Intelligibility of Iranian learners at high-school and university

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ABSTRACT

According to Smith and Nelson in World Englishes (Kachru, 2006:450) and Matsuura (2007), intelligibility, comprehensibility and interpretability are different concepts which are used interchangeably. Intelligibility refers to word or utterance recognition while comprehensibility refers to meaning and interpretability refers to discoursal level— pragmatics, issues which are interwoven in attitudinal aspect of leaning. This paper is an overview of the previous intelligibility article examining the intelligibility of eight different Englishes, USA, UK, Farsi, French, Korean, Chinese, Turkish, and Russian, to two groups of Iranian students—with Turkish and Farsi as their native language. Concluding on the findings of that paper and comparing the case with intelligibility in different levels of education from high-school—aged 14—to university students—aged 20 above, the researcher came to the conclusion the Iranian students need to be aware of the world Englishes and think not of British or American Englishes as the only form of English. Nevertheless, students' being aware of the speakers' nationality may change his attitude toward the person, an issue which necessitates further research.

Introduction

Jenkins, (2000) once proposed the idea of an International Language— which flourished in colonized countries and subsequently in outer circle of Kachru (2006). With abundant literature on post-modernism (Pishghadam, 2008), post-method pedagogy (Kumaravadivelu, 1999, 2003, 2006) and a new look at language teaching and learning, Iran seems to be no exception in interpreting the intelligibility or comprehensibility issues. Further due to economic and political relations, and with respect to mutual benefits, people have come to the understanding that intelligible communication can be a vital must in any kind of interaction. Nevertheless, based on the last study done by the same author on intelligibility of university students (at bachelor level), this study is comparing the findings of that study with the learners of high school. Further studies are needed to investigate the intelligibility of MA students as well as Ph.D students of TEFL in Iran.

Kachru's Three Circles

Kachru (2006) sees the spread of English as three concentric circles representing different ways in which the language has been acquired and also how it is currently used including the Inner Circle, Outer, and the Expanding Circle. The Inner Circle comprises the traditional historical and sociolinguistic bases of English in those areas performing all functions, where English is used as a mother tongue or first language. As David Crystal states the turning point of English spread around the world is significantly bound up with the American settlement in that continent and the emergence of so many other Englishes. This in turn is tied up to ideas of post-modernity and ideological philosophies flourished in Europe and America (Crystal, 1997, 2003; Kachru, 2006; Widdowson, 2003). So the move was significantly toward outer and expanding circles (Matsuura, 2007; Rocha, 2001). That is where intelligibility comes into the arena.

With the emergence of non-native varieties of English across the globe, the concept of intelligibility has attracted the sustained attention of many international scholars (Bansal 1969; Tiffen 1974). These studies were carried out with the traditional notion of intelligibility in mind. That is, the tendency of seeing native English speech as prestigious, correct, intelligible and the sole norm that must be emulated by non-native varieties (Atechi, 2007).

What is Intelligibility?

By definition, Kenworthy (1987) sees "intelligibility as being understood by a listener at a given time in a given situation". This means that the process of intelligibility will entail that the more words a listener is able to identify accurately when said by a particular speaker, the more intelligible the speaker is. Smith (1992) thinks that in order to make sense of the term "intelligibility" one needs to draw a clear-cut distinction between intelligibility, comprehensibility and interpretability; though the terms are sometimes used interchangeably (Atechi, 2007). Then intelligibility refers to word or utterance recognition, whereas, comprehensibility relates to word or utterance meaning and interpretability is the meaning behind word or utterance.

Many teachers claim that the intelligible pronunciation should be the goal of pronunciation training because pronunciation is just a tool for smooth speech communication (Kimberly, 1987; Matsuura, 2007; Atechi, 2007; Derwing, 1999). Nevertheless, it seems very difficult to define the intelligible pronunciation physically because the intelligibility depends upon listeners (Kenworthy, 1987; Jenkins, 2000).

On the issue of arguing the native and non-native intelligibility for the teachers, many scholars argue that the non-native teacher stands a better chance of teaching their fellow non-native learners than native English teachers who do not know the realities of these settings (Atechi, 2007, Kachru, 2006, Lin & Martin, 2005).

On the same line of thought, Widdowson (1994) argues that the native speaker teachers are generally equipped with knowledge only in a privileged intuitive sense, and with

pedagogic competence only to a rudimentary degree. By contrast, he goes on to argue nonnative speaker teachers know the "subject", English, in an explicit rather than intuitive sense, by virtue of having themselves learnt it as a foreign language.

Jenkins (2000) seems to take a more radical stance than Widdowson in the ELT profession. She thinks strongly that the NNS teacher is better placed to teach other NN learners as they have passed the same route as their learners.

So many other scholars take even stronger side and announce that the days when systematic new English features were seen as mistakes that needed to be corrected at all costs are gone (Atechi, 2007). In short, a lot has changed with regard to the so-called native/non-native speaker dichotomy that needs to be reflected when studying intelligibility (Kachru, 2006: McKay & Hornberger, 1996).

It would appear that the fight for the maintenance of native English norms in non-native environments is already lost. There is ample evidence to show that a majority of scholars across the globe are unanimous on the unrealistic nature of imposing native norms in nonnative settings. In this connection, Simo Bobda (2000) proclaims unequivocally: "The Native Speaker is Dead!" his proclamation may sound a bit hasty but what is clear here is that the native speaker is no longer the sole norm provider of English across the planet. However, many are still looking for standard language. Standard by definition means, to be independent of variables (Hatch & Farhady, 1981, 1997). But how, even if we regard native speakers as standards, are the natives independent of non-natives? Is intelligibility a one way route (Jenkins, 2000; Kimberly, 1987)? Can natives interact with non-natives viewing them as inferiors or marginalized or aggressively speaking barbarians, and still be hoping to have interactive communication? Then again it should be said that gone are those days (Said, 1994). So standard is similar to variety—a term coined in colonization era (Lin, 2005, Pennycook, 2004).

Even though many scholars emphasize on intelligibility in EIL (Kachru 2006, Widdowson 2003, Jenkins 2000), some others are worried about English norms deviations and anarchy as a result of diversity (Yang, 2005; Ketabi & Shomoosi, 2007). Ketabi and Shomoosi put it this way that linguistic features must be native-speaker-based whereas pragmatic features should be internationally-based.

Based on English as an international language –EIL— (Jenkins, 2000), it is believed that native speakers' norms should be re-examined. The case for EIL is not as straight as it is the case for EFL or ESL, since in EFL or ESL the purpose of language learning is communication with native speakers while in EIL the aim is having intelligible interaction—mainly non-natives with non-natives (Ketabi & Shomoosi, 2007, p.197).

Moreover, it should be noted that when it comes to issues of attitudes, one must be very careful, given that there are many factors that influence this behavior which helps to explain why we may have different attitudes portrayed by different people even in the same speech community (Nair-Venugopal, 2000; Atechi, 2007). Nevertheless, Karimi (2000) believes that attitudes are somewhat fixed after the age of 20, and awareness and maturity may change one's attitude in the long run. It is believed that it will take a long time for attitudes towards non-native norms to change, especially when it comes to accepting them in the classroom. Pedagogically speaking, if the non-native varieties of English have been accepted and recognized as distinct varieties in their own right - at least by a majority of scholars in this field - the use of these local norms in the classroom remains a highly debatable issue (Mc Kay & Hornberger, 1996). There is still the tendency for native models, as well as didactic material that reflects only native English to be used in the teaching of non-native speakers. Many people, non-native speakers included, still feel that the non-native varieties lack substance (Pickering, 2006; Atechi, 2007).

Regarding the question of "intelligibility with whom?" asked by some scholars like Platt (1984) and Kachru (1986), Simo Bobda (1994:14) points out that intelligibility is relative; for it depends on the participants in the speech act, as well as on the context. It can be said that Smith and Nelson (1985); Smith (1992); Bamgbose (1998) and others seem to be saying the same thing, namely, that every speaker of English in the world needs not be intelligible to every other speaker of English. The main point of agreement among the above scholars is that international intelligibility is the preserve of those who desire to use English for international purposes. This sounds really convincing but how we decide on those who will need English for international purposes, and those who will need English for national or local purposes. In this case, the debate on this issue is far from over. Therefore, construct definition is a hard task to do (Brutt- Griffler & Samimy, 1999).

Research Questions

The present study compares the findings of the previous work—on intelligibility of different English varieties (here US,UK, Farsi, French, Korean, Chinese, Turkish, Russian) for EFL Iranian learners with Turkish and Farsi as their mother-tongue and explores possible learner factors that would explain and predict the intelligibility of these 8 Englishes—high school students attitudes toward English varieties.

For the measurement of the intelligibility this study employs a subjective evaluation, a method prescribed by Kenworthy (1987). Attitude and its relation to intelligibility are also included in the study as the important variables on intelligibility (Matsuura 2007).

The research questions of this study are as follows:

1-Are Iranian high school students aware of English as an International Languages—EIL? To what extent they are familiar with some World Englishes?

2-Is there any relationship between Iranian high school students' intelligibility and attitude?

Methods

Participant

Subject of the study were 350 Iranian high school students of two schools of Tehran. They aged 14-18, with low to medium economic status. None of the students recognize accents like Korean, Russian, French, and Chinese Englishes. And just 12 students recognized British and American Englishes.

Questionnaire

A questionnaire consisting of two questions were given to the students, first it was asked if they knew anything about different accents, and if they distinguished the accents of English?

Procedure

In order to determine the listeners' intelligibility and attitude, the semantic differentiated scale also including personal information was administered at one high school class of level four which was hoped that students may be able to distinguish the different accents. Unfortunately the respondent did not cooperate which was due to their unfamiliarity with different accents. Then the researcher confined the research questions on the students' awareness of different accents. Further conclusions were made based on students claim on accent familiarity.

Results and discussion

Their findings are compared with the previous work done with the university students where similar problems raised. Although a thorough investigation of learners' attitudes was done with EFL learners at university level, it seemed that few students were aware of the concept of Englishes. Their comments just revealed a haphazard judgment. As commented by some scholars and reviewers of *World Englishes*, the researcher has covered a significant problem. In the context of Iran researchers are rarely inclined to conduct research with regard to social aspects of language learning especially the study of "World Englishes". The study is based on Sterns' new definition of intelligibility regarding the spread of world Englishes and its difference with such concepts like comprehensibility and interpretability.

Actually, the study was conducted in a context in which students are not really familiar with the concept of world Englishes. Few tourists visit Iran, so Iranians' ears are not tuned to different kinds of Englishes around the world. The only way Iranians learn English is through materials provided by the American or British material developers. Even few Iranians can distinguish between American and British English. Furthermore, a concept like "Persian English" seems ridiculous for so many Iranians; even those with high education think so. Therefore, it would be better to conduct such a study in a context in which the people are at least familiar with the concept of World Englishes or at least two or three World Englishes. Focusing on the participants' attitudes towards Englishes which they are not really aware of does not seem plausible.

Something which should be taken into consideration with regard to the reliability of the study is the subjective assessment of intelligibility. By simply asking learners to give their opinions regarding intelligibility or unintelligibility of some samples of world Englishes, we cannot gain a highly reliable and valid results. One of the main problems in this subjective method is how equivocal "intelligibility" may sound for the subjects. It would be better if other complementary data collection methods were used or if triangulation was done to reach high validity.

Why don't Iranians have a high opinion of their own English? Is it because of their lack of familiarity with their own Internalized national English? Is such a concept as "Persian English" (Farsi English) or "Turkish English" meaningful for them? What does the subjects' focus on meaning without attention to the accents indicate? Does it show that they are totally aware of the post-modern thoughts and try to get on the right track of understanding the meaning no matter what accent the samples are expressed with. Or does it show they just did so due to their inability to recognize the Englishes or their unfamiliarity with the concept of world Englishes. Generally, an advance has been represented in the study of world Englisehes by a research study zooming in on one of the expanding circle countries like Iran.

Discussion

As previously done (Nazari, 2012), the researcher found that at the university level—bachelor TEFL students—in general, the correlation between intelligibility and attitude for both aware and unaware groups was not significant but moderate. Though in some Englishes like British, Farsi, and French the correlation was substantial whereas for others it was low. The similar result was observed for the listeners' sex that did not reveal a significant difference. Nevertheless, it seems that the higher proficient listeners had more positive intelligibility and attitude index to British and Chinese

Englishes. The economic status also was of insignificant relationship with listeners' intelligibility. However for American and Korean Englishes there was significant difference. Moreover it was found that when listeners are not aware of the speakers' nationality, they do not get so biased to them. The results also showed a moderate correlation between students' intelligibility and their attitude in unaware group. While as soon as they know what English they are listening to, the correlation level increases to substantial or even strong level. The general Turkish or Farsi language did not show significant difference but for some varieties they revealed meaningful differences.

The findings done through the subjective Likert scale revealed that the students even at university level have less familiarity with different accents. at the high school level either the students are unaware of different accents, Englishes. So what is needed is awareness-raising among the students by showing movies of different englishes, discussing the value of each accent and helping students to appreciate all the Englishes.

Conclusion

This study investigated intelligibility vis-à-vis some world Englishes with respect to Iranian EFL listeners at high school and university levels; what was uninteresting was the inability of the students to recognize or distinguish Englishes even at the bachelor level of university students studying TEFL. The findings at the university level can help the teachers to raise students' awareness on world Englishes. Students need to know that there are different Englishes spoken all over the world.

Contrary to Matsuua's finding (2006), unfamiliarity with the English variety did not influence listeners' judgment of their attitude and intelligibility. But providing opportunities for the students to listen to wide variety of Englishes may sharpen their ideas of the globalized Englishes.

Therefore, contrary to some assumptions on the acceptance of American and British accents as the sole norms of English, this study proves that listeners especially at university levels do not mind too much what accent they are listening to but rather what they understand from it. So the study at its limited scope showed that at the post-modern era British and American English should not be set as the only accepted forms or norms. Nevertheless, for some listeners there still exists a kind of biased attitude toward English accents. This study was in part an answer to Matsuua's paper on intelligibility and attitude (2007). But further studies can be done to investigate the relationship of instruction on students' intelligibility and attitude with objective instruments.

Limitations

Although the term intelligibility is always encountered in pedagogical literature and in studies on second language acquisition, it is unfortunately the least researched and least understood concept in cross-cultural and cross-linguistic contexts. In addition, research available on the second language varieties of English primarily focuses on phonetics, specifically on the segmental phonemes, whereas the problem with intelligibility is at other levels, especially in communicative units. Also, In the case of English, we must be clear about whom we have in mind when we talk of participants in a linguistic interaction, so the role of interaction is not pinpointed here. Besides the instruments used in this study are of limited scope as the concept of intelligibility and attitude are so complicated and still vague. Therefore, it will be wrong if somebody tries to generalize the findings of this study as it was confined within its cultural arena of Iran specifically the Northeastern universitiess of Ghoochan and Bojnourd and further the high schools in Tehran. Finally the more objective attitude and intelligibility

measurements, the more reliable results may be acquired. Nevertheless the more objective, the less valid the construct will become.

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