

## The Role and Value of Sociolinguistics in English Language Teaching

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Abstract: This paper aims to explore how the study of sociolinguistics can benefit teachers, particularly in the context of teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in China. The article will first examine how sociolinguistic knowledge can reshape teachers' perceptions of "English," focusing on aspects such as English varieties, World Englishes, and Chinese English. Following that, the article discusses the necessity of rethinking current practices in English language teaching, including the nativeness paradigm and the concept of communicative competence based on a reconceptualized view of "English." Additionally, the discussion will focus on how teachers, informed by sociolinguistic awareness of non-native teachers' identities and teacher agency, can address and resolve existing challenges in EFL teaching. Finally, the article will conclude by summarizing the key issues discussed and highlighting the significance of studying sociolinguistics for language practitioners in China.

Keywords: World Englishes; Chinese English; English language teaching; Nativeness; Non-native English-speaking teachers

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#### 1. Introduction

Sociolinguistics studies "the relation between language and society, between the uses of language and the social structures in which the users of language live" <sup>[1]</sup>. Although it does not explore classroom methodologies directly, the issues it addresses help us understand the nature of language and communicative competence in second language learning <sup>[2]</sup>, which can indirectly implicate language education. Studies on the role of sociolinguistics in the field of language teaching range from theoretical references for pedagogical methodologies <sup>[3]</sup> to foreign language acquisition <sup>[4]</sup> and language planning and policies <sup>[5]</sup>. Most of the previous studies are conducted from the angle of the relationship between the components of sociolinguistics and language teaching. However, there is a lack of research investigating the significance of sociolinguistics to language teachers per se. This paper aims to explore how the study of sociolinguistics can benefit teachers, particularly in the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching in China.

### 2. Reconceptualizing "English"

In China, English is embedded in the national curriculum as a compulsory subject from primary school age, and simultaneously English-medium instruction is increasingly introduced in tertiary education <sup>[6]</sup>. Regarding curriculums and materials for English education, either in government-founded schools or in international schools, "standard" English is widely accepted as the "correct" English to teach, which is partly due to the endorsement of standard language assessments (e.g. IELTS or TOEFL). Hence, teachers impacted by the influential enterprises in China, agree on fostering learners' language skills and communicative competence through teaching "correct" grammar and linguistic properties. However, the concept of English itself, especially under the scope of global sociolinguistics, requires considerable rethinking in light of English varieties, English as a Lingua Franca, and even the emergence of Chinese English.

#### 2.1. New Englishes

New Englishes covers the varieties of English other than that spoken by people demographically living in England <sup>[7]</sup>. According to Jenkins <sup>[8]</sup>, the native new varieties, like British, American, and Australian English resulted from the first diaspora involving relatively large-scale migrations of around 25,000 mother tongue English speakers from Britain to North America, Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa. Whereas a number of second language varieties, or nativized varieties were developed from the second diaspora, i.e. the consequence of colonization of parts of Asia and Africa. According to Mufwene <sup>[7]</sup>, nativized Englishes are more referred to as new Englishes than the former ones. As for the subjective acceptance of these two types, Mufwene goes on to point out that the "native" new Englishes are more likely to be considered "immediate offspring of the original variety from England" with no classificatory problems, whereas "nativized" Englishes seem to be treated as "illegitimate offspring" <sup>[7]</sup>. The prejudices on "nativized" Englishes can also be found in the fact that people tend to consider British English or other native varieties "purer" and more "proper" English<sup>[9]</sup>.

However, the criteria for classifying English should value more the immediate interactional purposes that a variety can suit, instead of the difference in demographic and ethnolinguistic makeups. On the one hand, it is the need for language contact that results in the emergence of new varieties <sup>[10]</sup>. Such realities reflect that norms are not necessarily based on native speakers, instead, they can be developed through the communicative habits of a stable population of speakers. On the other hand, linguistically, there are no significant differences between "new" Englishes and English in conventional "native" territories, for all varieties can be analyzed and characterized by the same principles of dialectology<sup>[11]</sup>. In this sense, prejudice towards "new" English makes no sense.

#### 2.2. World Englishes and English as a lingua franca

Under the continual impact of globalization, English is being widely used for multilingual communication beyond territory boundaries, which leads to the "super diverse" uses and users of English. According to Crystal <sup>[12]</sup>, those who use English as a second language or foreign language have far outnumbered native speakers. Subsequently, the spread of English around the world is modeled into three circles by Kachru <sup>[13]</sup>: the Inner Circle, the Outer Circle, and the Expanding Circle. Based on the acquisition patterns and functions of English in different contexts, these three categories also represent individuals who speak English as a native language (ENL), a second language (ESL), and a foreign language (EFL) respectively <sup>[8]</sup>. However, although Kachru's model provides the most convenient framework for categorizing world Englishes, one limitation is that it is based on geography and history rather than the speakers' use of English, non-native learners are presumed to communicate with native speakers as their ultimate goal when learning English, which enhances native norms hegemony. Another limitation falls on the labels like ENL, ESL, and EFL used for world Englishes. They are leading the research on world Englishes

into discrete linguistic features which leads to the distinguishment of one variety from another and a failure to establish one theory of how meaning is communicated in and across these varieties <sup>[14]</sup>.

Jenkins goes on to suggest that these labels fail to identify a fourth group of users, who do not share the same linguistic backgrounds but use English for international communication, i.e. speakers of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF). Aiming at mutual intelligibility, ELF research seeks to "untie linguistic description from conventional notions of distinct groups of speakers" <sup>[14]</sup>, which is different from world Englishes, on which scholars focus more on fixed "linguistically identifiable, geographically definable" varieties of English <sup>[15]</sup>. It is also important to note that ELF is different from EFL. According to Jenkins <sup>[8]</sup>, EFL assumes that communicating with native speakers is the non-native English speakers' goal of learning English, whereas ELF emphasizes the role of English in successful intercultural communication "which may, but often does not, include native English speakers <sup>[15]</sup>. In other words, native English serves as the benchmark for EFL, and any deviation by non-native English speakers from these native norms is often judged as "incorrect" or "wrong." However, for ELF, the differences from native English indicate "linguistic adaptability and creativity" where intercultural communication competence is required <sup>[15]</sup>. Therefore, equipped with the knowledge of ELF tenets, English practitioners in EFL contexts in China may rethink what is "correct" English with the consideration of their own contexts.

#### 2.3. Chinese English

With the largest English-learning population <sup>[8]</sup>, China is continually contributing an ever-increasing number of English-speaking Chinese to the worldwide English-speaking community. This tremendous number of Chinese learners has consequently led to a distinctive Chinese variety of English—Chinese English <sup>[16]</sup>. He and Li defined Chinese English as "a performance variety of English which has the standard Englishes as its core but is colored with characteristic features of Chinese phonology, lexis, syntax, and discourse pragmatics" <sup>[16]</sup>. Although Kirkpatrick and Xu's survey <sup>[17]</sup> indicated that participants preferred standard English and were unwilling to be identified with a Chinese accent while speaking English, He and Li's study <sup>[16]</sup> suggested a shift towards accepting Chinese English is taking place among learners and teachers. Furthermore, quite a few articles published on the status and linguistic features of Chinese English are also evidence showing an increasing awareness of Chinese English in language teaching <sup>[18-20]</sup>.

In summary, from the scope of sociolinguistics, English language teachers are able to reconceptualize "English" in at least three aspects. Firstly, given the emerging varieties, English, as a fluid and dynamic language, is continually reshaped and varies with the communication of its users. Secondly, the varieties of English, either world Englishes or global Englishes, come into being from social mobility and cater to the needs of a particular community. They are linguistically equal in achieving communication purposes and should not be judged with prejudices. Thirdly, for language practitioners in China, it is necessary to keep an eye on the emerging variety of Chinese English and take it into account when re-evaluating the pedagogical models in English teaching.

#### **3.** Rethinking current practices in English language teaching (ELT)

Due to the rapid spread of English, the super diverse uses of English as a lingua franca, and the emergence of many new varieties of English discussed above, we are required to rethink the paradigms that served as the foundation of pedagogical methodologies and upon which "education standards" are established.

#### 3.1. Nativeness

The nativeness paradigm has directly and indirectly influenced a wide range of ELT enterprises, including theory, methodology, assessment, teacher education, etc. <sup>[21]</sup>. It underpins the beliefs that "the ideal teacher of English is

a native speaker," and "native English like British or American English is the standard English to learn." Even though this paradigm is criticized for arbitrarily dichotomizing speakers as native and non-native <sup>[21]</sup> and for being seen as an unattainable goal for L2 learners<sup>[22]</sup>, British and American English as standardized native speaker norms still maintain their position as the only internationally accepted pedagogical models for ELT <sup>[23]</sup>. However, this paradigm is getting more and more problematic with the emergence of English as a lingua franca. World Englishes and ELF scholars <sup>[9,13,24,25]</sup> challenge this paradigm by arguing which variety of English should be selected as the pedagogic model in ELT contexts. For instance, Jenkins <sup>[25]</sup> put forward an account of phonological features, known as lingua franca core, advocating the intelligibility model as a replacement for the native-speaking model. In line with this, Alptekin <sup>[26]</sup> also emphasized the need for a new pedagogic teaching model in contexts of English as an international language by pointing out the invalidity of the nativeness paradigm in a cross-cultural setting. As a further development, Dewey <sup>[27]</sup> investigated teachers' responses to ELF and current practices in ELT and suggested a post-normative approach in ELT, which is more of "a framework of choices available when deciding whether/to what extent/which (if any) language norms are relevant to their immediate teaching contexts" <sup>[27]</sup>.

In the era of world Englishes, it has become increasingly important to discuss the most appropriate norms and teaching models in China, especially given the country's vast population of English learners and users, as well as the evident emergence of Chinese English. In recent research, some studies insist that Chinese English should be treated as a pedagogic model along with standard English; others suggest the nativeness model is more suitable for present China<sup>[17]</sup>. However, some scholars propose an eclectic model, which is to adopt standard English but includes Chinese English as a part of it <sup>[23]</sup>. Among some studies, one interesting finding is that English teachers are more likely to seek to native-speaker norms than their learners <sup>[23]</sup>. In other words, English practitioners in China tend to insist on setting a goal as high as nativeness. The reasons might be that firstly, standard English is the choice of all stakeholders in China. Being represented in the national curriculum, it is strongly attached to teachers' work and study. Secondly, there is not yet a Chinese English model that can be applied systematically and in practice. The so-called salient Chinese English features are still waiting to be codified before being incorporated into the pedagogical model.

Practicing English teachers in China can be enlightened by the pedagogic model debates, from which potential new methods are introduced. However, due to the complexity between theory and practice, a safe way to decide on a pedagogic model for teachers can be a post-normative approach supported by Dewey<sup>[14]</sup>, for it provides a tool for practitioners to consider their particular teaching contexts and then work out the best teaching model accordingly.

#### **3.2. Intercultural communicative competence**

In the current ELT, the predominant teaching methodology is often referred to as communicative language teaching (CLT), which is seen as a focus shift away from formal properties to communication through meaning <sup>[14]</sup>. "Communicative competence," the core of CLT, is conceptualized as the ability to get information exchanged between interlocutors through a set of linguistics forms. Hence, interpreted in the curriculum, this teaching methodology emphasizes communication outside the classroom closely associated with pragmatic objectives, such as "making an appointment," "taking a job interview," and so on. However, the concept of nativeness-based communication is becoming problematic both linguistically and sociolinguistically. Widdowson <sup>[28]</sup> referred to it as somewhat "reductionist" by arguing that the courses designed based on it only aim to provide learners with formulae and cover only "a limited range of routine and rudimentary social purposes" <sup>[28]</sup>. Consistent with this, from the sociolinguists' view, Alptekin <sup>[26]</sup> claimed that the concept of communicative competence in CLT is both "utopian" and "unrealistic" <sup>[26]</sup>, for it relates mainly to native speakers' ways of thinking and behaving

and more importantly, it fails to reflect the status of English as lingua franca. Therefore, intercultural communicative competence (ICC) is proposed and getting more support. As Jenkins<sup>[8]</sup> remarks, ICC is a comprehensive set of communication skills that include abilities to accommodate, paraphrase, meta talk, etc. In this respect, it is more linked to "successful ELF communication than the ability to mimic native English speakers"<sup>[8]</sup>.

In China, task-based language teaching (TBLT), regarded as a strong version of CLT, has been employed as the main pedagogic methodology in the national curriculum for several decades <sup>[29]</sup>. Against this, the "English-Only" ideology is largely implemented in classrooms in an attempt to develop learners' communicative competence in a native way of English speaking. However, given the intercultural communicative competence required in cross-cultural scenarios, how English language practitioners perceive the role of learners' first language in ELT is an issue to ponder. From the case study conducted by Creese and Blackledge <sup>[30]</sup> in a Mandarin school where a translanguaging method, i.e. English and Chinese bilingual application, was exploited, learners were more inclined to interrupt teachers and actively participate in classroom discussions, contributing to the creation of meaning during communication. Therefore, making good use of learners' language repertoire, i.e. activating their shared L1, can be an advantage. More research can be done to investigate whether this innovative teaching method helps foster learners' communicative competence.

#### 4. Reflecting on teachers' actions in ELT

The discussion above illustrates how the conceptualized concept of "English" can cause TESOL practitioners to rethink the validity of the current practices when accommodating ELT in the ever-globalizing English environment. When teachers have access to the latest research that updates their conventional thinking, they will be able to reflect on the way they should conduct ELT activities. This section will explore how teachers can apply their new understanding of language and rethinking of ELT into practical implications.

# 4.1. Establishing non-native English-speaking teachers' positive identity in language teaching

As Varghese *et al.* <sup>[31]</sup> remarked, there are two reasons to conduct research on teachers' ideology. Firstly, from the need for classroom-based teaching research, language teachers' identity plays a crucial role in determining how language teaching is acted out. Secondly, from sociocultural and sociopolitical dimensions of teaching, teachers' identities and ideologies from the institutional and interpersonal contexts decide how they define the purpose of their being and personal biographies <sup>[32]</sup>. In the contexts of ENL/ESL/EFL, under the influence of the native speaker notion that the ideal teacher is a native speaker, non-native English-speaking teachers were revealed to be self-discriminated due to their low proficiency in English compared to native English-speaking teachers <sup>[33]</sup>, which led to a poorer self-image and stronger feeling of inferiority. However, with the development of the ELF paradigm, more research studies <sup>[34,35]</sup> have been published to blur the conception of native speakers, which consequently causes more publications <sup>[36-38]</sup> to explore the differences (both advantages and disadvantages) between native and non-native English-speaking teachers. Therefore, with more evidence for the positive role of non-native English-speaking teachers in these studies, their self-perceptions in ELT are positively improved. According to Samimy and Brutt-Griffler's research <sup>[39]</sup>, although non-native English-speaking teachers were reported to conduct teaching activities distinguishably from native English-speaking teachers, they did not think that native English-speaking teachers were superior to them.

Considering the current circumstances in China, even though the terms native speaker and non-native speaker are highly controversial, they continue to be used unthinkingly by English language educators and their students<sup>[32]</sup>. Hence, there is a necessity for local English teachers in China to re-establish their positive identity in the ELT

profession. Firstly, they need to recognize their values and the indispensable roles they are playing in teaching. Huang's study <sup>[32]</sup> indicated that college students hold positive attitudes toward both native and non-native English-speaking teachers. Non-native English-speaking teachers are reported to be indispensable in terms of effective teaching, awareness of L1 transfer, sensitivity to learners' needs, and assistance in preparing exams. Secondly, they need to deliver the message of reconceptualized "English" to both teaching practitioners and learners. In this sense, the perception of the ELF model shared with learners will "liberate the L2 speakers from the imposition of native speaker norms as well as the cultural baggage of World Englishes models" <sup>[40]</sup>. Lastly, they are encouraged to disempower the native-speaking norms by critically applying the dominant pedagogical methodology, TBLT or CLT. Instead of adhering to conventional communication, i.e. English-only communication, teachers should also cultivate learners' communication skills in accommodating two or more languages. As Cook <sup>[36]</sup> pointed out, the knowledge of two or more languages in one mind should be treated "as a whole rather than as having separate L1 and interlanguage components" <sup>[36]</sup>.

#### 4.2. Strengthening teachers' agency on language policy and planning (LPP)

An agency is defined by Giddens<sup>[41]</sup> as "the capacity of the individual to make a difference to a pre-existing state of affairs or course of events" <sup>[41]</sup>. However, when it comes to language policy and planning (LPP), it is more recognized as large-scale planning and national policies, which are undertaken by the authorities, and are seen as solutions to deal with language problems in a top-down manner <sup>[42]</sup>. Only after the proposal of Cooper's <sup>[43]</sup> LPP framework, "who does what to whom," the role of individuals as actors in LPP started to gain more attention from researchers <sup>[44,45]</sup>. Teachers, the real implementers and micro policymakers in the classroom <sup>[44]</sup>, have been the focus of many recent studies, which reveal the central role that teachers can play in policy implementation and interpretation <sup>[46,47]</sup> and even in micro policy accommodation and resistance <sup>[48]</sup>.

However, in China, under a highly centralized education system, where the government enacts a nationwide education policy, English practitioners are regarded as not yet able to play a role in education policy-making <sup>[49]</sup>. However, in Cheng and Wei's latest study <sup>[50]</sup>, they investigated the agency in LPP from macro to micro levels of 5 groups of individual players in China and pointed out that English teachers are mostly unaware of their agency in policy-making, which in this study is shown from their resistance to the GCET (Guidelines on College English Teaching). Their complaint towards GCET is based on the difficulty in implementing rather than the consideration of the policy itself. In this sense, English teachers in China should strengthen their agency by conducting self-conscious and reflective involvement in LPP. Instead of merely executing top-down decisions and unthinkingly following the curriculum, they can involve more than teaching to make their voice about the first-handed teaching experiences heard, which will in return positively influence LPP. Furthermore, teachers can exert more agency on LPP through "bottom-up" efforts. Serving as a bridge between policymakers and receivers of language education, teachers can proactively report their learners' needs to administrators with greater agency, so that learners, as the final evaluators of LPP, receive more attention and support in the planning and implementation processes.

#### **5.** Conclusion

This paper illustrates the benefits that the study of sociolinguistics can bring to English language teachers through three dimensions. By developing greater awareness of the sociolinguistics of English through perceiving the rationales behind different English varieties and labels, practitioners could end up with less prejudiced views towards non-native Englishes. Based on the reconceptualized concept of "Englishes," teachers are rendered to think more critically about the current beliefs and paradigms in ELT, which not only inspires teachers to flexibly adhere to the current methodology but also empowers them to keep seeking more appropriate pedagogic models in ELT. Finally, on the aspect of taking action, teachers especially non-native English-speaking teachers can start by developing a positive identity in the teaching profession and proactively wielding their agency in LPP. In this way, teachers, armed with the knowledge of sociolinguistics, are able to ultimately make a difference in language education.

#### **Disclosure statement**

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