A Comparison between Teaching Standard English and Teaching World English in Mainland China

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Abstract: The wide spread English is an unstoppable stream, because of the globalization. The word of “English” has been defined as American English (AmE) or British English (BrE) for years. However, AmE and BrE could be considered as two kinds of Standard Englishes (SEs) [5]. Moreover, with the changing purpose of English learning, the unawareness of changes could be one of the leading problems in English teaching system in China. This paper is going to learn about SE and World English (WE), explore the English teaching situation in China, present the reality of WE and SE teaching, discuss the benefits and drawbacks respectively, analyze the changing purposes of English learning and find out which one is more suitable to China.

Keywords: World English; Standard English; BrE; AmE

1. Introduction

A salient language of English has been widely used in all kinds of international situations. As a major part of the world, Chinese realized the importance of English decades ago, and started to learn the language ever since. English teaching was added into the educational syllabus of Chinese primary schools in 2001, which is a monumental step in the progress of English education in China. And, the nine-year compulsory education is where most Chinese learn English from [14].

As English has been learned and employed around the world, its localization based on historical, political, cultural, social and many other kinds of reasons [11]. These changes could be beneficial to the variation of English. Besides, WE has been modeled by Braj Kachru as three circles: inner circle, outer circle and expanding circle [10]. And to China, a country belongs to the expanding circle [4], the consideration of learning what kind of English could be essential.

2. Literature Reviews

2.1. Standard English

“Standard English is not a language, an accent, style or a register, it is a dialect” [12]. Thus, SE is one kind of Englishes. However, unlike other dialects which varied from one region to another, SE is the one presented by codifications, spoken by the most prestigious group of people in the society [4], used by the authorities, and so on. More importantly, SE probably owns wide recognition and respect in a certain English speaking nation [9].

Because of the world-around application of English and ineluctable localizing progress in different countries [4], a variety of SE is the outcome. Terms, sentence structures, pronunciations and so on, could be codified differently form one SE to another.

Owing to some social and historical reasons, limitations of teaching or learning materials, and choices made by authorities, BrE or AmE is taught as a SE in many Chinese public schools in the phrase of compulsory education or in other English language teaching institutions. Hence, in the English teaching system of China and in this essay, SE is referred to BrE and AmE.

2.2 World English

WE can be classified into three circles. Briefly, people take English as their mother tongue in the inner circle, take it as second language in the outer circle and regard it as a foreign language in the
expanding circle\(^1\). To be specific, in the inner circle, people are native English speakers, English could be their first or only language; in the outer circle, English is hold to be an important language, it could be their official language, but not their mother tongue; and in the expanding circle, as a foreign language, it may be used in some specific circumstances for some particular purposes. However, this classification may be scientific currently, with the self-development of English in various countries or cultures, it may need rectification some day.

2.3 Standard English Teaching in China

In this section, SE teaching realities in China will be presented and analyzed, then it’s benefits and drawbacks will be discussed as well.

In China, scholars have been focusing on exploring grammatical rules of English (BrE mainly), codifying them and teaching these rules to Chinese English learners for decades. English has been taken as a taught subject in schools, like mathematics, chemistry, physics and etc. Standard rules and principle are always pursued and followed by Chinese English teachers and learners. In addition, due to the English assessment system in China, unified rules and principles of English is highly required. In this case, a series of textbooks based on BrE or AmE normally exclude other English varieties.

Advantages:

- Teaching a foreign language with fixed and unified rules of a language could help students, especially beginners, to avoid confusions aroused by various rules of different Englishes. Some lexical confusions like different spelling rules between AmE and BrE, for example: “color” and “colour”. This is a simple case, it may be easy for native speakers or advanced English learners to understand and distinguish, but it could be difficult to foreign English beginners, even mislead them. So teaching one kind of English could be helpful by some means.

- With all these years’ development of English teaching, it is much more easier for both teachers and learners to get AmE and BrE teaching materials or resources. So learning these two kinds of SEs could be quite convenient in China.

Disadvantages:

- To students, either Standard AmE or Standard BrE could be a challenge to learn and apply. Whether for the purpose of communication with foreigners at home or for the further study abroad, SE may not be a good option as it is not even closely relevant to Academic English\(^2\) nor to daily circumstances. In addition, due to the AmE or BrE learning convention, some learners are highly interested in practicing “standard accent”. And their interpretation of “standard accent” is the most influencing ones like, BBC English, the Queen’s English, VOA and so on. However, “never become native-speakers without being reborn”\(^3\). Hence, to most Chinese students, pursuing a standard accent could be wasting time.

- To most English teachers, the restriction of teaching a SE based on fixed textbooks and pursuing student’s higher scores in examinations will lower their creations in the classrooms and make English as a rather boring subject.

- Teaching SE, could be a limitation to the development of English. By focusing on teaching and testing Standard AmE or BrE, students may have no awareness of WE. And under the pressure of examinations, it is rare to see Chinese students create some new terms or chants in English which could help with the language acquisition. Hence, the possibility of flourish English in a Chinese way remains low.

2.4 World English Teaching in China

World English Teaching is facing a quite awkward situation in the context of China that many Chinese don’t even have the awareness of this term. Even worse, some higher educational Chinese, like university students, have none or very limited knowledge about WE\(^5\). It could be a defect in English educational system of China. How would it be possible to learn something without knowing about what it really is? WE could be considered as an important character of English, being aware of it may help Chinese English learners and teachers to change their mindset about English — English teaching is not just about teaching fixed grammar rules, learning English is more about gaining the competence of a language and English could be flexible in use.

Advantages:
To students, learning WE, being aware of the differences between Englishes and understand the reasons if necessary, can help them recognize different English speakers. Focusing on learning restricted grammatical rules will make students feel hard to learn and over worship the official textbooks. However, learning how English updated, how grammatical rules varies, some expressions may be outdated and etc., could be a way of leading students to explore by themselves. What’s more, being exposed to various accents may help students to build their language confidence and speak up.

From teachers’ perceptive, presenting some common differences and similarities between one dialect or SE to another could be a more interesting option than teaching grammar. Moreover, adapting to a dialect could be quite mystifying to Chinese English speakers, thus, teaching WE and building students’ sense of Englishes is a more practical option.

Disadvantage:

Teaching WE in China is not an invulnerable choice. It could be troublesome in some circumstances, because language is “a major means (some would say the chief means) of showing where we belong, and of distinguishing one social group from another”[2]. So it could be hard for Chinese students to learn all of them simultaneously and distinguish them from the very beginning. For instance, some barriers exist between AmE and BrE may lead to misinterpretations between speakers of these two standard Englishes, especially between Chinese AmE speakers and Chinese BrE speakers.

2.5 Needs analysis

Under the policy of reform and opening up in 1978, English was believed to be salient, and was stipulated as one of the major courses in Chinese compulsory education. However, to most students, their main purpose for learning English is the Gaokao — College Entrance Examination, or other tests. Except this major need of English inside the country, learning BrE or AmE could be a stepping stone to building connection with world major economic entities, such as the UK and the USA. In this case, teaching SE—BrE and AmE, could be a rational option.

However, the situation has been changing. The authority has released a document of some proved changes in English examinations[7]. This is not only a piece of news about cutting the score of English examination from the Gaokao, but also shows that Chinese are changing their views about English[15]. It not only liberates students from the burden of examinations, but also shows the trend of teaching for practical purposes which means put English on the level of communication—as an International Language or Lingua Franca. Nowadays, with the deepening of globalization and modernization in the 21st century, the increasing number of workers, businessmen, students and etc. from other English speaking countries, move to China. These English speakers bring Chinese with WE and it is also a notification of learning WE as well.

Moreover, the pattern of international trade and business cooperation is changing. For example, from the number of Chinese Foreign Direct Investment (FDI), the connection between China and other parts of the world, not only the USA and the UK, is becoming closer. For instance, as the third largest FDI country, China had financed $16 billion in African at the end of 2011 and the number is increasing firmly[13]. Moreover, Africa is a principle supplier to Chinese import market and a major customer to Chinese international construction companies[6]. During the conversation with Africans, whose L1 may be African English or other languages, being aware of the localized English and all kinds of accents, could help Chinese international workers to communicate with local people successfully and achieve a good cooperative result.

2.6 A Comparison between Standard English and World English in Mainland China

By reviewing the understandings of SE in 2.1 and WE in 2.2, it is manifest that SE is focusing on producing a widely recognized and accepted dialect in a certain country or a region, while WE is working on welcoming all kinds of Englishes. Various kinds of SEs around the world, and varied dialects in different regions, are all considered as one of the WE.

Furthermore, by comparing the analysis in 2.3 and 2.4, here are a couple of results could be summarized: Firstly, From the angle of students, most of them are now learning SE in quite stressed ways and the achievement may not as good as expected. However, WE could be learned in a more interesting way and the outcome may be more practical. Secondly, teaching SE brings quite a lot of restrictions, and limits creations as a teacher. Nevertheless, WE offers teachers plenty opportunities of showing students a dynamic English world and students may enjoy the achievements of using the language in daily life.
What’s more, according to the needs analysis result in 2.5, the purpose of English learning is changing in China. Nowadays, whether inside or outside the country, SE is not sufficient enough to meet the requirement of our ever-changing international situation.

All in all, it would be too obstinate if we stick to the old path of teaching SE. Therefore, adjustment is recommended to be made and teaching WE could be considered as a better option in the context of modern China.

3. Suggestions

According to the advantages and disadvantages, presented in 2.3 and 2.4, it is obvious to see both the SE teaching and the WE teaching contain benefits and drawbacks in the context of Mainland China. In addition, base on the needs analysis in 2.5, WE teaching would be more useful in the modern Mainland China.

WE teaching could be processed as informing students how language varies, comparing the variations and etc. In this way, students could be enlightened to contribute some language creations. For example, they would add some Chinese elements into English, build some new terms for fun, feel free to slip and fall in language use and etc. As a result, students may find English is much more interesting than it was and could be stimulated to explore the language by themselves.

However, it doesn’t mean SE should be abandoned. In order to confront with the drawbacks, during the teaching process of WE, some confusions may be aroused by the differences between SEs. So it could be wise to start the process with teaching one kind of Standard English, no matter choosing AmE, BrE, Australian English, Canadian or another, could help avoiding a lot of confusion. Thus, letting students know about the English variation and teach them in a “balanced way” [3], could be the option.

What’s more, during the teaching process, teaching environment should be considered first, then, students’ performance of practicing English should be highly regarded. Additionally, teachers should give students sufficient exposure of different Englishes and train them with language tactics to comprehend different SEs[3].

4. Conclusion

Generally, in this paper, the terms of SE and WE are explained first, and teaching reality of SE and WE in China are discussed secondly. Then, by comparing the teaching realities and analyzing the modern need of English in Mainland China, the result comes out that WE can be taken as a better option. However, it doesn’t mean that SE should be given up. So in the suggestion part, SE was reconsidered as a teaching option in some circumstances and a few motions and regulations for the WE teaching are presented. Last but not least, it is rational to believe the WE is a satisfactory option to shorten the distance between Chinese English learners and the target language which may benefit English learners with an easier access.

References