

THE CHALLENGE OF PRESCRIPTIVISM IN TEACHING ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

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Odată cu apariția fenomenului *Limbi engleze mondiale*, profesorului de limbă engleză îi este tot mai dificil să recomande pentru însușire o variantă sau alta a limbii engleze. Adepții prescriptivismului afirmă că există doar o variantă standard a limbii engleze, celelalte fiind o deviere de la această variantă. În articol sunt abordate provocările prescriptivismului în procesul de predare a limbii engleze.

Nowadays we live in a global village, and what seemed impossible not so long ago in terms of encounters, communication, travel is accessible for most people. Interaction requires that people communicate, and it is quite a challenge for those involved in the process, with thousands of languages spoken in the world, to make themselves understood and to understand the others. The English language assumed the role of lingua franca in order to make communication possible between people. The language is studied worldwide in the most remote regions due to the social prestige it confers to its speakers. English is taught and learned in many countries because it is indisputably the international language, it is seen by many as a means to open doors to parts of the world that are not accessible to everyone otherwise, and learners are delighted by the increased international opportunities they believe the knowledge of English will bring to them. Due to all these factors, it is imperative that both teachers and learners should develop an understanding and be aware of the linguistic diversity and have positive attitudes towards World Englishes.

Interacting with people from different countries, we hear English with a range of fluency, which often deviates from the Standard English we have been taught in terms of accent, vocabulary, grammar. When so many people communicate in the same language worldwide, there is a tendency to develop some local varieties of it, which will concern vocabulary, pronunciation and grammar. Although these variations are not opposed to by sociolinguists, there are many who condemn their recognition and are inflexible as regards the standard variant which should be accepted by all the educated people regardless of where they live.

Purists hold the belief that there was a period when the language was pure and it is of utmost importance to restore English to its former state. According to them, language should be stopped from its development and preserved unchangeable.

John Lyons wrote in *Language and Linguistics* that “There are no absolute standards of correctness in language” [4, p.52]. When learners of English as a foreign language make mistakes and say something which violates the well-established rules of grammar and usage, it is considered that they do not sound in English as native speakers do. However, the native speaker should not be idealized as a model for second language learning. Kramsch also questioned the idealization of the native speaker [1, p.15]. She questioned the fact that native speakers use the idealized, standardized version of their language as their speech is influenced by geography, occupation, age, and social status. The ultimate decision is attributed to the society as language can exist only within a society and it is the means of communication and what form of language to accept as the standard variant belongs to the society wholly. Language has the task to help people in their need for communication in the society in order to interact and to establish contacts. Frank Palmer wrote in *Grammar* “What is correct and what is not correct is ultimately only a matter of what is accepted by society, for language is a matter of conventions within society” [8].

C.L.Wrenn started his book *The English Language* with stating the fact that “Language is the expression of human personality, whether written or spoken” [7, p.1]. He also wrote that “Language is an ever-changing and developing expression of human personality, and does not grow well under rigorous direction” [7, p.84]. Therefore, it is obvious for everyone that just as the human personality develops, so does the language and too much guidance and rigour will produce a counter-effect.

The supporters of prescriptivism base their attitude on an authority whose postulates will be followed by other members of a speech community. This authority in the English language is considered Henry Fowler,

who in *English Usage* set the standards for the British English. Other authorities who consider themselves entitled to prescribe rules of usage are the Oxford English Dictionary lexicographers. However, a number of words and word combinations had been in usage for many years, even centuries, when they were finally introduced in the dictionary. This is the case of *acid rain* and *politically correct*, for example, the former having been recorded in 1859 and the latter in 1793. For this reason and for a number of other reasons prescriptivism is strongly opposed to. Prescription presupposes choices made consciously and thus favours one form over the others. Frequently, the upper class's speech is taken for granted as the standard dialect. This conscious choice has sometimes the aim of promoting the language variant of a certain social class or regional community and this could lead to political controversies. Moreover, anyone considers himself entitled to give advice of what is correct in a language; this is why many linguists are sceptical of the quality of advice given in many usage guides.

Prescriptivism criticizes any deviation from the imaginary standard, thus failing to recognize the natural process of linguistic change and variation. The standard to which it appeals may refer to some previous stages of the language evolution. In doing so, the prescriptivists are averse to linguistic change and diversity. Prescriptive attitudes are quite widespread and they are characterised by a resistance to the facts of language use; their supporters tend to view as inferior even well-established usage which does not conform to the idealised norm. Such attitudes are damaging from the educational point of view, especially when it is attempted to enforce them in communities in which the range of variation is greater than in Great Britain. In addition, many young people are included in various exchange programmes, supported and financed by the governments of the English-speaking countries. They have to study and live in a community in which English seems 'slightly different' from what they have been taught at school, from textbooks in which rules of usage are prescribed rather than described. Such a situation can certainly lead to confusion and misunderstanding. Therefore, over-prescriptivism shapes an inadequate approach to reconciling the need for good standard language.

Any effort to remove or to attach a stigma to a non-standard variety will be regarded as an attack on the values and social identity of the speaker. There are other consequences of language prescription, which are related to a person's mobility and access to employment. A person might speak quite good English, with occasional usages of substandard forms, and for this reason, he or she will be refused certain employment opportunities. However, there will be no official recognition that the refusal is attributed to the use of language. An even more serious negative consequence of prescriptivism is the class discrimination. It is an established fact that those who use the 'unacceptable' grammar and pronunciation generally belong to lower social classes; hence, such attitudes to language may be viewed as discrimination on the grounds of the social class a speaker belongs to. Despite the fact that discrimination on the grounds of race, religion, social class, gender is publicly condemned and disapproved of, discrimination on linguistic grounds is accepted.

Teachers and learners of English face the task of choosing among so many varieties of the language and so many prescriptive authorities in terms of grammar, pronunciation, usage. This task may sometimes be daunting and deter anyone. The English language has not only the most expansive vocabulary of all languages, but it also has confusing grammatical rules, which are necessary to be studied in order to master it. Once one has overcome the difficulties related to grammar and to all the exceptions from the rules, another discouraging task will be the use of prepositions.

The solutions suggested by many leading authorities seem to be of little help. Any country in which English is the official language is entitled to publish textbooks for those who want to learn it. All these books do not reflect the English language as it is spoken by the majority of native speakers. Even those teachers who are worried by over-prescriptive approaches in the classroom feel that prescriptive grammar is of little use in helping them face practical problems.

Many learners and teachers of English are tolerant of the large diversity of Englishes and accept the regional standard and non-standard varieties of the language as structurally effective communicative systems. Teachers have to adopt an alternative approach to teaching English, which will consist in explaining facts about the way in which the great variety of sociolects and regional dialects are related to each other, thus leading to an understanding of the social functions and structural characteristics of the standard dialect.

Nevertheless, the proper usage of a language denotes intelligence and complying with societal rules and their acceptance. The way one speaks will influence the kind of milieu that is considered important for the individual. Spelling is certainly crucial for effective communication as it provides evidence that the person pays attention to the impression made about him or her.

Similar problems with language variation were faced by other languages, such as Italian and French. However, special academies were founded in order to ascertain, refine, and fix these languages, first the Accademia della Crusca in Italy, founded in 1582 with the purpose of purifying the Italian language, and later l'Academie francaise, founded by Cardinal Richelieu in 1635, having the same targets. Language academies currently expound, authorize and censor in many countries across the globe. No academy exists to regulate English usage and therefore there is no universally accepted Standard English.

The scientific truth consists in the fact that Standard English is only one variety among many, although a significant one. Scholars are convinced that all languages, and correspondingly all dialects, are equally appropriate and good as linguistic systems if they meet the needs of their speakers. According to P.Trudgill, “value judgements concerning the correctness and purity of linguistic varieties are *social* rather than linguistic. There is nothing at all inherent in non-standard varieties which makes them inferior. Any apparent inferiority is due only to their association with speakers from under-privileged, low-status groups” [6, p.8]. Therefore, prejudices against non-standard dialects are the same prejudices that reflect the social structure of society. No pronunciation, word or grammatical construction can be considered objectively as being superior to others from a strictly linguistic viewpoint. It was the chance of the London region to impose its dialect as the standard language, but if any other capital area had been chosen, the dialect of that region would have acquired that function, and, no doubt, the same prejudices would have existed concerning the speech characteristics of the other areas. “To say that some word or form is better than some other, because Shakespeare or Milton or King James Bible used it, is like saying that a particular colour of red is better because Titan or Rubens used it. It may perhaps be better for getting a particular aesthetic or artistic effect – that is the creative artist’s or critic’s concern, not ours; but it is obviously not better from a scientific or practical point of view.” [3, p.50] [borrowed from H.Hulban “Syntheses in English Lexicology and Semantics”, p.234].

The study of regional linguistic variation has much to offer as the more we know about regional variation and change in the use of English, the more we will appreciate the striking individuality of each of the varieties that is called a dialect, and the less we are likely to adopt a despising attitude towards people from other parts of the world who speak English. An understanding of World Englishes can promote multiculturalism and enrich one’s teaching of history and geography. Students come to understand the sociocultural, political, and moral issues related to linguistic diversity. A first step, according to D.Crystal, is “to replace the notion that a regional variety is ‘only a dialect’, because it lacks prestige of the standard language, with the realization that every dialect is a source of great linguistic complexity and potential” [2, p.299]. Further, the linguist notes that it is difficult to persuade ourselves that a dialect which we find worth detesting is “a variety of the English language which deserves as much respect, as the variety we speak ourselves” [2, p.299].

When learning a language, the foreign student generally learns the standard variant of the English language, because this is the variant which is accepted everywhere in the English speaking world, constituting, at the same time, an important instrument of international communication. However, in most cases, English is taught to non-native speakers by non-native speakers, neither teachers not students being in much contact with native speakers. That is, people do not always speak the way they think they do, and linguistic insecurity is perhaps one of the main motivations for linguistic prescriptivism. Models need to be found which will accommodate the population trends and interactions. Teachers of English are expected to be exposed to multicultural ideas and examples, otherwise they “go out into the world in very much the same state of mind as a certain zealous sort of religious missionary who seeks to show ‘the lost’ the error of their ways – without knowing anything about their ways” [5, p.95]. Teaching English and learning English turn out to be complex and difficult tasks. In order to achieve positive results, it is of utmost importance in the process of training teachers to create awareness of the status and functions of World Englishes in the world today and in that of the future.

Therefore, teachers should lead students to discover language differences as a way of laying a foundation for examining the World Englishes. The teacher of English should teach the common core that stands at the basis of all the English dialects and guide the learner to stick to one variant of the English language rather than select what seems more likeable and attractive from each variant. Moreover, this common core will enable people to pass any tests in English, as they will be made up based on the essential features of English, which are a component part of all the World Englishes.

Moderate prescriptivism has to be compulsory in teaching a language as learners should be aware of standard literary language with all its conventions, though artificial sometimes, as literary language is part of the cultural system. They should certainly know it and be able to use it freely. Yet, no illusions about its real form should be developed while teaching, as Standard English (British, American, Australian, Canadian etc.) is not better or more sensible to the needs of communication. Therefore, much of what is taught in the standard language is just a history of artificialities which no longer correspond to the real communication. However, learners should know them because they are part of the cultural community in which they play a role and all the variants of the English languages developed having these artificial rules as the starting point.

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