

Error or Feature of English? Assessment in the Context of a Changing Language

Isabel Pefianco Martin
Ateneo de Manila University, Philippines

ABSTRACT

This presentation is an invitation to reflect on English language assessment practices, on whether or not these confront the dynamism of the English language. The presentation begins with the Kachruvian paradigm for approaching the English language, which engage some realities about the English language and its users and pose questions about the spread of English. The second part of the presentation Philippine English. Filipinos go about their daily lives carrying the illusion that the English they use is *just* English—a language that is universal and neutral. To destroy this illusion, I shall present the work of Philippine sociolinguist, Ma. Lourdes Bautista, who very carefully described the grammatical features of educated Philippine English. I shall also present some lexical innovations in Philippine English as documented in a dictionary and a research study. The final part of this presentation focuses on implications of the Kachruvian paradigm, as well as of Bautista's study on Philippine English, on assessment in ELT. I shall briefly review studies that had been conducted on the validity of tests which use 'native speaker' norms. I also hope to share my reflections about assessment practices in the context of a changing language.

English Changing

English is a vibrant language, changing and morphing to fit the needs of its users. Because of this, rules concerning English change very rapidly. How do ELT professionals confront these changes? How do we assess proficiency in the context of these changes? In his essay entitled "World Englishes and Culture Wars," Kachru (2006) writes: "It is a reality that the sun has already set on the Empire but does not set on the users of English." Recent estimates of users of English worldwide vary from 1 billion to 2 billion (Kachru, 2006). The range is quite wide, as you can see. But if we take these figures out of 6.5 billion people (UN 2005 estimate) in the world, the figures would translate to a range of 18 percent to 36 percent users of English worldwide.

In India today, an estimated figure for English users is about 333 million. In China, there are over 200 million students enrolled in English programs (Kachru 2006). In terms of categories of English speakers worldwide, the Kachruvian paradigm of world Englishes presents three concentric circles of users of the language. This model, which is a radical departure from the traditional categories of 'native speaker' and 'non-native speaker,' takes a geographical-historical perspective in grouping English speakers throughout the world. In this model, the Inner Circle represents countries such as the US, Britain, and Australia where English is widely used as a first language; the Outer Circle represents countries such as India, Singapore, the Philippines, where English is institutionalized; and the Expanding Circle represents countries such as China, Japan, and Korea where the diffusion of English has come about recently and the social acceptability and penetration of the language is increasing very rapidly (Kachru 2006).

Clearly, users of English in the Outer and Expanding Circles greatly outnumber the users in the Inner Circle. Kachru tells us that "...this disparity is an unparalleled linguistic phenomenon with a number of theoretical, methodological, pedagogical, and indeed ideological implications." (Kachru 2006)

In addition, the world cannot, should not, rely solely on inner circle models, or inner circle varieties, as standards for Englishes. The Kachruvian paradigm, by resisting the traditional 'native speaker' and 'non-native speaker' dichotomy, privileges local norms and presents these as legitimate. Thus, English becomes a language that is truly dynamic, multifarious, and pluricentric. No single race or culture owns the language.

Philippine English

The absence of a definitive 'native speaker' model for English poses many problems, among them, the question of what constitutes an error and what constitutes a feature of a 'non-native' variety. "When does an error become a feature of Philippine English?" Bro Andrew Gonzalez asked this question in the early 1980s. Two decades later, Maria Lourdes Bautista (2000) attempts to answer the question by describing the grammatical features of educated Philippine English. Gonzalez writes (in Bautista, 2000): "When do these errors cease to be errors and become part of the standard? If enough educated elite in the society 'commit' these errors, then these errors in effect have been accepted by the society as the standard. The thin line separating error from accepted feature is difficult to trace, however." The thin line is indeed difficult to trace, so Bautista used as her guide Kachru's three-way distinction among innovations, deviations, and mistakes/errors (Bautista 2000).

Other than grammar, there are also lexical items that are unique to Philippine English. These lexical items may constitute what Kachru refers to as "innovations." These lexical innovations have been recorded by Bolton and Butler (2004) and appear in the Anvil-Macquarie Dictionary of Philippine English for High School (2000).

Assessment in ELT

That English is a vibrant and dynamic language with changing rules and emerging varieties definitely has implications on language teaching and testing. Peter Lowenberg (1993), in his analysis of the TOEIC ("Issues of validity in tests of English as a world language: whose standards?"), observes that assessment of non-native speakers' proficiency in the language has been receiving little attention. This he attributes to an implicit and frequently explicit assumption in language testing that "...the criteria for measuring proficiency in English around the world should be the candidates' use of particular features of English which are used and accepted as norms by highly educated native speakers of English."

Fred Davidson, in his essay "World Englishes and test construction" (2006) also stresses the "well-established and legitimate concern that large, powerful English language tests are fundamentally disconnected from the insights in analysis of English in the world context." In "The Englishes of English tests: bias revisited," Liz Hamp-Lyons and Alan Davies (2008), investigated bias in high-stakes tests such as TOEFL, TOEIC, and IELTS. In this study, Lyons and Davies noted that "bias on the basis of our study may be "not proven," but it cannot be dismissed."

Conclusion

Why is assessment (or testing) such an important field of inquiry in education? Why do language professionals take so much time to do needs analysis, prepare a table of specifications, pre-test or pilot items, and formulate rubrics for marking, before a test is actually administered? Because assessment is essential to teaching and learning. Tests have the power to make or break our students. And if this aspect of ELT is not taken seriously, teachers have no business teaching in the first place.

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About the Presenter

Isabel Pefianco Martin is Associate Professor and Coordinator for Research at the School of

Humanities, Ateneo de Manila University. She was Chair of the English Department from 1998 to 2004, President of the Linguistic Society of the Philippines (LSP) from 2006 to 2008, and Secretary of the American Studies Association of the Philippines (ASAP) in 2006. Since 2004, Dr. Martin has been a member of the Board of Trustees of the Philippine Social Science Council (PSSC), which she now serves as Treasurer. In 2006, she was appointed by Philippine President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo to the position of Part-time Commissioner of the Komisyon sa Wikang Filipino, representing the Philippine languages Kinaray-a and Hiligaynon. Her research interests include descriptions of English, world Englishes, Philippine English, and the politics and practice of language and literature education in the Philippines.