Standard English or World Englishes: Issues of Ownership and Preference

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Abstract

The widespread use of English worldwide ended in Englishes which are plural when used by local language users. As these World Englishes, in contrast to that of Standard English, consider all realizations of English as equally valid, debates over non-native English norms, standards, and attitudes remain a question. Such diversities also level arguments against language ownership for communities in which English is their first language hence language models. In line with such arguments, the aims of this study were 1) to investigate, to what extent Iranian EFL learners, as a community positioned in the expanding circle of English users, present positive or negative attitudes toward World Englishes (WEs) and Standard English (SE) and 2) whether they claim ownership over English. Forty students majoring in TEFL were invited and their viewpoints were collected through three semi-structured interviews. The results revealed that most participants' views skewed toward supporting WEs. Furthermore, they were more willing to call English as EFL learners' property. Although they appreciated the prestigious stance of SE, they showed no negative views toward either WEs or SE. The study has pedagogical implications for teachers and practitioners.

Key Words: World Englishes, Standard English, Language Ownership, Expanding Circle, EFL Context.

INTRODUCTION

Nobody can deny the powerful presence of English language in the world; it is seen everywhere serving different purposes. It is the universal language of diplomacy, academic conferences, business, commerce, manufacturing, and tourism. It is listed as the official or co-official language of more than 42 countries and is used even in communities where it has no official status (Graddol, 1997). It is almost taught at all schools of the world, but has become much more than a school subject to its learners. From a wider lens, it is the sole medium to exchange experience and information in international visits, emails, phones and video-conferences. These widespread uses of English question the nature of this language as something foreign and welcome its presence as a language that is locally placed and culturally adaptable to non-native users.

English is inevitably out of conventional and standardised use of native English speakers since it is transformed into a localised English that welcome the cultural and language priorities of expanding non-native English users (Matsuda, 2003). This expanding-circle community (Kachru, 1992) of English speakers utilises English language in their own particular society and even call for authority over English (Matsuda, 2003; Holliday, 2009; Widdowson, 1994). Such rather pervasive ideas may bolster the thought that, today, English is for all and any individual who utilises it may have the power to guarantee its possession to further use it as indicated by nearby standards that may not precisely coordinate those of the local nations. Likewise, dismissing the idea of a solitary normative, standard English, distinctive varieties of English that non-local speakers use are 'world Englishes'. This idea however, is not the same as similar terms like worldwide English, world English, or global English that portray the universal utilization of English. It is contended that such terms don't sufficiently mirror the sociolinguistic reality that 'formally and functionally, English now has multicultural identities' (Kachru, 1992, p. 357). However, Kachru and Smith (2008) ask for an appreciation of diversity in the medium for expressing so many different messages similar to the welcomes that we express for diversity in dress, food, and various artifacts and fine arts.

Based on Kachru's (1992) classification there are three circles among three groups of ENL (English as a native language), ESL (English as a second language), and EFL (English as a foreign language). These groups of English users are further called the users of Inner Circle, the Outer Circle, and the Expanding Circle respectively, and Iranian English users fall in the third

circle and the innermost circle refers to the 'traditional cultural linguistic bases of English' including nations like the USA, the UK, and New Zealand, where English is the essential dialect. The Outer Circle area eludes to English as the second dialect, for example, the previous English settlements of Ghana, Malaysia, and India. In the outermost circle (including Iran), English is for the most part utilised for purposes like diplomacy, trade, or communication with different countries. From a linguistic perspective, World Englishes incorporate English as a foreign dialect and they are truly described as 'localised forms of English' (Bolton, 2005, p. 69).

World Englishes and language learning

The debate over WEs and SE has affected the immediate contexts of language learning and teaching. On the one hand, some argue that '…the immediate context of language teaching and the socio-cultural factors…' (Snow, Kamhi-Stein, & Brinton, 2006, p. 274) are points to be applied. The conundrum of English educational programs either in line with SE or under particular local expectations hence WEs is around. Although it is believed that local and outside researchers can collaboratively direct language profession, some researchers do not hesitate to suggest that teaching professions should go with local norms.

World Englishes has a new look into ESL/EFL teaching and learning since 'spread of English worldwide has made the English language plural in terms of pronunciation, vocabulary, idioms, and rhetorical styles' (Kubota & Ward, 2000, p. 80); however, to reflect the sociolinguistic reality of the largest group (EFL learners), some researchers (Jenkins, 2000; Seidlhofer, 2004) agree with those particular uses of English that do not cause communication problems, and are rendered for communication purposes. The mentioned views did not reflect ELF as a World English, however.

In fact, World Englishes view highlights the authenticity of diverse varieties of English, which are created by non-natives, as functionally independent and real (Bhatt, 2008). The idea of World Englishes, compared with that of Standard English, legitimise different qualities of Englishes worldwide; all instantiations of World Englishes as well as their specific sociocultural settings, are as legitimate as Standard English and its sociocultural context. Such viewpoints, expectedly, may create concerns for teachers and learners in EFL settings as the issues may affect English

Language Teaching (ELT) and empower local English researchers in all EFL contexts (Matsuda, 2003) since language users in such community even claim ownership over English.

Ownership of English

Closely connected to WEs is the concept of English ownership. For Widdowson (1994) ownership argument describes the ways in which speakers adjust English for their own utilization hence NSs are not the only community authorised to announce which realizations of language are grammatical and standard. In fact, Widdowson's (1994) view questions referring to English standards for measuring speakers' proficiency and suggests 'indigenization' as a possibility in language authority. According to Widdowson (1994), 'you are proficient in a language to the extent that you possess it, make it your own, bend it to your will, assert yourself through it rather than simply submit to the dictates of its form' (p. 384).

Likewise, such perspectives toward English calls for learners' consciousness of non-fixated determiners in ownership, authority and being outer. Norton (1997) believed that only when English speakers claim ownership over English do, they consider themselves to be legitimate speakers. He follows Bourdieu's (1977) view that the authorization of speakers and their ownership feeling over a specific language are interconnected.

Expectedly, if no nation can have an absolute custody over English, since this language really belongs to all people who are using it around the world (Chaung, 2002; Holliday, 2009; Widdowson, 1994) then all global language users are free from being controlled by 'a language standard by virtue of place of birth' (Holliday, 2009, p. 151; see also Phan, 2009).

A handful of studies have considered English in the Iranian context including , the use and the status of English in the country, (Zarrinabadi and Mahmoudi-Gahrouei, 2017), place and social presence of English in Iran (Sadeghi & Richards, 2015), identity of English users (Mirhosseini, 2014) ideological assumptions of English language teaching in Iran (Rezaei, Khatib and Baleghizadeh, 2014), and English use in the advertisements (Baumgardner and Brown, 2012). However, as a community of EFL learners, Iranian English users are prone to provide useful data for WEs and SE arguments. Hence the assumptions of 'ownership of English' and language users' preferences of WEs versus SE are investigated through the point of views of some outer-

circle users who are majoring in TEFL. As a research-provoking step, the present study can point to the cavity which has rarely been spotted. In fact, present study aimed to find answers to the following questions:

1. To what extent may participants present positive or negative attitudes toward WEs and SE?
2. Do Iranian EFL learners claim ownership over English?

Method

Participants

The present study invited 40 MA advanced English-major learners from Science and Research Branch, Azad University, Ahvaz, Iran. The participants had passed all their academic courses and were working on their theses; their age range was 27 to 35. The researcher selected all the participants from male students because they were available and the researcher could contact them more easily comparing with their female classmates.

Three semi-structured interviews with a total of 10 open-ended items were developed to gather participants' views on SE and WEs, as well as their feeling toward their ownership of English. The open-ended questions sought answers to questions like 'Do you appreciate more the idea of World Englishes or Standard English?' Do you assume your English is a version of World Englishes (or it is a medium that share its principles with other WEs)? Why? Why not? Do you believe in World Englishes or Standard English regarding accent and structure? Do you claim ownership over English?' (do you feel you can use English without considering the Standards?), 'Do you like to be considered as a native English speaker or as a EFL speaker when using English? (do you try not to be recognized as an EFL)?', and 'Are you concerned with standard English when you speak with your instructor or partner?'.

Procedures

The participants were interviewed one by one at university, at their own homes or at places where they worked (at schools or English institutes) depending on participants' preferences and ease of attendance. In the first session, the purpose of the study and the main variables were

explained to the participants and they were directed to answer the first 5 items out of 10 verbally. After one week, the second phase of interview was followed and participants answers to the other half of items were gathered. One week later, the last interviews were held to make sure of the validity of the participants' answers, to cover the materials which were ignored in the first and the second interviews, and also to correct some ambiguous data. During each interview participants' voice was recorded, and after each interview the answers were transcribed; interviews were formed by more than one person sometimes lasted for an hour but individual interviews usually ended around 15 minutes.

About 500 sentences were collected. To exactly find the answers to research questions these sentences were numbered, classified and summarized. Out of sentences presenting the same wordings and ideas one was kept (Dornyei, 2007). Even if different wordings of items presented the same ideas just one item remained. Those items which were not related to the questions of the study and were biased like 'Persian language is richer than English' were omitted. Finally, thirty-nine items remained to be analyzed. Next, the items were classified into two categories regarding the two questions of the study; each category is displayed in a particular table (Tables 1 and 2); at the end, each group of items in the mentioned categories which presented one similar idea was classified under a new theme. The themes were selected based on the content of the items which in turn formed a particular idea regarding the questions of the study.

RESULTS

Participants' views regarding SE and WEs, their preferences toward these two varieties and willingness to have English ownership are issues that the results of this study suggest. Descriptive statistics presented by each table summarizes participants' preferences and views.

Table 1. *WEs and SE in Iranian Advanced EFL learners' views*

WEs and SE in Iranian Advanced EFL learners' views
1. English is going everywhere, so we should respect all English varieties.
2. WEs varieties can help us to have a good communication with native and non-native speakers.

3. WEs make communication easier.

4. WEs facilitates real life communication.

5. Knowing WEs varieties and accent make communication more effective and easier.

6. WEs are tools to help people to communicate with people from different countries successfully.

7. They are very effective and they give us a chance to communicate with people from China, Argentina and also native speakers.

8. WEs are enough for me to communicate with all people around the world.

9. The version of English we speak is a kind of English and deserves respect, as it carries communication.

10. WEs are worldwide and understanding and knowing them is a sign to respect people who use them.

11. As long as a language provides communication among humans, it is useful and deserves respect.

12. WEs should exist to make communication easier among all countries.

13. We cannot deny the power of WEs since they are seen all over the world.

14. WEs are worldwide phenomena to bring all people around the world together.

15. The number of nonnative speakers of English is far larger than SE speakers; since they are being used everywhere; this shows power of that WEs.

16. SE is great because of its prestigious accent.

17. I think American and British English are superior to other varieties.

18. SE which is used and spoken in native countries such as Australia, America and England

is more natural.

19. SE accent is fantastic and really beautiful.

20. I think SE enjoys more natural and beautiful accent.

21. Speaking with SE accent is great.

22. SE is more fluent.

Based on Table 1, 15 items out of 22 (about 68/18%), supported the idea of WEs. That is, these items presented positive attitudes toward WEs. And 7 items out of 22 (about 31/81 %) advocated SE for its prestigious accent. To have a more unified map of coded and categorized data, each group of items which presented one theme received a separate name. That is, the participants' 22 positive views toward WEs or SE were classified into 3 main themes. Regarding the content, the themes were named as Successful communication through WEs, WEs a worldwide phenomenon, the prestige of SE.

Participants' positive views toward WEs

As it went on, participants of this study supported WEs for 2 reasons. These reasons formed two themes that presented positive views to WEs. As descriptive statistics in Table 1 shows participants had more positive views toward WEs comparing with their views toward SE.

Successful communication through WEs

Out of 15 items which supported WEs, 10 items suggested successful communication through WEs to justify this position. As it can be seen in Table 1, one noticeable reason for participants to support WEs is that they (WEs) pave the way for successful communication for all people or nations. For example, one participant said 'WEs varieties can help us to have a good communication with native speakers and non-native speakers' (item 2). Another participant stated 'The version of English we speak is a kind of English and deserves respect, as it carries communication' (item 9).

WEs: a worldwide phenomenon

Participants said that WEs are seen all over the world, and they should be respected. Five items supported WEs because of this characteristic. The second reason for participants to advocate WEs is that they (WEs) are widespread phenomena. Table 1, depicts that English is seen everywhere and all nations and countries whether native or non-native use it around the world, so WEs should be respected. For example, it is said 'English is going everywhere, so we should respect WEs' (item 1). It is also suggested that 'WEs are worldwide and understanding and knowing them is (used) a sign to respect people who use them' (item 10). Students believed English is a worldwide phenomenon like internet; it should be honored and used by all.

As it can be seen clearly and simply in Table 1, no negative attitudes was presented toward WEs. To sum up, according to the above table, 15 sentences supported and appreciated the existence of WEs because they mostly provided successful communication, and they are used worldwide.

Participants' positive views toward SE

Based on Table 1, 7 items out of 22 (31/81%) supported the idea of SE. One theme was identified based on participants' preferences. In fact, participants of the study appreciated SE because they feel it is prestigious.

The prestige of SE

As it is clear in Table 1, 7 items out of 22 advocated SE accents because of its prestige and beauty. Participants revealed positive attitudes toward SE accent because it is more prestigious and natural. For instance, in item 16, one participant directly asserted that 'SE is great because of its prestigious accent'. It is also said that 'I think SE enjoys more natural and beautiful accent' (item 20).

Students' preferred positions: WEs versus SE

Concerning ownership which is the variable of the second question, two distinct positions were identified. Although some claimed ownership over English, and some said that English

belongs only to native countries, the direction that their views are skewing is the point for answering the questions of this study. The following table displays all these views.

Table 2. *EFL learners' views on ownership over English*

EFL learners' views on ownership of English
23. English like any other worldwide phenomena like internet is for all today.
24. Since I use it I own it.
25. It belongs to all countries.
26. It does not only belong to native speakers.
27. English is an international language that belongs to all people.
28. It is no doubt that English is an international language because it is being spoken by majority of people around the world.
29. All people have right to speak and use English.
30. English belongs to all countries since it is the language of trade and international conferences.
31. Learning English is a human right nowadays like going to school.
32. Learning English is every body's right.
33. English is an international language that no country can have custody over it.
34. English belongs to native countries like America, Australia, and England only.
35. I never claim ownership over English, because English is a language which I learned at school.
36. I use English as my foreign language, so I don't claim over it, and I am just an English user.
37. English is the property of native countries, and other countries are English users.
38. Learning and using English is very limited in our country; outside of school we don't have any communication because of this, I never claim ownership over English.
39. EFL countries are just English users, not owners.

The items covering participants' views regarding ownership over English were classified into 2 main themes which present two almost opposite positions.

Sense of belonging to English

Eleven items out of 17 (64%70) went for WEs, and they showed that participants felt ownership over English. Based on the collected data in Table 2, they felt they own English language as they own their L1- Persian. They believed they own English as native speakers do, and also, they claimed that English language is a worldwide phenomenon which belongs to all nations and countries. For example, it is said 'English is an international language that belongs to all people (item 27). It is also expressed that 'English belongs to all countries since it is the language of trade and international conferences (item 30).

English: the language of its native countries

Some participants did believe that English language is just the property of the native countries, and other countries are only English users. Sex items out of 17 (35%29) suggested that English language only belongs to native countries. Some items showed that English only belongs to native countries like England and America. These sex items showed that participants attributed English language to natives. They believed EFL countries are only English users not owners. One reason for participants that did not claim ownership over   English was the limited uses of English in Iran. For example, one participant directly said that 'learning and using English is very limited in our country; outside of school we don't have any communication because of this, I never claim ownership over English' (item 38). Item 37 revealed that 'English is the property of native countries, and other countries are English users'. All in all, most participants of this study supported WEs and they showed no negative views toward both WEs and SE; moreover, they're more willing to call English EFL learners property.
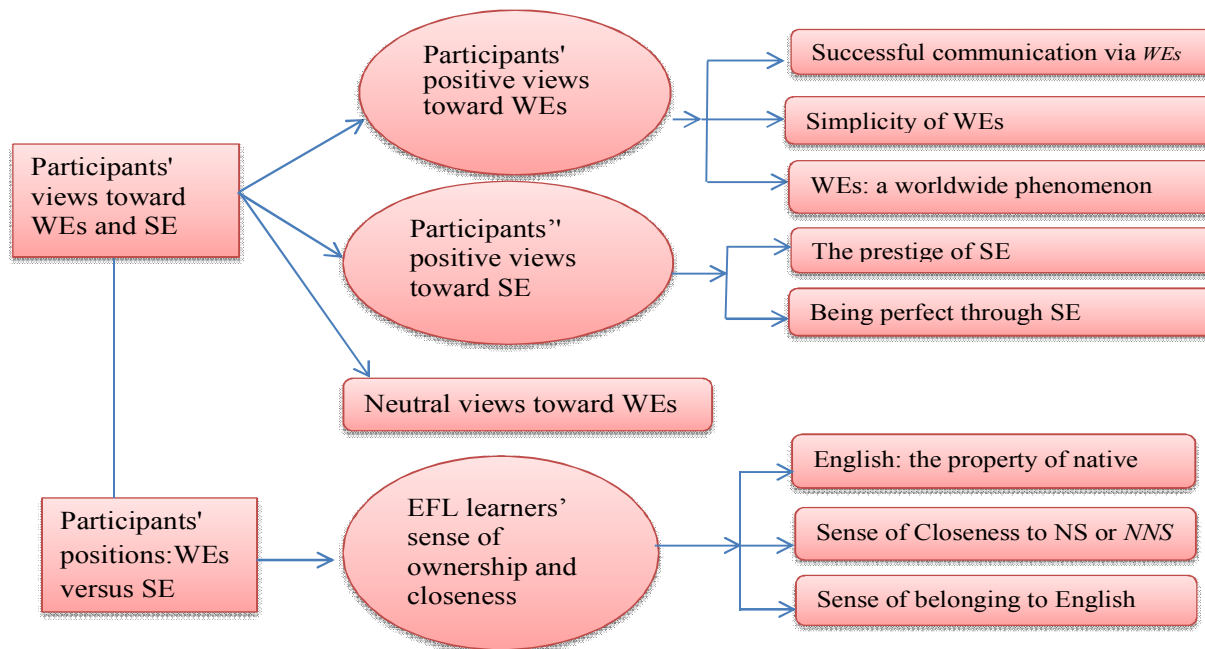
Figure 4.1. Summary of the results

Discussion

As the largest group of language learners in the history of humanity belongs to English learners worldwide, all nations with such learners might be willing to decide when, how, and what kind of English they want. Moreover, nations, language learners included, are to determine what relationship the teaching of English may have with the teaching of local languages (Kachru & Smith, 2008). To understand the position of English in the fast-globalizing world we are required to consider not only the changes of English itself, but to perceive its changes in local spaces and to answer questions like *why* different people use English, '*how* local people use English and *how* English co-exists with the other languages spoken in the locality' '(Georgieva, 2011, p. 3), and how learners view such questions.

In the light of mentioned ideas, the present study aimed to investigate such *hows, whens*, and *why*s from the lenses of some Iranian language learners who are classified as expanding circle of language learners. Most participants of the present study claimed ownership over English as they

said they would learn the language better when they feel English belongs to them. Although the findings are in line with Norton's (1997) that only when English speakers assert ownership of English do they claim themselves to be legitimate speakers, there remain dilemmas. EFL speakers may not be able to meet standard varieties of English, so they may feel incompetent to claim ownership of the language (Yeh, 2013). Still, it is argued that no nation can have custody over English, as long as it is used by many people internationally (Holliday, 2009; Widdowson, 1994, 2003; Chaung, 2002). So, are EFL learners exceptions? Although such positions bring about a certain degree of liberation from being controlled by 'a language standard by virtue of place of birth' (Holliday, 2009, p. 151), it might be so simplistic a view to have an either or choice regarding SE and WEs. That is there must be a compromise between local and outside researchers to collaboratively manage language profession while local norms are observed (Snow, Kamhi-Stein, and Brinton, 2006).

The participants of this study also pointed to the diversity of Englishes used in different sociocultural contexts, and evaluated all diversities of English uses as valid as SE. For Davis (2004), WEs' ideology does not appreciate the special status of native speakers of English and in fact questions native speakers' discriminations against users of world Englishes. Following these ideas, WEs aim to highlight the equality of different forms of English and question the Western-centric linguistic hegemony (Chaung 2002; Yan & Su, 2008), where SE is the deterministic way for international English users. The finding of present study confirmed that participants preferred more WEs without the yard stick of SE since they believed in WES as communication means for people around the world. They claimed that WEs should be recognized as valid and respectful as SE is; however, a number of participants advocated SE mostly because of its accent. They preferred it over WEs because these participants believed SE accent is more prestigious than WEs; such views in turn, confirm Pishghadam and Sabouri (2011) concluding remarks that Iranian EFL learners consider Standard accent of English to be quite superior to the Persian accent of English; moreover, they considered those with standard accent to be better teachers.

These results can highlight some sociolinguistic implications for both EFL learners and teachers. English users may get aware that there is no best and worst variety of Englishes; that is WEs are varieties of English just as SE is. As a result, language learners and teachers may learn about functions of varieties in their immediate contexts and how different varieties empower language users to realize their immediate goals. Furthermore, language teachers may no longer

insist on any particular accent which may 'reinforces an artificial barrier between another Circle characterized as 'norm-breakers,' and an Inner Circle as 'norm makers' (Kachru, 1985, cited in Kachro & Smith, 2008). That is, language teachers may not determine learners' knowledge by referring to SE standard; instead, they consider learners' immediate needs and future purposes.

Conclusion

As the participants of the present study have all grappling with either or choices of WEs versus SE during their educational trajectory, what they suggested as their preferred variant of English or their right for claiming ownership, can be conducive to some points. First, as teachers and language planners we should welcome the attitudes that expanding circle users grasp firmly. The participants appreciated SE accent and prestige but out cried their EFLness may call for more democratic and liberal views toward our judgments when we assess such parties' language skills; furthermore, they may have the right to choose what to want to learn.   Second, although language ownership is a multi-dimensional affair (Higgins, 2003; Seilhamer, 2015), in line with cultural linguistics views (Sharifian, 2015), the global spread of English ended in English localization where WEs signal cultural expectations of different communities, and highlight communities in which use of English may have a different manifestation regarding cultural views. Although it is a big claim to call for legitimizing, authorizing and recognizing of all mentioned issues and preferences it is the responsibility of prosperous researchers to irect their lights on spots that crave more research.

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