

Teaching Our Very Own English: Ideas on Making It Not Look Foolish

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Introduction

English is now a global language shared by people all over the world and, — by definition — it can no longer be rendered to any one nation or group claiming it to be their native language. Citing McArthur (1992), Li writes, “...English is the possession of every individual and every community that in any way uses it, regardless of what any other individual or community may think or feel about the matter” (1999: 1).

Considering the different needs that Asia-Pacific learners have in learning English and the different function that English serves in the Asia-Pacific Region, Li (1999) strongly suggests that at least three points: phonology, lexis and grammar, as well as elements of communicative competence be accommodated in the regional English curriculum, all aimed at training learners to develop language functions needed for both inter- and intra-group communication, especially across national boundaries.

Building on the above assertion, this paper firstly argues the need for teaching our own English (OOE). Then it discusses English use in some (Non-)English—Speaking countries. Next it reveals problems with students' English use. Finally it proposes some solutions to improve the current practice of English teaching to fit the framework of OOE teaching.

English Used in Some (Non-)English-speaking Countries

There are records of how English is used in some countries in which it is either a foreign or a second language. This can be in print resources or online webs. What is interesting to see is that it shows diversion with regard to some aspects such as grammar, collocations, choice of words, accent, local pragmatic norms and even logic. This conforms to the assertion made by Li above. So, instead of rendering intelligible English which is easily understood, this oftentimes produces confusion and also fun and smiles or even laughter on the part of people reading or hearing it.

Through a search of appropriate phrases on youtube.com, we can find audio-video samples of how English is spoken in these countries with an accent and pronunciation and also grammar

that is unique and characteristic of these countries. Two examples I can present at this point are a phone conversation between a restaurant owner and her prospective customer [here](#) or at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NIW8WfgoJUA> and a conversation between a mother and her daughter [here](#) or at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EidmafQLfcl&feature=related>. For samples of English used in written form, Engrish.com is an online site that posts English in public notices, brochures, signs, food labels, etc. taken from some countries that show confusion in meaning due to those factors above. Some examples I can give here are as follows:





For more examples, feel free to go to the site by simply clicking on <http://www.english.com>

The Need to teach OOE

Antoni and Gunawan (2005) assert that EFL learners will not expect to, or necessarily come into contact with their American counterparts. They will only get to use English with their teachers and friends within their own community (be it their school, society or country), the farthest being the region, or world, but not necessarily America. To quote Li, the assumption that teaching English should go with teaching Anglo-American sociolinguistic norms governing the language use "...has been increasingly called into doubt, especially by advocates of New Varieties of English (NVEs), (cf. D'souza 1997, Kachru 1989a). The main argument is that, given that NVEs are typically learned and used in local and neighboring communities, there is really no room for Anglo-Americanism, a point already asserted by Kachru (1976) well over two decades ago..." (1999: 2).

Honna and Takeshita (1995) assert that, thus, many people in the world are learning English not to assimilate themselves to the Anglo-American norms of behavior, but to acquire a working command of the language of wider communication whereby to express their national identity and personal opinions. In other words, no one is forced to abandon his or her native culture and behave as Anglo-Americans in order to acquire proficiency in English.

Observed Problems

No sooner is the above OOE realized than Antoni and Radiana (2001), Antoni and Gunawan (2005), and Antoni (2009) render problems with students' English at both the sentential and discursal level conforming to those in the above videos and notices. With one or two at the sentential level and many more at the discursal level, the problem aspects are: run-on sentences versus cut-off thoughts, diction or choice of words, phrase-forming and collocations, clauses, parallelism, coherence and cohesion, transition markers including punctuation marks, relevant versus irrelevant ideas, discourse development, logic, and (oral) discourse strategies.

As for problems in oral discourse associated with accent, intonation, and the like, none have so far been recorded except for some localized syllabic stress and pronunciation problems when it comes to some words that persist in occurring but go untaught. In this category are exclusive words such as *occur* itself, *laboratory*, *develop*, *temperature*, *literature*, *development*, *psychology*, *psychological*, *psychiatry*, and those in their minimal pairs or groups such as *career/carrier*, *Korea/courier*, *hit/heat*, *content* (adjective and noun), *contrast* (verb and noun), *graduate* (verb and noun).

These problems have to be dealt with tactfully because some really cause confusion or misunderstanding while others simply produce fun and smiles with the language still being intelligible. Even in the latter case, teachers should not be prevented from teaching good English so that even slight mistakes are corrected though they do not bring about communication breakdown.

Proposed Solution to the Problem

Li's (1999) afore-mentioned assertion and strong suggestion to accommodate the three aspects of language, namely, phonology, lexis and grammar, as well as elements of communicative competence in the regional English curriculum should be carefully and wisely interpreted. Otherwise, our English teaching will produce students who use their English like that shown in the videos and notices above. We certainly would not want that to happen. Therefore, the following solution is proposed:

Firstly, mistakes in grammar at the sentential level must constantly be corrected no matter how often they persist in occurring. Antoni and Gunawan (2005) in this respect offer examples of

students' *presentate, I am agree, I have to take my mother to the hospital, and I am flu* to be corrected into *present, I agree, I had to take my mother to the hospital, and I am having a flu*. This applies also to other grammatical aspects such as run-on sentences, diction or choice of words, phrase-forming and collocations, clauses, and parallelism.

Secondly, mistakes at the discoursal level must also be equally tackled. This usually concerns coherence and cohesion, transition markers including punctuation marks, relevant versus irrelevant ideas, discourse development, and logic. Antoni and Radiana (2001) inspired by Alwasilah (1993: 78) proposes 3 steps in creating a discourse so that it conforms to the aspects required to make it organized. They are: formulating what we want to say, arranging the ideas syntactically, and writing the ideas down.

Thirdly, mistakes in syllabic stress and intonation should be handled this way: teachers should teach words in their minimal pairs or groups by putting them in context and then training students to say them. Using the above-mentioned words, one example can be: *When he was in Korea, he was just a mail carrier then a courier. Even so, he might well consider it a good career*. As for words having different classes or parts of speech, teachers should still put them in context before teaching them to students. Using the words above, an example can be something like: *I was not content with the content of his paper*. Concerning exclusive words, teachers should also put them in context beforehand rather than simply drill them directly. Employing the words above, an example is: *He chose psychology as his major*.

Fourthly, in oral discourse, teachers should know and teach discourse strategies typical and characteristic of our own culture and norms that can safely be adopted into English. Antoni and Gunawan (2005) present examples of students' *where are you going?, I want to thank God for the opportunity given to me to present this essay...*, and *I am sorry if I made mistakes in my presentation. Mistakes are from me, the truth is from God...* to be understood as typically pragmatic (that is, of Indonesian cultural norms and values) and therefore to be accepted. Further, in support of this, Kirkpatrick (2000) endorses an example of an English-translated Minang dialogue, provided by Rusdi Thaib, an ex-PhD student at Curtin University, Perth, Australia, who is a Minang.

Conclusion

Even though English is now owned by any country—in this respect, Indonesia— which can use it in ways appropriate to its own context, it does not have to mean that we have to teach and use it in such a way that it sounds silly with regard to such aspects as rules of grammar and discourse. It is in the aspect of local pragmatic norms that we can be creative, appropriately incorporating our own norms and values that others will have to understand and accept as uniquely ours and us. Otherwise, the so-called intelligible English that we aspire to will not materialize.

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