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**Topic: Benefits of teaching Sociolinguistics
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Abstract

Language is the most important and versatile means which human beings have to express their sentiments, their intellect, their discoveries, their theories, their own personalities. Sociolinguistics is the descriptive study of society and how language makes connections within a society. It is the study of the context in which language is used; cultural norms and social expectations, and how the context can produce language varieties that differ between groups separated by political factors, ethnicity, religion, status, gender, level of education, age, geographical location and socioeconomic classes. At Pacific Adventist University, the subject 'English in the Pacific', a socio-linguistic study is like a light switch. The students understand their own difficulties in pronunciation, semantics and syntax. Incorporating socio-linguistic insights with prescriptive language teaching is a successful method of teaching English in the Pacific countries. First, students discover language learning is set in a complex social context. Secondly, language learning involves the learning of a new phonetic language. Confusion with the mother tongue phonetic language can create confusion with learning English. Thirdly, learning English is affected by the ability of the teacher to understand the students' language hurdles, the motivation to learn the new language, and the country's language policies. It is important that English teachers are aware of the socio-linguistic factors that affect the evolution of English. Being able to describe the language and have an awareness of what factors influence change, provides trainee English teachers with the skills and knowledge to demonstrate what language is used in a particular society and what language codes should be used in a formal English situation.

Introduction

Language is the most important and versatile means which human beings express their sentiments, their intellect, their discoveries, their theories, and their own personalities. Language reflects the work, needs, joys, affections, fears, expectations and tastes of generations of humanity (Tisdell, 1998: 134). Sociolinguistics is the descriptive study of language in society: how language is used; how the social context can produce language varieties within different cultural groups; and how political factors, ethnicity, religion, status, gender, level of education, age, geographical location and socioeconomic classes affect language use are part of the spectrum in making connections within a society. Sociolinguists are concerned with identifying, analysing and describing grammatical, phonological and semantic features and language patterns that set one speech community apart from another group. These variations are not described as wrong or right, but how they are different. It is

important that tertiary students acknowledged the fact that language is social dimension of society and language is part of the cross-cultural exchanges within society (Shirbagi, 2010:1). At Pacific Adventist University, the subject 'English in the Pacific', a socio-linguistic study is like a light switch. The students understand their own difficulties in pronunciation, semantics and syntax. This experience gives them insight into the experiences of their own students. Incorporating socio-linguistic insights with prescriptive language teaching is a successful method of teaching English in the pacific countries. Students who study sociolinguistics at Pacific Adventist University have expressed that at the end of a course of study, they discovered many benefits to learning how language and society interact. First, they discover language is part of a broad social context and understanding this social context is complicated. Secondly, language learning involves the learning of a new phonetic language. Understanding one's mother tongue phonetic language assist in understanding some of the pronunciation issues related to learning English. Thirdly, students learn that learning English is a complicated processes; it is affected by the ability of the teacher to understand the students' language hurdles, and individual's motivation to learn the new language.

The teaching of sociolinguistic at university focuses on describing the linguistic situation in a cultural environment rather than prescribing the rules of English. It is descriptive rather than prescriptive in focus. It is not the teaching of language skills but explaining the reasons why certain languages issues occur. Studying sociolinguistic is not just a skills class; it is an awareness exercise. Other subjects are prescriptive in focus.

Benefits to Students doing a Sociolinguistic Study

1. Language is set in a social context

Students understand that language is to communication for mutual intelligibility. This interactional social phenomenon is so people can converse fluently with each other, even if they recognise they are speaking different varieties of the same language. Language is also a system of communication which enables people to convey feelings and facts to one another, to react and comment, to agree or disagree, to accept or to reject (Tisdell, 1998: 134).

The context of the interactional discourse demonstrates how language changes. For example, language use will change in urban versus rural areas. People living in rural areas tend to lack

supporting facilities, such as medical care, well-equipped schools, professionally trained teachers, or have access to international and national form of the media access; television, radio or even newspapers. The isolated world of rural residing person means they are unaware of the developing world of ideas in technology, education, cultural and language use, due to their physical isolation. This isolation, added to the fact, that there is usually resistance to change, fails to support a student who is attempting to practise a new language necessary for economic advancement (Holmes, 2001: 59). When these rural based students arrive at university, they are confronted with not only new technology, new ideas but a new unfamiliar language.

Social aspirations influence speech patterns. People who want to move in a socio-economic direction will adjust their speech patterns to sound like them. Social mobility is usually linked to education. There is a change of language usage when a person is well educated and has been exposed to forms of 'standard English'. This is illustrated with the examples below.

Non Standard form (partly educated) ... Standard English (secondary education)

I ain't done nothing ... *I haven't done anything*

I done it yesterday ... *I did it yesterday*

It weren't me that done it ... *I didn't do it*

Any native speaker of English would immediately be able to guess that *speaker 1* was likely to have a different level of education to *speaker 2*. Social class and occupation are among the most important linguistic markers found in society.

Language usage is determined by the context in which the language is used. For example, in bilingual situations, speakers will borrow and code switch from one language to the next. The looseness or tightness of a social network may affect speech patterns adopted by a speaker. Language learning is not just an academic process; it is part of the social fabric of life.

2. The spoken form a language is influenced by the phonetic language of the mother tongue

In a sociolinguistic class, students learn that language use is influenced by one's own mother phonetic language. Comparing one mother phonetic language with English phonetic sounds is an important process. The knowledge helps students understand some of the pronunciation issues they face.

a. Phonetic Language and pronunciation

The mother tongue, and its matching phonetic language and its related vocabulary can create interference with a new language. The most common feature of this interference is with code switching. Nouns, rather than function words, are more easily transferred from one language to another (Baeten Beardsmore, 1986: 57). Many students in the Pacific are aware of phoneme shifts that occur from the mother tongue but are not aware of how to change their pronunciation patterns correspondingly. For example, students need to be taught to be aware of the common phonetic changes; for example,

the shift from *s* to *sh* as in *sip* to *ship*.;
the *f* to *p* shift as in *pater* instead of *father*;
l to *r* shift as in *culliculum* instead of *curriculum*
ee to *i* shift as with *sheep* to *ship*.

Many times the final <ed> is not pronounced or is substituted with a <t. In many local dialects, there is a process of sound shifts. Even in English, there has been a shift from a strong <r> sound after a vowel. Students need to be made aware that each student has their own phonetic alphabet and does not always correlate with the English equivalent. Being aware of the differences is the first step in making the correct pronunciation changes.

b. Rise of nationalism

Due to the rise of nationalism, geographic isolation from the standard form and the sense of cultural language identity, there has been evidence of code switching between one language code and another. Borrowing from one language, into the 'new' form of English, usually demonstrates connection with a local language. The pronunciation of this borrowed word then has a flow-on effect by changing the pronunciation of the whole sentence.

This borrowing is evident with the issue of word stress. For example:

word *research* is acceptable while many others say *research*
distribute and *distribute*.

In the Pacific islands, *research* and *distribute* are the common forms, where the first syllable is stressed. This is very different from the Received Pronunciation, or even Australian and American forms. Even the highly praised Received Pronunciation monopoly is "slowly [been] lowered into its coffin" (Crystal, 2006; 186).

Even though the words accent and dialect are used interchangeably, they have distinct meanings. An accent refers to the system of pronunciation that a speaker uses. This involves the way sound segments, such as vowels and consonants, are produced. It also involves the use of speed, rhythm, stress, pitch and volume.

It is estimated that more than a billion people speak a form of English. The large majority of this group are non-native speakers (Morley, 1991: 481). Teachers need to make their students aware that pronunciation is not uniform. It depends on the language community that the student wishes to be identified with. Identification with a language group is sometimes more important than the use of 'correct' pronunciation. Personal and group identity, the feeling of disorientation, anxiety and social isolation, conflict of loyalties and aspirations generated from the home language and culture and the new language and culture can cause mental confusion. The expression of this inability to resolve the conflict is often demonstrated in the lack of correct pronunciation (Baeten Beardsmore, 1986: 154).

The issue of teaching pronunciation is far more complicated than just deciding on the correct form. To be a teacher of English pronunciation involves questions of content, pedagogical issues, models of dialect and accent, context of use, transfer of mother tongue issues, and the ability of the instructor to cover these issues (McDonough, 1999: 265). Not one of these aspects can be taken in isolation.

It is interesting that in PNG, the English syllabus states, "This syllabus ... is aimed at fostering deeper understanding of both the English language and the students' vernacular and through this understanding, the many Papua New Guinean culture and contemporary issues that the reform principles are based on. ... English will be learnt in relations to students' society, local and global cultures and the influences that direct the course of these changes (iv) ... Learning English is important because it is the medium of national and global communication. It is the language of international communication, business and politics. With more than 800 different languages in Papua New Guinea, speakers of these languages can be drawn together through the learning and use of English. (English: Lower Secondary Syllabus, 2007: iv, 3). The aim of the English syllabus is for all students to be functionally literate while cultivating skills in reading, viewing, speaking, listening and writing various forms of texts and at the same time cultivating an appreciation for local cultures and language use. In reality, when applied to pronunciation, these aims are mutually incomprehensible.

Appreciating one's own cultural language and transferring elements from that language will be in stark contrast to Received Pronunciation, the model of most English pronunciation exercises.

c. Written forms of a language

In multilingual societies, communication is embedded within a sociolinguistic environment (Fondacaro & Higgins, 1985: 77). Written communication with its emphasis on 'correct' construction influences the social cognitive environment and vice versa (Fondacaro & Higgins, 1985: 95). The written form of a language is usually regarded as the standard form of the language; it is where ideas are clearly stated (Chafe, 1985: 107) and constructed in a formal ways according to the syntax of the language. In places, where English is one of the languages, billboards, the media, and much of the correspondence use non standard form of English. Many times, the English syntax has been simplified and applied generally. These incorrect forms are often accepted as the correct form, by the uneducated majority as they are unfamiliar with the standard forms of grammar. In a sense, these incorrect forms become entrenched and fossilised into the linguistic framework. The continual exposure of the incorrect forms gradually become embedded in the subconscious and gradually become regarded as correct. There is a sense that the general population are partly incipient bilinguals, with a partial knowledge of English, rather than balanced bilinguals, knowing languages at their disposal equally (Baker, 1993: 7 – 9).

Examples of the acceptance of non-standard form of English are evident in Papua New Guinea. Many Papua New Guineans' pluralised non-count collective nouns. This phenomenon is common in most developing countries.

Advices *furnitures* *staffs*
 The *stationeries* are in the vehicle.
 Please pack up all the *furnitures*.
 All the *staffs* wish you a happy Christmas.

Code switching and fossilization of a general English syntax rules encourages the acceptance of new words and expressions into Papua New Guinea English (PNGE). The examples below have fossilized are accepted as normal usage in English.

John's *bubus* came to the *house cry*.
 John is *aftering* you.
 The *replyment* for the invitation is on your desk.

Students have often informed the writer that one of the most common linguistic obstacles was comprehending the linguistic and behaviour expectations. Students often did not know when to speak, when to remain silent and when to argue with the lecturer. One student told the writer that he did not know how to talk to a woman as in his culture women were not regarded as equals. He was experiencing confusion with the ethnography of communication (Wardhaugh, 1998:243), 'cultural now-how', a common problem for people moving from one linguistic group to another.

3. Influence of local language constructions in comparison to English

Students in a sociolinguistic class need to be aware of the differing sentence constructions. In English, the active voice, the main form of the English sentence is constructed as subject, verb, Object. In many of the mother tongues languages of the students are constructed in a different form, object, verb followed by the subject. If the construction of the mother tongue is different from the construction of English, learners need to be aware of the difference. The change of sentence structure can cause confusion and slows the writers' ability to construct the sentence. Awareness is the first step in understanding this confusion.

4. The language learning process

The role of the instructor is very important in supporting the students in their linguistic journey.

a. Teacher awareness of the linguistic hurdles of language students

Linguistic competence and communication is a mixture of factors; situational issues, language input, learner differences, learner learning processes and opportunities for linguistic output (Ellis (1985). The lack of any one of these factors can lead to language confusion and a consequence of a delay in learning. Linguistic variability between the student, the peers and the teacher can lead to miscomprehension and language confusion (Wardhaugh, 1998: 204). If the teacher is not aware of this context and is not aware of linguistic hurdles faced by the students, the education process is distorted (Jones, 2003:118).

b. Motivation

Motivation is a strong indicator of the effectiveness of learning a new language. Noels (2001, quoted in Naser, 2010, 3) asserted that motivation to language learning is a complex set of variables including effort; desire to achieve goals, as well as attitudes toward the learning of the language. In addition, he remarked that individuals' motivation for second language

learning also includes their motivation orientations, interest, attitudes toward second language group or learning situations and anxiety. The role of teachers is to motivate students to learn English for their own professional and personal growth.

Conclusion

It would be very easy to produce a new form of colonial English teachers, if only prescriptive language teaching is practiced. Prescriptive language is when rules are taught and compliance is expected without comparison to what is practiced in the linguistic environment. Insisting on one form of language without reference to other varieties is colonialism in a different form.

It is important that English teachers are aware of the socio-linguistic factors that affect their students in their classes. Being aware of the factors that influence language usage provides students with the skills and knowledge how language is used, how language has evolved and what language codes are acceptable in what situation. Teachers need to understand that language is a means to comprehend social networks in which the language is embedded. Teachers need to be aware that formal rules and correct Standard English pronunciation is needed in some situations but in others, the local version of English is more appropriate for communication.

At Pacific Adventist University, the subject 'English in the Pacific', a socio-linguistic study is like a light switch. The students understand their own difficulties in pronunciation, semantics and syntax and the subject provides with insight into the language experiences of others. Incorporating socio-linguistic insights with prescriptive language teaching is a successful method of teaching English in the pacific countries.

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