



World Englishes and Language Assessment in English Language Teaching in Sri Lanka: A Conceptual Review

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ABSTRACT

This study is a conceptual review investigating the significance of World Englishes (WE) ideologies and its perspectives for (re)conceptualizing language assessment (LA) in English language teaching (ELT) in Sri Lanka. For this research, a keyword search was conducted on Jstor and Taylor & Francis databases and the internet and 21 scholarly publications with most relevance to the purpose of the study were selected. As such, 7 books, 12 articles from journals and research article compilations, and 2 conference papers were reviewed thematically in terms of the research objectives guiding the study: to identify what ideologies the scholarship of WE is based on and how they are useful for (re) conceptualizing LA; to identify what suggestions are made in the field of WE with regard to LA and how practical these suggestions are; and to understand the relevance of WE perspectives on LA, for understanding the role of SLE in LA in ELT in Sri Lanka. The findings reveal that the WE scholarship promotes five ideologies and that they are necessary for understanding WE position on pluricentric language norms, i.e. language standards which are regionally and locally determined. While this implies the relevance of Sri Lankan English (SLE) as the target language for LA practices in ELT in Sri Lanka, several obstacles to this speculative argument was also found through

the analysis of literature. It can be concluded that although WE scholarship has much to offer in terms of the relevance of SLE to LA in Sri Lanka, these theories remain highly abstract until they are practically implemented and tested.

1. INTRODUCTION

The scholarship of World Englishes (WE) which emerged in the 1970's, is now a well-grounded area of research with implications not only at theoretical, ideological and linguistic levels for varieties of English in the world but also at practical and pedagogical levels for English language teaching (ELT) locally, regionally and internationally. At an ideological level, the scholarship challenges the prestigious status occupied by varieties of English such as British and American Englishes while calling for recognition and legitimacy for other varieties of English such as Sri Lankan English (Kachru, 1985, 1996; Kandiah, 1998). Challenging the superiority and legitimacy of inner-circle varieties of English/ native varieties of English i.e. varieties such as British and American Englishes, has resulted in scholarly discourses exploring the merits of adopting outer and expanding circle/ non-native varieties of English such as Sri Lankan English (SLE) as the target language variety for ELT practices including language assessment (Tomlinson, 2021). However, the notion of outer and expanding circle/ non-native varieties of English as the target language variety for language assessment has been problematized due to its idealistic nature by various scholars (Canagarajah, 1999; Phillipson, 1992).

The theoretical and speculations and arguments made in the field of World Englishes are relevant to the Sri Lankan context because ELT in Sri Lanka is a site of contention with regard to the target language it should adopt, with some scholars advocating for Sri Lankan English as the target language variety (Parakrama, 2010, Meyler, 2015) while others violently opposing this stance (Fonseka, 2003). The question of Sri Lankan

English as the target language variety is however an even more contentious topic in the domain of language assessment (LA) due to the intrinsic nature of LA as a crucial factor in determining student, teacher and institutional standards, the yardstick for certification and qualification and the doors it opens for students' employability and upward mobility.

Nevertheless, arguments made in the WE scholarship are not without their merits with reference to their implications for LA in Sri Lanka. Thus, this article critically reviews and engages with the conceptual speculations made in the WE scholarship in line with the following research questions:

1. What are the ideologies that the scholarship of WE is based on and how are they useful for (re) conceptualizing LA?
2. What suggestions are made in the field of WE with regard to LA and how practical are they?
3. What is the relevance of WE perspectives on LA, for understanding the role of SLE in LA in ELT in Sri Lanka?

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

While research based on the review of secondary data (i.e. literature) often adopt meta-analysis and systematic literature review approaches, it is necessary to clarify that this research adopts the approach of a conceptual review, which is a form of literature review which critically engages with theoretical and conceptual speculations on a particular topic in order to tackle specific research objectives/ questions (Jaakkola, 2020). Thus, for this research, first a keyword search was conducted on Jstor and Taylor & Francis databases, in line with the research questions. After skimming through the selected literature, 21 scholarly publications under the categories of books (7), articles from journals and research article compilations (12), and conference papers (2) were selected based

on their relevance to the research questions. The contents of the literature were then analysed thematically to map the implications of World Englishes and its scholarly perspectives on Sri Lankan English as the target language variety/ the standard for language assessment in ELT in Sri Lanka.

2.1 World Englishes and Its Ideologies

Proshina (2012) observes that the field of World Englishes is marked by the ideologies of diversity, plurality, equality, inclusivity and variability from the very inception of the field when various scholars attempted to classify Englishes in the world. Kachru (1985) was one of the first scholars to promote the WE ideologies of diversity and plurality by challenging the notion of English as a monolith. Kachru's (1985) three concentric circles model of Englishes was controversial since it was the first of its kind to give recognition to varieties of English in the world other than inner circle varieties such as British or American English. Kandiah's (1998) model of Older versus new Englishes and McArthur's (1987) and Gorlach's (1990) wheel models promoted the WE ideology of equality and inclusivity. Kandiah's (1998) model promoted this ideology by attempting to establish that no variety of English is structurally inferior to the other, while McArthur's (1987) and Gorlach's (1991) models achieved this by placing all varieties of English in a wheel around "World Standard English"/ "International English" which was a idealization not aligned with any particular variety of English. Schneider's model (2003) promoted the ideology of variability by focusing on the evolutionary process of postcolonial Englishes which he mapped through five phases.

The review of the evolution of models of World Englishes reveal that the driving force behind the scholarship of WE is an ideology to challenge the hegemony of traditionally prestigious varieties of Englishes such as British and American English, and to acknowledge the legitimacy of newer/

emerging varieties of Englishes on structural, functional as well as socio-cultural grounds. The WE ideologies were instrumental in challenging fundamental assumptions about the English language, language standards and speakers of English with several implications for ELT and for LA, and these are reviewed in the next section.

2.2 The World Englishes Perspective: A Counter-ideology for Reconceptualizing Basic Assumptions in Language Assessment

More often than not, LA in ELT is conceptualized as a very technical activity that encompasses procedures related to test construction and rating (Brown and Abeywickrama, 2019). However, this notion of LA as a technical activity has been problematized in the domain of critical LA which calls for "a radical reconstruction [of] ideological foundations" (McNamara, 2000. p. 76) or assumptions of LA. One such ideological assumption that has been challenged by the WE scholarship is the notion of language standards, which is a central concept in LA that serves as a yardstick for test development and rating/ measuring student performance.

Kachru (1985) points out that with the spread of English and the emergence of varieties of English across the world, inner-circle countries such as Britain or America "lost the exclusive prerogative to control [the] standardization [of English]" (p. 30) and that it is foolhardy to conceptualize one standard or one "model" for ELT (Kachru, 1996, p. 51). Rather, he is of the view that language standards should be "pluricentric", i.e. standards should be defined in terms of the standards of English varieties which are in use locally and regionally (Kachru, 1996, p. 51).

Tomlinson (2021) adopts a similar view when he says that English language tests and examinations should "reflect the reality of language use", i.e. should adopt the language variety that is of use to the students as the target rather than test learners

“on a variety of English they do not and never will speak” (p. 641). True to the WE ideologies, he is of the opinion that LA should not be a way to “punish” learners for not using a language variety that is not socio-culturally familiar to them or as a means to test the learners’ grammatical competence which is assessed according to inner-circle norms (p. 651). Rather, he explains that LA should be geared to test the learners’ communicative ability in the language variety which is of most use to them (p. 651).

These arguments from a WE perspective clearly establish that English language standards are not global or but variety specific, i.e. each variety of English has its own standards and norms. This argument has far reaching consequences for LA in ELT since it implies that language tests and rating procedures should be designed to test student proficiency in the English variety that is most useful/ relevant to them or functional in their socio-cultural milieu. However, the notion of local varieties of English as the standard/ model is also not without its fair share of criticisms, and these points of view are examined in the next section.

2.3 Local varieties of English as the standard/ model for LA in ELT: Criticisms

Criticisms against the suggestion of conceptualizing language standards in LA according to local varieties of English as the model come from scholars who consider these suggestions to be too idealistic and to not sit well with the realities of ELT in the world. For example, Kubota accuses the entire scholarship of WE being too theoretical in nature (2023) while Phillipson (1992) argues that some varieties of English wield more “power” or hegemony than other varieties of English. Phillipson (1992) in particular traces the origins and evolution of the ELT industry in the world and argues that international ELT agencies such as the British Council and tests such as IELTS and TOEFL are directly responsible for promoting language norms of American or British English as

the standard. He further argues that the “myths” perpetuated by these organizations – such as the British and American varieties of English are superior to other varieties and that learners of English should strive to achieve inner-circle oriented “native-like” competence – constitute mainstream thinking which is difficult to challenge (Phillipson, 1992). Others like Canagarajah (1999) also point out that these myths about the superiority of inner-circle/ native standards have become “pedagogical common sense” (p. 126) in ELT, making it difficult for policy makers and teachers to reconceptualize language standards and LA according to local English language norms.

2.4 Role and Relevance of Sri Lankan English in LA in ELT in Sri Lanka

The relevance of WE ideologies and speculations on language standards are twofold in the Sri Lankan context. Firstly, it establishes SLE as legitimate national variety of English that should be recognized in Sri Lanka. Secondly, it invites ELT policy developers and practitioners to explore the merits of adopting SLE as the standard for LA practices. Several scholars do in fact display a positive attitude towards SLE as the standard for LA in Sri Lanka. For example, Parakrama (2010) believes that ELT in Sri Lanka should not adopt language varieties which are elitist and unfamiliar to the Sri Lankan students (p. 92) while Meyler (2015) states that it is “unrealistic and unfair to test students’ English ability according to an alien and outdated standard” (Meyler, 2015, p. 182). Further support for SLE as the target language variety can be drawn from Bernaisch’s research. In his scholarly work, Bernaisch explores how SLE has scored positively in attitudinal surveys (2012; 2015) and has steadily achieved linguistic stability according to Schneider’s model of evolution of postcolonial Englishes (2022).

However, several challenges should be addressed if one is to truly consider SLE as the standard or the model for LA in Sri Lanka. One is the negative

attitudes towards SLE by scholars. Even though attitudinal surveys involving the general public reveal a positive perceptual outlook towards SLE, studies show that ELT academics have a negative attitude towards SLE. Fonseka (2003) calls SLE as “substandard” (p. 3) while Amunugama et al. (2019) observe that most school teachers in Sri Lanka still believe that they teach British English. This could be due to their lack of understanding about SLE and the standards of writing and academic writing being associated with inner circle/ “native” standards (Mauranen et. al., 2021)

3. CONCLUSION

To sum up, at a theoretical and ideological level, the WE scholarship offers useful insights on how basic tenets of LA in ELT should be reconceptualized. A fundamental premise of LA which has been challenged through the field of WE is the conceptualization of language standards. For LA in ELT in Sri Lanka, this implies the importance of considering SLE as the language variety for test construction and assessing/ rating student performance against. However, literature (Fonseka, 2003; Amunugama et. al., 2019) reveals that there is still strong resistance from ELT professionals in Sri Lanka to accepting SLE as the standard for ELT let alone for LA. It could be speculated that may be due to their negative attitudes to SLE stemming from lack of awareness of SLE. If SLE is to be adopted as the standard for LA in Sri Lanka, several measures should be taken. The first set of measures should include steps to improve ELT professionals’ attitudes towards SLE. These steps may include language planning policies such as status planning and prestige planning in order to elevate the recognition and legitimacy of SLE in Sri Lanka. Secondly, further research should be conducted to document features of SLE with a focus on demarcating what is acceptable as standard and non-standard SLE. This is because even through variation within SLE has been mentioned in passing (Gunasekera, 2010), the line

between what is “acceptable” and “unacceptable” forms of SLE especially for the domain of ELT has not been clearly defined. In conclusion, it can be said that while WE scholarship proposes insightful ways to reconceptualize LA in socially just and inclusive terms, further research is necessary to test to what extent these theoretical speculations are compatible with ground realities of LA in ELT in Sri Lanka.

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