The Inspirations of Sociolinguistic Variables in Language Pedagogies

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Abstract

In traditional second language teaching, teachers teach the second language as a subject. Thus, their teaching focus is more on linguistic features rather than communicative competence. Since the 1960s, sociolinguistics, as a new field, reveals that language has a close connection with social activities rather than a pure linguistic subject. Then, a series of researchers (Hornberger & McKay, 2010; Geeslin & Long, 2014) confirm the necessity of learning the language in the social context. This study will demonstrate that social factors, such as ethnicity, gender, and social class, which bring variants in linguistic forms, style, and register, are relevant closely to language teaching. Through concerning these sociolinguistic variants, educators would realize the importance of teaching the second language in the social context. Finally, this paper will list three current issues in a traditional class: interaction neglection, overemphasized standard accents, and silence phenomena. After reviewing the inspirations gained from sociolinguistic variation, this study will raise several suggestions to promote language teaching changes in terms of contents and methods.

Keywords

Language; Social context; Social factors.

1. Introduction

As the primary tool, language is used to interact in every society, according to Geeslin & Long (2014). Metaphorically, language seems like a mirror of society. The relationship between them is reciprocal that social interactions impact the formation and changes of language and language shape social activities (Trudgill, 2000). However, in the traditional second language teaching model, linguistic elements, such as grammar, pronunciation, and vocabulary, are regarded as the main language acquisition content. Teachers neglect the aspect of using language in social contexts. Based on the drawbacks of the traditional model, Hornberger & McKay (2010) question the regular model and state that language learning should be immersed in social settings rather than learning as a subject. Since sociolinguistics establishment in the 1960s, it has unshed changes in the language teaching area. This paper will mainly explain in detail to demonstrate the relationship between sociolinguistic variables and linguistic variation. The research of sociolinguistic variables inspires language teaching to make changes both in teaching contents and methods.

2. Sociolinguistics

2.1.   What Is Sociolinguistics

Sociolinguistics, as a multidiscipline, is a broad study of society and language. It mainly investigates the variants of language under different social conditions (Geeslin and Long, 2014). Labov's (1966) study demonstrates that the pronunciation of /r/ has a relationship with social

class in New York City, which has become the mainstream in sociolinguistics. Based on Labov's work, Hymes (1972) questions Chomsky's (1965) view that linguistic performance should be distinct from performance. As a new term, communicative competence raised by Hymes (1972) is regarded as the paradigm of combining linguistic competence and performance. Labov (1966) and Hymes (1972) findings are metaphor as the founding fathers of sociolinguistics. Their conclusions have unshed a series of sociolinguists to explore more between social factors and linguistic variants.

More recently, sociolinguistic research spreads to dialectology, historical linguistics, and language contact with considerable influence from sociology and psychology (Tagliamonte, 2011). The analysis of sociolinguistics has established a transparent system. According to different research objects, sociolinguistics is divided into macro sociolinguistics and micro sociolinguistics. The former mainly studies the overall issues concerning the whole situation, for example, language standardization issues, the formulation of language policies and language plans, etc. The latter mainly studies language variation in style, register, dialects, genres, etc. caused by social factors such as ethnicity, class, gender, age, etc. (Hornberger & McKay, 2010). This study will focus on micro sociolinguistics. Through observing sociolinguistic variables, it would inspire educators to make changes in language pedagogies.

Sociolinguistic variables research would provide some inspirations for language teaching. In the study, Starr (2019) reports that those children acquire sociolinguistic variations in linguistics, social constraints, and style when exposed to language environments. Starr (2019) investigates the pattern of t/d deletion among 60 Singapore children to test their attitudes and teaching model. The author finds that there has a dramatic connection between their attitudes and the rate of deletion. Starr's (2019) research confirms that sociolinguistic variables have a relationship with social contexts and psychology. Moreover, Trudgill (2000) supports that different communities would have distinct linguistic recognition and diffusion because they share diverse cultural backgrounds. These results prove that the goal of language teaching is to interact in social settings.

2.2. Sociolinguistic Variation

Sociolinguistic variation mainly refers to the change of one or some language variants (pronunciation, form, syntax, etc.) with the evolution of social factors (ethnicity, gender, age, etc.) or other language factors (Geeslin and Long, 2014). Saussure (1916) and Chomsky (1965) both against language variation and support the notion that language variation is an accidental, isolated, or biased language from the interference of social factors to language norms. However, Herzog et al. (1968) challenge their belief and indicate that language, as a tool for social communication and identification, has a strong identity and an orderly system with multiple variations. Sociolinguistics variation view dramatically enriches the linguistic theory. This view also makes up for the limitation of a unilateral understanding of the homogeneity of language.

2.3. Social Conditions

2.3.1. Ethnicity

One essential sociolinguistic variable is ethnicity and religion. In many countries, the populations are composed of different cultural backgrounds. For instance, English is the dominant language in America, Canada, and Australia, while English is not the home language for all the residences in these countries. People from different cultural backgrounds may use various linguistic features from native speakers. Trudgill (2000) maintains that the difference in the community may impact linguistic recognition and diffusion. Tagliamonte (2011) further explains Trudgill's (2000) view that certain linguistic characters would reflect ethnicity's identity. For example, the pronunciation of some words may be different in the mainstream community and ethnic community. Another explanation given by Fought (2002) is that both

mainstream and ethnic communities would also show the difference in the frequency and patterns of using some sharing of linguistic variables. Thus, there is no doubt that ethnicity variation impact on linguistic variation.

2.3.2. Gender

Plenty of research has investigated the difference in language usage between males and females and finds that women and men have their language register. According to Wolfram (1969), women are more sensitive to linguistic forms of social evaluation than men. Labov (1972) supports Wolfram's idea and further explains that females are more vulnerable, typically in terms of prestige forms. In Lakoff's (1973) work, she observes the gender difference in American society and finds "women register." For example, females express more indirectly and politely. Less powerful and stigmatized forms and more intensifiers and tag, as well as statement questions, are used by women group. According to these findings, many researchers have given explanations of the gender difference. Chambers (2003) explains that biological features decide these differences. It means that females are superior to men innately in the aspect of linguistic ability. Another explanation is the difference in social position. Labov (2001) maintains that socioeconomic weakness, psychological and sociological insecurity, impact females' sociolinguistic behaviors. As a result, gender as a social factor influences language usage in form, register, and style.

2.3.3. Social Class

Linguistic features would act like a mirror to the social class. Labov (1966) conducts a sociolinguistic investigation of social stratification of /r/ in New York City. Three levels of social status based on three departments, named Saks (upper middle), Macy (lower middle), and S. Klein (working class), were investigated by Labov (1966). Labov (1966) leads the objects to pronounce the "fourth floor" twice by the designed conversation model in his research. By observing their/r/ pronunciation characters, Labov (2006) reveals that the higher social class is, the more frequent of /r/ would be pronounced. Besides, by comparing the difference between the first time /r/ pronunciation and second time /r/ pronunciation, Labov (1966) indicates that the lower middle class are more sensitive to aware the forms of prestige. As a result, they show a significant increase in using /r/ in emphatic speech comparing with their first time to pronounce /r/. In summary, the class level has a close connection with the speakers' choice of phonological variations.

3. Language Teaching

3.1. The Aim of Language Teaching

Language teaching is the process of transferring the language by the teacher to learners. Cook (1999) presents two goals of language teaching. The first one is that students are taught in the classroom where they learn language features and get practice in conversational situations. The second aim, realized in social cases, is that learners go outside and communicate with native speakers in real situations. According to these two language teaching goals, it is clear to find that language learning is associated closely with interactional activities.

3.2. Current Issues in Language Teaching

3.2.1. Interaction Neglection

The top problem in language teaching class, typically L2 teaching class, is that language teachers mainly concern teaching L2 linguistic knowledge and neglect interaction in language teaching. Mastering many vocabularies, arranging words into correct sentences, and pronouncing in a nativelike way are the top three goals. However, the cultivation of these skills would not be enough for L2 learners to communicate with native speakers. The lack of interactions causes them still feeling confused about how to use language in social contexts.

3.2.2. Over-emphasis on Standardized Accent Learning

Second language learners spend too much time on learning standard English, typically accent. There is a universal concept among second language learners that speaking English naturally is the certification for good learners. Based on this belief, a significant number of second language learners spend much time practicing speaking in a native-like way. However, it would be odd if one speaks English like a broadcast worker or a host in the daily conversation. Thus, acquiring a standard English accent takes a significant part of learners' time in language learning, but it may sometimes be unacceptable in real social conversations.

3.2.3. Silence Class

Silence class is also a significant issue in the language teaching class. Duff (2002) investigates the manner of peer dynamics in a Canadian class composed of native students and non-native speakers speaking Chinese and Cantonese. These students were asked to discuss a topic relevant to Chinese culture. During class discussion, Duff (2002) finds an interesting phenomenon that even though these non-native speakers were familiar with the topic, they still tend to mute and inaccessible. Refusing chances to express their interests and knowledge, non-native students avoided humiliation by keeping silent. Regarding this phenomenon, Gee (2004) conclusions that language is not the only thing that students need to get. He highlights the importance of discourse on how to interact with others in the right way and place would be regarded as proper sociolinguistic competence.

4. The Inspirations of Sociolinguistic Variables In Language Teaching

4.1. The Benefits of Teaching Language in Social Contexts

Sociolinguistics focuses on how to use language into society and to interact with interlocutors appropriately. In this way, teaching language based on social actions would cultivate the communicative competence of language learners. Hymes (1966) points out that communicative competence is the ability to use grammatical and cultural knowledge in an appropriate way and method. His view against Chomsky (1965) holds the belief to distinction linguistic competence and performance. According to Lyie Bachman (1990), communicative competence deals with cultural aspects of language, such as registers, politeness, and formality. Broersma (2001) states that this competence involves understanding situations, saying the right expressions, and doing the proper things. Therefore, sociolinguistics variables could be helpful for educators to teach language in social situations by practicing interactions.

4.2. Changes in Content Teaching

4.2.1. Cultivate Style Awareness & Polite

English teaching should cultivate students' style awareness and politeness by introducing relevant knowledge. According to the needs of different communication environments, different styles should be used. Therefore, people's language communication has a specific scope of a register so that people have different language styles when communicating in different registers. Besides, Brown & Levinson (1987) raise the theory of politeness, which is regarded as the paradigm to obey in the conversation. They point out that speakers need to concern "face" in their conversations. One is the positive face, which is the image that the speakers desire to show in public. Another one is the negative face that speakers want to avoid intrusions on their field. Language learners should be taught to be polite and avoid threatening the face of interlocutors. In a word, the cultivation of style awareness and enhancing the politeness level would be essential content for language learners to learn.

4.2.2. Take Less Effort on the Standard English Accent

Language learners should focus more on the interactions rather than speaking in a standard way in their language learning process. According to Canagarajah (2007), the number of non-native English speakers has overtasked native speakers' number. Benesch (1993) states that many conversations take place on nonstandard English features, both native speakers, and non-native speakers. Additionally, sociolinguistic variables impact on the form of linguistic forms from time to time. This trend inspires educators that language learning should concern more about how to deliver productive and successful conversations. Learning English in a standard way, typically nativelike accent, would not that necessary in the real conversation.

4.2.3. Language Localization

Second, foreign language teaching should connect with local culture and identity (Hornberger & McKay, 2010). English teaching tightly integrates with cultural education. The mastery of cultural knowledge also cultivates students' humanistic quality and improves their language comprehension ability. In our current language teaching, educators bridge between the second or foreign language and local features. Teaching language knowledge such as pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar, cultural backgrounds should be introduced. Hornberger & McKay (2010) realize that second language teachers may not be familiar with the western contexts mentioned in textbooks. Though language teachers are familiar with western routines, they may also feel it challenging to keep their students learning a second language in a stimulated western country. Language teachers could establish a relationship between second language and local identity because they are good at a second language and genuinely familiar with the local culture.

4.3.   Changes in Teaching Method

4.3.1. Interactional Activities Outside the Classroom

Schools can encourage students' language learning by organizing exchange activities between different schools, holiday exchange programs, etc. The ultimate goal of foreign language teaching is to develop students' social communication abilities. Hornberger & McKay (2010) reveal that the majority of parts of English conversations are among non-native speakers. Thus, designing more L2 to L2 interaction activities would help language learners learn various background cultures and promote their English knowledge. English learning should not be limited to classroom teaching. Language teaching should be further enriched and go outside. Language teachers should cultivate students to act as the host in their language learning process to change the traditional spoon-feeding teaching model.

4.3.2. Interactional Activity Inside Classroom

Organizing role play in the class would be a useful method for language learners to practice under simulated social contexts. Roleplay is an instrument used in pragmatic research to collect data close to natural interaction data. It owns several advantages that designers could design different settings and roles. For example, the study could set the degree of situations in the aspects of social power (+P, -P), social distance (+D, -D), and imposition (+I, -I) to test speech acts, such as to request, refusal, and offer (Bella, 2014). As classroom practice, language teachers could introduce this method into a language class, which could help students practice the language under simulating social contexts. In this way, language learners could improve their communicative competence, typically sociolinguistic competence.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the main aim of this study is to gain some inspirations from sociolinguistic variables. After rethinking these inspirations, educators should make changes in the language teaching model. Firstly, teaching the second language outside social contexts is unworkable

through the research of sociolinguistic variables, language educators aware that language teaching should connect closely with social activities. Moreover, educators should focus on cultivating communicative competence instead of emphasizing on standard forms in linguistic. Canagarajah (2007) states that the main aim of using language is to communicate with others. Thus, there is no necessity to learn a second language following standard forms. Thirdly, second language teaching should immerse in the local culture. Combining second language learning with local culture would help learners acquire a new language quickly because they are more familiar with local customs and peers around them. However, some problems still exist in the process of language teaching. In the short term, both teachers and students would feel challenging to transfer from the traditional one into the more interactional one. Besides, these changes in language teaching are based on theory instead of practice. Thus, some of the meatuses would not be workable in real teaching activities.

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