teacher attitudes and practices will not take place without a struggle. Larsen-Freeman and Anderson (2011) believe that the precedence given to the inner circle varieties, American English in particular, is a political and socio-economic issue more than a linguistic issue.

This paper intends to make a strong case for integrating English as an International Language in ESL classrooms. It argues for the demolition of American or British English as the orthodox and the establishment of a new pedagogic model of TESOL, which de-emphasizes the native speaker norms and embraces all varieties of English language. In order for this "paradigm shift" to happen, it is essential to transform teachers' perceptions to help them recognize that there should not be a single variety of English language that is prescribed as the only correct or acceptable model. Rather, students should be prepared as competent English users in a "global village." TESOL teacher preparation programs should place a greater emphasis on raising preservice teachers' awareness of teaching English as a means of international and intercultural communication, instead of continuing to be restrained within the frame of the "Standard" and native speaker norms.

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