

The examination of the test of English as a foreign language (TOEFL): *Evident disparities between world englishes and standard English*

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Abstract

While many English Language Learners (ELLs) embark on a path towards higher education in universities centered around Standardized English, they must undergo rigorous training to prepare for these demanding TOEFL exams. Students that have been exposed to World Englishes, or lingua francas, for communicative purposes are now asked to abandon these English varieties to assume the elevated importance of the Standardized form of English implemented across universities around the world. This paper analyzes the juxtaposition and negotiation of these languages as learners are often encumbered with not only linguistic barriers but cultural hindrances that contribute to identity displacement. As language is deeply entrenched in one's cultural background, it is necessary to reflect on how these English proficiency exams negate the learner's L1 along with the unique qualities that they strongly identify with.

Introduction

The Test for English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) exam has been commonly ranked among the top methods of assessing the English proficiency of non-English language learners in all respective areas of linguistic acquisition. Originating from California, the TOEFL exam predominantly employs the use of American-English as its testing material mirrors the Standard English linguistic conventions. Currently, there are more than “10,000 colleges, agencies, and other institutions [such as immigration departments, medical and licensing agencies] in over 130 countries that accept TOEFL scores” (Who Accepts TOEFL, 2017). Despite its worldwide reach of over 18 million test takers and preferred style of integrated linguistic components “to help learners build the skills and confidence needed to communicate effectively in academic environments” (ETS, 2005), the TOEFL exam advocates for the uniform assessment of Standardized English by neglecting World Englishes into its exams.

Discussion

Contrary to the positive stance that World Englishes have on the ever-evolving English language, the TOEFL exams reflect a dominating monolingual approach with a focus on errors rather than features (Bolton, 2008). For instance, the integrated skilled test is tailored to favor students that have undergone the “immersive” process of residing in an English-speaking country, more particularly the United States, and have acquired the extensive vocabulary needed to succeed. Although the speaking and listening component of the test regularly utilizes native-American English speakers, it does incorporate a handful of other accents from the U.K., New Zealand, and Australia (ETS, 2005), which reflects the prominent language standards spoken in these more monolingual societies. However, the reality addressed by Cheung and Braine (Ulate, 2011) is that the English language as a “foreign language [is used] by about 750 million speakers; [and] subsequently, most English teachers are non-native speakers.” Therefore, the misconception that Standardized English triumphs other varieties of the English language due to the number of individuals who speak it as a first language is false. As illuminated by Medgyes (Ulate, 2011), the English language is “no longer the privilege of native speakers [...] Nevertheless, people who speak English as their native language continue to have a distinct advantage over those for whom it is a foreign tongue.” For instance, when examining the favored population of native-speaker English instructors abroad, Mossou and Llorca (Ulate, 2011) has deconstructed

the myth that native speakers represent the “ideal teacher” because this idea has been grounded in insubstantial evidence and the wrongful propagation of deception. Therefore, it is a falsified preconception that native-speakers are more reliable resources for the obtainment of language acquisition; and we must consider the ripple effect of how the administrative favorability of native-speakers negatively affects the ways in which English learners are introduced to these biased standards. Although the speaking portion of the TOEFL exam is designed to implement an unbiased approach of assessing speaking proficiencies by having test takers communicate and record their responses via computers rather than conducting in-person interviews (Dodigovic, 2015), it adopts a mechanical approach to language and neglects the multidimensional facets that add volume to sociocultural awareness. As the learners’ responses are scrutinized under a vetted process where “three to six trained raters review” (ETS, 2005) those responses to ensure that students meet the requirements of what is expected in a traditional academic or professional setting in an English-spoken country (Brown, Hudson, & Clark, 2004). Therefore, international students are being pigeon-holed into adopting a singular approach to learning English to conform to these set standards and are essential forced to abandon the cultural influences that shape their identities. Students are not only expected to be familiar with the extensive range of Standard English vocabulary associated with American academia, but they also must be well-versed and knowledgeable about how to maneuver through the design of the conventionally structured of the exam. From the perspective of the test creators, the integrated written component is “stable...[because] it is the goal and it is the product of institutionalized learning both for the L1 and L2 learners” (Davies, 2009). By abiding the set of requirements employed by institutionalized English universities and professional standards, the TOEFL’s systematic approach to examining and ranking students according to their proficiency skill levels do not allow for much room to deviate from the standard norm of the Standard English language.

In preparation for the exam, ELLs are encouraged to take on a holistic approach in educating themselves about the unique structure of the multi-skilled and integrated test along with the various components that distinguishes a well-rounded English learner. Although there is no explicit mention in the ETS’ “TOEFL Test Prep Planner” (2012) about the utilization or preference of Standard English in its study guide, if students desire to succeed, they will need to

employ not only the linguistic skills associated with Standard English but also be knowledgeable about the culture and expectations for taking these exams. For instance, the various scenarios introduced in the speaking and listening component of the exam imitate real-life contexts and scenarios any American student may encounter, such as classroom lectures and conversations between students encompassing a wide spectrum of subjects. As language is deeply entwined with one's cultural history, it is imperative to analyze the controversial issues of how English varieties may conflict with the testing standards implemented by English speaking universities around the world. Students that are accustomed to World Englishes may perform poorly on the rigorous TESOL exams due to the nature of the "intricate English used... [and the] students' lack of comprehension" (Arucino, 2013). Therefore, ELLs need to exercise caution when preparing for the exam as they are expected to tailor their studies and habits to accommodate the demands of the institutions that promote Standard English norms. In efforts of alleviating the pressures of measuring up to these standards and excelling on the TOEFL exam, learners need repeated exposure and practice to familiarize themselves with organizational patterns and structured presentation of the timed exam.

When considering the various skillsets needed to succeed in the TOEFL exam, we must consider the ethical encroachments of how promoting Standardized English across university standards negates the sociocultural values embedded in the learner's identity. As foreign born students typically "identify with their first language and culture, ... their home background provides them with positive self-esteem" (Hadaway, Vardell, & Young, 2004). The standardized tests often "encourage [learners] to replace their home language and culture with their new [targeted] language and culture" (Hadaway, Vardell, & Young, 2004). Rather than promoting a one-dimension application of the English language, we need to adapt to the ever-evolving utilization of English and the multitude of needs it serves on various communicative levels. As Jenkins (2000) highlights:

Human nature, on this evidence at least, seems to have a strong tendency to favour conformity to standards, uniformity, and conservatism, and to disfavor non-conformity, diversity, and change. Because language is so closely bound up with human identity and attitudes, it is inevitable that we should commonly encounter among speakers of

standard English(es) strongly held and deeply entrenched convictions as to the superiority of languages which adheres to established linguistic norms and the inferiority of language which departs from them.

Therefore, if Standard English continues to be upheld as a prestigious representation of one's intellectual and social background, it will diminish the cultural values in other English varieties, which may have a consequential negative effect of encumbering the learning experience. Promoting and cherishing the distinct cultural differences that inspire the evolution of the English language is necessary in validating each student's unique cultural blueprint, or identity, as well as encouraging a heterogeneous community rather than a conforming homogeneous society.

In promoting the holistic approach to learning the Standard English language, the TOEFL exam appropriately allocates 30 possible points to each of the speaking, listening, reading, and writing categories. After reviewing the TOEFL test results collected from January to December of 2016, it is noted that the three major groups of ELLs that took the exam were acquiring immigration statuses, employment, or admission to higher educational institutions. In a global poll of non-native English speakers taking the exam, the average roughly ranged from 20 to just below 22 for each of the reading, writing, speaking, and listening sections (Test and Score Data, 2016). Upon deeper analysis, the data gathered was broken down into the native spoken languages and home countries of the test takers. Africa, one of the world's most densely populated continents that embodies nearly 2,000 languages, scored on the lower tier of global polls and roughly scored between 65 to 78 on the TOEFL exam (Nationsonline, 2017). Conversely, in the Americas, Asia, and Europe, the scores were consistently higher which highlighted the disparity of the surmounting number of languages and dialects that Africans must negotiate upon. In efforts of reconciling these differences, several African communities have adopted an English lingua franca to communicate among communities without the burden of acquiring each language painstakingly; therefore, it is more likely that Africans are not formally introduced to Standardized English but rather are well-versed with World Englishes. Although this data may not be as pertinent to the ESL communities in Southern California, due to the major influx of Asian immigrants who predominantly enroll into these American English schools, the statistical breakdown of each nation and country may provide an ESL instructor insight as to anticipate what

areas students of different cultural backgrounds may require extra assistance in (Test and Score Data, 2016). For example, taken from the “Test and Score Data” poll of Chinese TOEFL test takers, the students scored strongly in their reading and writing sections; however, there was an evident deficit in the speaking and listening proficiencies.

Conclusion

Conscientious that most of my students are preparing to take the TOEFL exam soon, I would cross-examine their needs with the statistical overview of their home country’s test scores to get a general overview of what areas they may require extra assistance with. Although this is a loose projection, it is a great starting point in gradual tailoring various activities to meet my students’ individual needs.

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