

The Importance Of Sociolinguistics To Language Learning And Teaching

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Abstract – Sociolinguistics affects all areas of society, including cultural concepts, expectations and contexts, through the use of language; and the effects of language use on society. This paper aims to point out how three basic concepts in this field, namely imagined communities, English as an international language, language policy and planning can help ESL teachers to better understand and improve teaching for Vietnamese high school students.

Keywords – Imagined Communities, English As An International Language, Language Policy And Planning.

I. INTRODUCTION

In Vietnam, English has been taught at high schools for long time and witnessed continuous changes. To adapt global trend, The Ministry of Education has set a new goal for the curriculum: using English as a communication tool (MOET, 2006), leading to the shift from grammar – translation to communicative language teaching method (CLT) since 2006. However, applying these innovations into practice faces many obstacles. One of the biggest concerns of Vietnamese teachers is the poor participation of students in listening and speaking sections at schools. Another issue is the standard for teaching and learning English: whether to achieve the proficiency as native speaker or not. The concept of “Imagined reveals the gap between students and their expected community, leading to the low level of engagement in classroom. Besides, the studies about “language policy and planning” support teachers to find solutions for this circumstance, through the role of teachers in policy implementation. One the one hand, teachers can have some interventions to bring students closer to the objectives of the curriculum. On the other hand, the teachers can raise their voice to make the national curriculum better. Last but not least, “English as an international language” addresses the second concern, giving space for other standards, rather than being proficient as native speakers.

II. DISCUSSION

Regarding the first concern about students’ poor participation in speaking and listening sections, this relates to the concept of “Imagined communities”. That notion is defined by Norton (2013, p.7) as “groups of people, not immediately tangible and accessible, with whom we connect through the power of the imagination”. In this teaching context, high school students are under pressure because they are going to take the entrance examination to university, which is conventionally believed by parents and Vietnamese society to be the best option for students’ future. Consequently, achieving good performance in assessments is the direct factor motivating them in learning process. However, the structure of assessments of high school English program, even the entrance examination to university is unbalanced, which mainly focus on reading, grammar and overlook listening and speaking. It leads to

the fact that students prefer to invest in learning reading and grammar rather than other communication skills. In this case, their imagined community is the groups who get good marks in assessment, which is far from the “community using English as communication tool” specified in objective of national curriculum. This gap between students’ imagined community and that specified in curriculum have been claimed by researchers to have impact on their learning. Yim (2016) claims that imagined communities will motivate students to invest in learning to narrow the gap between their future selves and the actual selves. On the other hand, Norton (2013) points out that if students’ imagined communities are not validate by teachers, they will resist engaging in classroom practices. This finding could be the explanation for the teaching context above, where the gap mentioned above leads to poor engagement of students in communication sections at schools.

To deal with this problem, Yim (2016) suggests narrowing the gap between the imagined communities of students with the one devised in educational program. One of his recommendations is to strengthen students’ imagination beyond their local contexts. Coming back to the context, teachers should encourage students to think about the community that English is used as a communication tool, along with benefits as being a member of this community. The role and issues relevant to this language has been explored by a number of scholars under the concept of “English as an international language” (EIL), which is defined by Hornberger, Nancy & Sandra (2010) as “the use of English between any two L2 speakers of English, whether sharing the same culture or not, as well as between L2 and L1 speakers of English” (p.95). They also summarize a number of opportunities that we can benefit from English, as an international language. Among them is “intellectual mobility” (p.96), which refers English as the language of science that help students to access further education and technologies. Additionally, mastering English will provide new international chances that are not available for them, such as working for multinational companies overseas, where English is used as the common language. Other benefit, which is very familiar to high school students, is the chance to make friends and order goods online by using English. Such examples of advantages from English could be used by teachers to inspire their students to invest in learning this language for communicative purposes. To maximize the effects of these examples, teachers should choose the one that are close to the needs and expectations of students in the future, such as studying abroad or working overseas. The other impact of these instances on students is the awareness of English usage in real life, that is not limited in reading but for communication in most situations, which is close to the objective that the curriculum orients students to reach. By this way, teachers can shift students’ desire as a member in group of good learners of English to the community of efficient users of English, thus narrowing the gap between students’ imagined community and that specified in national curriculum.

To narrow that gap, the changing cannot be made only from the side of students but also from the curriculum, in which teachers will act as stimulation factor. The role of teachers in educational policy making process has been documented in some studies about language policy, which is defined by Kaplan & Baldauf (1997) as “a body of ideas, laws, regulations, rules and practices intended to achieve the planned language change in the society or group...” (as cited in McCarty & Littlebear, 2013, p. 33). Bianco points out that curriculum implementation is not a mechanical process, but school practices do make choices among curriculum contents and methods, even producing change (as cited in Hornberger, Nancy & Sandra, 2010). This fact is argued by Bianco that curriculum just provides generic framework, which are not suitable for all students’ needs and circumstances, thus requires the flexibility of teachers to adopt or suggest some changes. We can imply from his research that teachers should raise their voices to make national curriculum better. Coming back to the teaching context in this paper, what to be proposed for change is assessment types, which should give space for listening and speaking skills. This change could make the imagined communities of students (groups achieving good performance in assessment) closer to the objective of national curriculum.

However, given that the assessment already includes listening and speaking components, then the standard to assess these communication skills and whether to be proficient like native speakers remains unanswered. As long as this issue is not handled, students may lose their confidence to even dream about a day when they can join the community of users of English, which is also the objective of curriculum. As a result, the ambiguous standard for learning English is another issue to concern in high school curriculum. This concern is addressed when we revisit the concept of EIL, which draws attention of many scholars. In an article, Jenkins (2002) emphasizes the fact that nowadays English is spoken by a significantly greater number of non - native speakers than native speakers. This fact results in the emergence of multiple varieties in English with linguistically and culturally diverse (Matsuda, 2012), which is explained by Kachru (1992) that any language when coming to new environment will get through “nativization” process to adapt and change appropriately to the new context (as cited in Matsuda, 2012). Furthermore, another reason for this emergence is pointed out by Hornberger, Nancy & Sandra (2010) that these varieties reflect “individuals’ desire to signal their unique identity while speaking a global language” (p.111). This diverse trend of English when spreading around the

world will lead to the lack of comprehension among speakers of English (Hornberger, Nancy & Sandra (2010). From all the issues above, we can see that using only the standards of native speakers to teach English is inadequate and call for changes.

III. IMPLICATION

The first implication related to the poor engagement of students at high schools, where they mainly focus on learning reading and grammar, and show low level of interest on speaking and listening. This fact could be explained by the mismatch between their imagined communities (students getting good marks in reading and grammar tests) with the target community (users of English) drawn by the Ministry of Education, as claimed by some scholars. This finding implies that the problem will be addressed if this gap is narrowed. To do so, teachers help students imagine a community that they can benefit from using English as a communication tool, rather than a test.

Regarding the implementation of Vietnamese curriculum for English subject, there is a conflict between the curriculum objective (English is used as a communication tool) with the structures of assessments that exclude speaking and listening competence, thus lead to the rejecting of students in schools. This case imply that to ensure successful implementation, some structural changes should be carried out such as involving listening and speaking in examinations, which makes the top – down policy of the ministry and the bottom – up effort of students consistent, thus narrow the gap between students’ imagined community and that of curriculum.

In term of the concern whether to be proficient like native speakers: This standard has been found to be inadequate and does not reflect the real life situation, where English is used by non - native speakers over native speakers. Along with this fact is the emergence of the diverse of English around the world, which could be the constraint for comprehension among speakers. What to be implied is that changes should occur in curriculum so that English is learnt in the way closely to real life usage. Firstly, these English varieties should be recognized in our curriculum and aware by students. Secondly, the strategies to deal with diverse English should be taught to students so that they could clarify meaning and establish relationship when facing real life situations (Hornberger, Nancy & Sandra (2010). Course materials such as video should also integrate exposure to a wide range of non-native speakers accents (Yim, 2016).

The problems in the context could also have implications for the wider context of teaching English in general and contributions to sociolinguistic field:

Firstly, students’ needs and expectations are important elements that decide the success of any curriculum. The top – down policy could never take effect if facing the rejection from bottom up practices. Therefore, teachers should allocate some class time to understand students’ perspectives about learning English and relevant constraints through some methods such as surveys and interviews (Yim, 2016).

Secondly, language policy making process should recognize the bottom – up voices of teachers, who know their students the best and have valuable feedback whether these policies are appropriate to apply in practices or not. The involvement could be in any phase of this process such as determining how the target language is used.

Last but not least, the complicated use of English as an international language calls for the change in teaching and learning approach, not only in mindset but also in practices. These changes should not be partial but systematic in national curriculum, which covers a lot from program objectives to materials and methods, etc. However, there are not many researches and pedagogy ideas about how to integrate these changes into practices, thus require more studies to explore this issues and come up with the framework.

IV. CONCLUSION

The “imagined communities” concept reveals the gap between the communities pictured by high school students with the one targeted in the curriculum, leading to the low level of interest of students learning. This problem would be solved if the gap is narrowed, only when chances happen from two sides. In one hand, teachers could draw a future community where students can benefit from using English as communication tool, which is also that specified in national curriculum. On the other hand, oral examination should be integrated in assessments of curriculum, in turn motivates students to invest more in communication sections at schools. To address the concern about the standards for learning English, the concept about EIL open a new perspective for this language. Along with global spread, English emerges many varieties when being used in new contexts, which is locally and personally diverse. Therefore, there is no point to pursue the target of being proficiency like native speakers. The recognition of these varieties will call for new approaches to teach and learn this language, to be specific, the varieties and strategies to overcome

misunderstanding among speakers should be taught to students. These issues also imply the importance of bottom – up voices from students and teachers to make language policy more feasible to put into practices.

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