

## Critical Reflection on English Language Learning and Teaching Experience ～Based on the Sociolinguistic Perspective～

### 英語言語学習と教授経験に関する批判的省察 ～社会言語学的観点に基づいて～

KOYAMA Eiji  
小山英二\*

“How have I learned English at different level of schools in Japan where English is used as a foreign language (EFL)? To what extent, in turn, has EFL had an impact on my teaching experience as a full-time English teacher for over fifteen years?” The two realistic questions have sprung to my mind whenever I reflect on how I have been learning and teaching English. I would like to answer to these questions by discussing them from the sociolinguistic perspective. The six key concepts that I will focus mainly are on World Englishes, Standard English, and linguistic landscape (LL) for my past experience learning English, English as an international language (EIL) curriculum, linguistic diversity, and teaching email politeness for my current teaching practice.

First, the term World Englishes has affected my view on learning English. In fact, when I was a junior high school student, I learned about this concept from my English teacher (a native speaker of English from the UK) that there are three types of English spoken in the current world: English as a native language (ENL), English as a second language (ESL), and English as a foreign language (EFL). He explained to my class about its distribution in the world by presenting a world map to show how English has been used worldwide. It seemed that his explanation was based on the historical and political point of view. His small talk, which had nothing to do with the content of the course textbook during the English class, attracted my attention to the fact that there are many varieties of English as an intranational and international language. His explanation prompted me to study English more deeply from the sociolinguistic perspective. Celce-Murcia’s study (2014), having cited three concentric circles of English proposed by Kachru (1985), also reminds me of what World Englishes mean in terms of their grammar, lexicon, and phonology. For example, dropping the third person singular -s in simple present tense as seen in ‘Paul go to school every day’ suggests that there are some other grammatical variations in World Englishes. My English teacher and the two researchers have helped me to realize that some linguistic changes have been taking place over the time even within the same nation or region.

Second, the term Standard English has drawn my attention to what features define English as Standard English. This simple but important question occurred to me when I was a senior high school student right after I learned about World Englishes at a junior high school. For me interested

---

\* 学習院大学教職課程兼任講師、学習院中等科教諭

in studying abroad to learn English, some official language tests like TOEFL and IELTS served as language gatekeepers that I had to take. Since I realized that those high-stakes tests were based on Standard English, I have been curious to know about the distinction between a standard English and a non-standard English in terms of grammatical features. A native speaker of English from the US, who was working as an assistant language teacher, advised me to consult some unknown words in an authentic English-English dictionary like Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary. At that time, I was quite not sure whether I should rely on just one dictionary to decide whether one English expression is considered as a standard English. However, McKay (2002) has clearly defined Standard English by citing some research done by Strevens (1983): "A particular dialect of English, being the only non-localized dialect, of global currency without significant variation, universally accepted as the appropriate educational target in teaching English; which may be spoken with an unrestricted choice of accent." He has also introduced Bamgbose's study (1998) to state that there are five key factors in determining whether an innovation is a norm: demographic, geographical, authoritative, codification, and acceptability. Among the five factors, I think codification plays an influential role in the field of language learning as long as it is widely accepted as dictionaries and coursebooks. In this sense, it is crucial to understand what Standard English means from the pedagogical perspective as we often need a norm to make a decision on what kind of English expressions are best represented among a wide variety of English expressions.

Third, the concept linguistic landscape has explicitly reminded me of the publicly displayed texts, such as road signs and companies' advertisements that helped me to be aware of the English words and then master many English expressions. According to Rowland, L. (2013), who cited a definition of the LL provided by Landry and Bourhis (1997), "the language of public road signs, advertising billboards, street names, place names, commercial shop signs, and public signs on government buildings combines to form the linguistic landscape of a given territory, region, or urban agglomeration." This is exactly the case in Japan. As the number of immigrants and foreign tourists has been dramatically increasing over the past decades and almost all of them have been living in the Tokyo Metropolitan area, I have come to see a lot of written English signs in the malls and some public areas whenever I take a walk for a shopping and get on the train. Some international sport-related events like Soccer World Cup held in 2002 and Tokyo Olympic Games in 2020 are driving forces that encourage Japanese people to know more about the English words or phrases visually. In the late 1990's when I was a university student majoring in English and American literature, I had no choice but to learn an authentic English vocabulary in the English classroom where native speakers of English presented me with a variety of useful expressions with some specific situation provided. However, once I have learned to know that there are publicly displayed texts available for Japanese to see and recognize what each text or sign means, I have felt like knowing more English words or phrases enthusiastically out of the English classroom. This mindset has led me to communicating actively with some foreign people travelling around Tokyo. The idea of LL helped me change my learning style as well as my point of view of the English landscape around me.

Fourth, the term EIL curriculum has prompted me to rethink about what kind of instructional variety of English to use in terms of English language courses. Matsuda and Friedrich (2012) have described that "in classrooms where English is taught as an international language, the linguistic, cultural and functional diversity associated with English today challenges some fundamental

assumptions of English language teaching.” This is true for the current EFL in Japan. As I have described in the previous paragraph, EFL in Japan has been greatly influenced by English from the inner circle such as the UK, the US, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand ever since World War II ended in 1945. Especially, British English and American English have been considered as good role models that Japanese EFL teachers would like to pursue consciously or unconsciously. Such an assumption or bias against the two varieties of English has still remained even though curriculum guidelines for EFL prescribed by the national authority called the Ministry of Education do not explicitly state that British and American English are dominant varieties of English. Under this circumstance, it is so difficult for Japanese EFL teachers to meet their students’ specific needs for learning different varieties of English such as Indian English, Singapore English, and Philippine English. When I reflect on what I have been teaching English, one realistic issue comes to my mind that different students have their different learning goals and needs for their future in different contexts. With this language hierarchy in mind, I think all language teachers have to do is to make a careful consideration on a contextual basis.

Fifth, the term linguistic diversity proposed by Greeslin (2014) has drawn my attention to what extent Japanese EFL teachers can integrate students’ different learning backgrounds into the EFL classrooms. He designed a checklist called ‘rubric for evaluating linguistic diversity in classroom materials.’ In addition, he explained that “it is aimed toward including linguistic variation along geographic, social, and formal lines so that the ability to vary speech across contexts is accessible to learners.” In my working school where there are around 40 Japanese students learning English in the same classroom (three to five of them as returnee students have learned English in an inner circle, the other in an outer circle, and the rest of the group in an expanding circle, respectively), I have had no idea about how to connect one speech community with the other two communities in a more integrated way. However, it seems that I have one clue to the complicated situation. By creating some activities that help EFL students to develop their awareness of sociolinguistic competence, EFL teachers can consciously encourage them to share one group with the others from the sociolinguistic perspective. Course materials and returnee students can be key sources in fostering their sense of linguistic diversity.

Sixth, the concept of teaching email politeness has been totally new to me. Since Japan is situated in the expanding circle where English is a dominant foreign language used in limited domains, there is little opportunity for secondary students to interact with their teachers via email in English on a daily basis. This means that there are few course textbooks available for teachers to deal with the email politeness. From my teaching experience at the secondary level, I have never seen some textbooks that cope with status-congruent languages like the student-lecturer relationship except for student-student interactions. However, the students’ needs for teaching email politeness in the EFL classroom has been considerably increasing because there are a growing number of students who want to go abroad to study English. I used to be in charge of the international exchange program that is responsible for improving the students’ English ability to convey their own messages politely to their future teachers via email. I had no choice but to ask for my colleague (a native speaker of English) to teach my students how to write English messages in a more polite manner. Economidou-Kogetsidis (2015) has stated that lingua franca English usually involves participants from different linguistic and national backgrounds, and that it tends to be characterized by possible variations in the cultural norms that needs to be applied during the interactions between

one speaker and the other. Her statement is very remindful of the fact that there are some differences between Japanese and English in terms of formality and politeness. For example, contextual factors such as participants' relationships, degree of formality, and power differences are all important elements to be considered. Through her article, I have got a useful suggestion that some activities like writing and revising emails will help non-native students develop not only their pragmatic awareness but their pragmatic competence. By incorporating this writing task into EFL classrooms, I will be able to help my students improve their writing skill as well as boost their pragmatic awareness of email politeness.

All in all, both my learning experience and teaching practice remind me of the fact that they are highly relevant to the sociolinguistic issues that have been discussed by many researchers over the past few decades. The six key concepts changed my way of thinking about sociolinguistics and will have a great influence on how to teach English as a foreign language effectively even in the future.

### References

- Celce-Murcia, M., Brinton, D. and Snow, M.A. (2014). Teaching English in the context of world Englishes, *Teaching English as a second or foreign language*, 4<sup>th</sup> (Ed.), pp. 63-70.
- Economidou-Kogetsidis, M. (2015). Teaching email politeness in the EFL/ESL classroom. *ELT Journal*, 69 (4), pp. 415-424.
- Geeslin, K,L. (2014). Integrating Sociolinguistics Into the Second Language Classroom, *Sociolinguistics and Second Language Acquisition : Learning to Use Language in Context* pp. 255-277.
- MaKay, S. (2002). Standards for English as an international language. *Teaching English as an international language; rethinking goals and approaches*, pp. 49-58.
- Matsuda, A. and Friedrich, P. (2012). Selecting an Instructional Variety for an EIL Curriculum. *Principles and practices of teaching English as an international*, pp. 17-27.
- Rowland, L. (2013). The pedagogical benefits of a linguistic landscape in Japan. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, 16 (4), pp. 494-505.