

ESL in Malaysia: Looking Beyond the Classroom

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Introduction

In recent years, much enthusiasm has been poured over the various aspects of teaching ESL. This trend persists until now and with the deteriorating standard of English in the country, such enthusiasm has become overwhelming. One can simply flip through the pages of local journals related to English and education and, with great certainty, articles giving prescriptions for teaching ESL will feature. Most prescriptions are on methodology, techniques, strategies, or what should go on in the classroom during instruction. Related research can enlighten teachers and educators with means for improving the standard of English in the country. However, analogous to the case of a doctor prescribing medication without knowledge of the patient's medical history, prescribing a method or a technique for ESL teaching in Malaysian classrooms without any serious consideration for the sociolinguistic aspects of teaching English to different sets of pupils, schools, and communities can pose more problems than for what the prescription is intended. The possibility of factors beyond the classroom having a role to play in language learning is in fact compatible with recent theories in second language acquisition which have described language learning through sociolinguistic factors (Schumann 1976, Gardner and Lambert 1972, Lambert and Tucker 1972 and Lambert 1967). Ashworth (1980:1) maintains this very perspective when she says "...whatever the reasons, the fact is that the establishment of good teaching/learning conditions cannot occur without the quiet, sustained efforts of caring and knowledgeable teachers working in and with communities that lie beyond the classroom - beyond methodology." In advocating the emphasis on sociolinguistics in ESL teaching and learning in the Malaysian context, this article sets to show the importance of sociolinguistics through the discussion of several studies that provide an answer to the question of why the need for sociolinguistic emphasis.

Sociolinguistics is essentially the undetachable social connection of language. Elements such as culture, community, tradition, religion, socioeconomy, and so forth that are found within the social realm provide the context for language. Language is therefore not independent of society. This underlying assertion of sociolinguistics has prompted studies investigating the influence of language and culture on learning in general as well as the learning of a second language. The studies discussed here primarily deal with the interaction between linguistically and culturally diverse communities and educational settings. Such a structure of communities and schools make the studies relevant for linguistically and culturally heterogeneous communities and school settings. The studies offer some useful background information for investigating the relationship between a community and its school

and how this relationship has an impact on learning in general while some of the studies deal specifically with second language learning.

Heath (1982), Philips (1982), and Labov (1969) are some of the scholars who have investigated the relationship between language, school and community and the effect of this relationship on learning or schooling in general. These researchers generally describe how both the school and the community react to each other based on the differences in their patterns of interactional behaviour and language.

Through an in-depth ethnographic study, Heath (1982) describes how the interactional patterns or language habits in a lower-class Black community differ from that of the school. Children are not familiar with the questioning patterns and the decontextualized skills employed in classrooms. Conflicts between the home language and the expectations they face in school consequently result in the children being evaluated as incapable of using language effectively, and thus they are faced with failure in school.

Along the same line of interest, Philips' (1982) observations of the interaction among community members of an Indian community in Warm Springs, Oregon, show that the children's school behaviour is an manifestation of cultural patterns of learning and interactions with adults of the Indian community. In the Indian community of Warm Springs, children's learning process takes place mainly through observing their elders and practicing the skill alone until they have completely mastered it. In classrooms which exercise Anglo ways of learning, the children display silence and are reluctant to participate in interaction with the teachers. These differences in learning behaviour and interaction are interpreted by their Anglo teachers as a lack of interest and intelligence. Due to this misunderstanding in the interaction between the school and the community, failure in schooling is often the result.

Heath's and Philips' studies show how different home or community culture and language habits can pose problems for pupils' learning or schooling. Taking this finding into the perspective of ESL teaching in the Malaysian context, it is of utmost importance that any recommendations for ESL teaching consider the possibility that pupils in schools may come from communities or homes that practice an entirely different pattern of language habits, language, and culture.

Labov (1969), like the above researchers, focuses on language in an attempt to describe the high rate of school failure among his subjects, the Black ghetto children in Harlem. The children, although exposed to and able to comprehend standard English used in schools, insist on using the stigmatized Black English in order to achieve covert prestige. Peer pressure, therefore, forces the children to uphold and continue to speak their stigmatized Black English much to the disappointment of the standard-English speaking teachers. The social need of the children causes them to adhere to peer pressure. They place a high value on the language used among their peers contradicting the value imposed on standard English upheld by the school. Malaysian pupils too have their social needs and therefore do not escape peer pressure. The rural environment, for instance, triggers peer pressure which discourages pupils to speak English; thus, pupils may refuse to learn it.

Discrimination and stereotypes stemming from differences in racial origin, cultural practices, traditions, religions, and social class are found to be an obstacle for certain groups to achieve success in learning. This has been the finding of Chick (1985), McDermott (1987), Fairchild and Edward-Evans (1990) and Wilcox (1982). Chick (1985) using a South African university setting, examines the interaction between white South African professors and Zulu students who are fluent speakers of English as a second language. His study shows how society's attitude and expectations reinforce

stereotypes about a minority group and this in turn makes it extremely difficult for even a non-stereotypical member of the minority group to advance himself or herself.

McDermott (1987) in focusing on the high rate of illiteracy among minority children, also points at society's attitude based on stereotypes about a certain community. Such a negative attitude reinforces prejudice and discrimination, forcing the stigmatized community to impose the stereotypes on themselves in order to create a boundary or marker from the dominant group. McDermott theorizes that "in the politics of everyday life, black children in America learn how not to read; they learn how not to attend to printed information and as a result show high rates of reading disabilities" (p.98). Stereotypes, as shown by McDermott, can lead to self-fulfilling prophecy on the students' part.

Teacher expectations and attitudes have been further proved to play an important part in pupils' achievement by work of Fairchild and Edward-Evans (1990) and Wilcox (1982). In America, teacher attitudes have been a matter of debate on the issue of teaching standard English to speakers of non-standard varieties. Fairchild and Edward-Evans (1990) regard teacher attitudes as being crucial for student achievement. Focusing their discussion on the sub-standard Black English, they point out that teacher expectations of a student's performance is communicated to the student in a way that affects the attitudes and consequent behaviour of the students. Thus, teachers who expect failure from certain groups demand less, and provide less information, feedback and praise, therefore inducing failure. This in other words is a self-fulfilling prophecy on the part of the teacher who acts as the reinforcer of society's negative attitudes towards Blacks and minorities,

In her comparative study of two west coast communities, one working class and the other professional class, Wilcox (1982) describes how teachers socialize children differentially for work based on the teachers' perception of these roles and the social class of the children's parents. This, according to Wilcox, "does not appear to happen intentionally or consciously, but rather virtually without plan or plot, in a series of actions woven throughout the fabric of day-to-day life in the classroom" (p.272).

The studies above have shown how the larger society's reactions towards the smaller communities' social, language, and cultural differences can affect the children's school performances. Many children from smaller communities see following ~the rules' of the dominant society as to be avoided, and their differences (language, cultural etc.) as markers of identity to be maintained. These children are convinced that doing well in school is an act of betraying their roots or racial identity. In learning, it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy growing out of the teacher's expecting less of them, and so tacitly treating them in ways that make that expectation come true.

Malaysians too have their own stereotypes about the different races present in the country. Often the stereotypes are unconsciously transformed into acts of discrimination. Like everybody else, ESL teachers, due to having the stereotypes embedded in their thoughts, may face the danger of committing a self-fulfilling prophecy by unknowingly not treating students fairly such as by expecting less of students coming from a certain background. As a consequence, students' interest in learning the language may be dampened. Thus, it is essential that ESL teachers be wary of the stereotypes so as not to apply any miscalculated judgement on students from different backgrounds.

Culture is crucial in the life of a community as it is essential in shaping much of what is referred to as the individual's or the community's world view. Cultural dimensions are therefore present in all social organizations including educational institutions, as illustrated for example in the work of Spindler (1987) and Wolcott (1987). Spindler (1987), in an attempt to explain why minority groups have been disadvantaged by schools, examined the cultural process in three different schools of

lower class groups in America. Minority children are seen as being recruited in a school with a white system or culture. This recruitment relentlessly fails and creates a new barrier while reinforcing old ones. Spindler asserts, "for minority people the schools have been experienced as damaging attempts to recruit their children into an alien culture. Their self-images and identities were ignored, or actively attacked" (p.77).

Spindler thus indicates how a poor interaction between the community and the school occurs when the school system disregards the different cultural orientation of the community it serves. In a second language learning context, neglecting the pupils' cultural background in teaching can mean a serious threat to students' self-esteem and consequently interest in learning the language. As Loveday (1982:53) explains,

Language reflects and expresses the cognitive code of a particular community. If a teacher is going to provide an adequate explanation of the meaning of an item in the L2, this can only be done by referring to cultural knowledge. If the teacher does not do this, the lack of clarification of underlying assumptions may even lead to contempt and hostility on the part of the learner who applies his own cultural frame as a yardstick.

Another example of a study which considers cultural conflict as the barrier in learning is that of Wolcott (1987). Wolcott studied the Kwakiutl Indian community in America in order to assess and identify the influences of cultural barriers to classroom performances. This, he says, is a way of studying why Indian pupils have so often seemed refractive to the formal educative efforts of the school. Based on his analysis of the role relationships between the teacher and the Indian pupils, Wolcott considers the relationship between the teacher and his pupils as analogous to the situation of an enemy and his captives. The teacher as a representative of the Anglo or the alien culture is regarded by the pupils as their enemy who is trying to lure them into the enemy's culture and hence become the enemy's captives. This, Wolcott believes, offers a perspective for understanding why pupils might sometimes appear able but unwilling to accept teachers' instructions.

Where second language learning and teaching is concerned, the cultural dimension becomes acute since teaching and learning a language explicitly involves a different culture. The students of the classrooms themselves belong to a culture and where this differs from the second language teachers' culture or the second language teaching style, certain difficulties may arise. In the Malaysian context, most ESL teachers themselves are not native speakers of English. The problems stemming from language and cultural conflict, and teacher attitudes and expectations are, however, still not impossible. The composition of the teaching population in Malaysian schools reflects the multiracial state of the country. Thus cultural conflicts can occur when a teacher of one ethnic background deals with pupils from other ethnic backgrounds. Besides, conflicts can occur when individuals from two different social classes meet and this is possible in the Malaysian classrooms wherein the teacher may not only be a member of a different racial group but also a member of a higher social class than the students' or vice versa. ESL teachers then because of their ethnic background, social class and the English subject they are responsible for teaching can possibly be viewed by students as the 'enemy' who is trying to lure or 'capture' them into betraying their own people by acquiring the skills in the language taught by the teacher or the 'enemy'. This would conform with Wolcott's belief that pupils may be able but simply refuse to accept something presented to them by a figure whom they consider an alien who poses a threat to their identity.

Most of the above studies taken as a whole have shown how differences in language and culture and teacher attitudes and expectations deriving from stereotypes directed towards students coming from a certain community, albeit unintentional, affect learning in general. The work of Jorden (1980),

Gardner and Lambert (1972), Oller et al (1977 & 1978) and Chihara & Oller (1978), Segalowitz and Gatlinton (1977), Tucker and Lambert (1973) and Schumann (1976c) applies the same insights specifically to second language learning.

Jorden (1980) discusses the contrasts in language instruction and learning between Japanese native teachers and American students whereby the widespread assumption that foreigners will not be able to speak is shared by the teachers, resulting in self-fulfilling low classroom expectations. Furthermore, second language learners' shortcomings are not only expected but excessively tolerated and even regarded as "reassuring" according to Jorden. Teachers' sharing the society's assumption about a particular group of people can therefore inhibit the effective learning of a second language.

Gardner and Lambert's (1972) extensive studies are systematic attempts to examine the effect of attitudes on language learning. After studying the interrelationships of a number of different types of attitudes, they defined motivation as a construct consisting of certain attitudes. The most crucial one of these attitudes, according to Gardner and Lambert, is the attitude the learner has toward the members of the cultural group whose language he or she is learning. In their study, English-speaking Canadians' positive attitudes, i.e., their desire to understand and empathize with French-Canadians and people from France, will lead to high integrative motivation to learn French. Gardner and Lambert's proposition on integrative motivation for effective second language learning may explain the lack of motivation among many ESL students in Malaysia. Many Malaysian pupils, particularly in remote or rural areas, may not see the need to integrate with any English-speaking individuals thus the lack of motivation.

In several large scale studies examining the relationship between attitudes and language success, Oller and his colleagues (Oller, Hudson and Liu 1977, Chihara and Oller 1978, and Oller, Baca and Vigil 1978), look at the relationship of Chinese, Japanese and Mexican students' achievement in English to their attitudes towards self, the native language group, the target language group, their reasons for learning English, and their reasons for traveling to the United States. They correlate attained proficiency positively with a few meaningful clusters of attitudinal variables. For the most part, most studies conducted by Oller and his colleagues conclude that positive attitude towards self, the native language group, and the target language group can enhance proficiency.

While the above studies by Gardner and Lambert, and Oller and his colleagues show the facilitating effect of positive attitude on second language learning, studies by Segalowitz and Gatlinton (1977) show the effect of just the opposite attitude and how a negative attitude about learning another language can inhibit the learning of it. Using the linguistic situation in Canada, Segalowitz and Gatlinton show how the competence with which an adult speaks a non-native language influences the social and political attitudes attributed to him or her by others of his native community. Thus, French-Canadians who are very competent in English were regarded to be pro-English and undesirable as group leaders by fellow French-Canadians. Such a damaging assumption about a speaker who is bilingual can be a discouraging factor in learning a second language. Damaging assumptions about Malaysians who speak English are not uncommon. These assumptions are damaging in that they inhibit learners from speaking or continue learning the language. This only goes to show that what goes on in the classroom may have much to do with the environment beyond the classroom.

It is therefore clear that the second language learner benefits from positive attitudes and that negative attitudes may lead to decreased motivation and the high possibility of unsuccessful attainment of proficiency. A lot of negative attitudes build up from unfamiliarity with the other culture. Attaining proficiency in the language of that unfamiliar culture then demands a huge effort. Such a notion is

supported by Tucker and Lambert's (1973) study which shows that fluency in a second language has been shown to be affected by the degree of ethnocentrism or cultural narrow-mindedness of the learner. Schumann (1976c) substantiates the theory put forth by Tucker and Lambert by describing the difference between "good" and "bad" second language learning situations as dependent upon the degree of social distance perceived to exist by the learners between themselves and the target community and vice versa. If the target community is dominated or subordinated by the learners' community in a political, cultural or technical way, then the learners are not likely to be interested in learning the target community's language. The social distance depends a great deal on learners' perceptions, or whatever stereotypes exist in the target community. Although most English-speaking countries are superior to Malaysia politically and technologically, many Malaysian pupils exhibit a lack of interest in learning English. This may be due to the fact that Malaysian societies can generally be described as differing socially or culturally from the English-speaking Western societies. The social distance between Malaysian societies and Western English-speaking societies is relatively great. Ascribing to Schumann's theory, it can therefore be said that Malaysians who do not already speak English and are attempting to learn English may find learning English a difficult and challenging task.

A different language or ways of using language, a different value system, attitude and expectations drawn from stereotypes, and culture are in sum the sociocultural and sociolinguistic factors identified by the above studies. These factors as described by the above studies shape much of the interaction between the community and the school. If the community or home environment contradicts with what and how things are taught in classrooms, then learning difficulties may arise if teachers do not consider the existing differences. The impact of this interaction is crucial not only for success or failure in learning a language but also for children's schooling at large. Referring to the question of why the need for sociolinguistic emphasis, the above studies has the implication that teaching in general and second language teaching specifically, must not only consider what needs to go in the classroom when a lot of what goes on in the classroom is influenced by elements external to it. A sociolinguistic emphasis must take place in teaching ESL for successful learning of the second language. Furthermore, as have been pointed out by the above studies, the sociolinguistic emphasis becomes especially relevant in a diverse setting such as in heterogeneous Malaysia.

Conclusion

The English language as stated by the 1960 Malaysian Education Review Committee 'holds a dominating position in international councils and commerce, in the textbooks and literature of the world. A command of it is one of our national assets' (cited in Platt and Weber 1980: 162). This 'national asset' is currently at the risk of being listed as one of the nation's 'losses' and this has triggered the growing concern over the declining standard of English in the country. In overcoming this problem, a bombardment of ammunitions through various methods, strategies, techniques and so forth have raced through. These ammunitions for the most part have been used only in vain as evidenced in the continuous deterioration in the standard of English. This alarming deterioration cannot reach a screeching halt and maneuver to a sudden heightened standard overnight despite any new measures. Nevertheless, it is time that an alternative be considered; the trend of concentrating on what or how things should go on in the classroom alone must turn to the sociolinguistic emphasis or the consideration that goes beyond the classroom. Furthermore, as have been shown by the studies above, many factors external to the classroom can affect learning a second language.

Building on the findings of the above studies, it can be suggested that sociolinguistic courses in the teacher training curriculum be included in order to prepare prospective ESL teachers with sociolinguistics awareness necessary for their future teaching encounters. ESL teachers cannot just rely on methods and textbooks alone in their teaching. They have to be versatile and resourceful in order to be commended by the community they serve. Efforts at creating a desire for integrative motivation, narrowing down the social distance and home or community differences, and putting aside stereotypes, are among the many things that ESL teachers have to do to facilitate effective second language learning among the pupils.

This article has highlighted the why of what must be emphasized for ESL teaching and learning in Malaysia. The question of adapting methods, approaches, strategies, techniques, and curriculum to this sociolinguistic perspective calls for research looking into the sociolinguistic issues in the Malaysian ESL situation. Perhaps, with sociolinguistics being emphasized in methodology, the deteriorating standard of English in the country may improve in the long run.

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