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**“I learn English since ten years”:  
The Global English Debate and the German University Classroom**

When a student produces a sentence like the above “I learn English since ten years” . . . it could be thought that they haven’t had a very good English teacher, that they may not, in fact, be very good in English despite the amount of time they’ve spent learning the language. However, some of my students may indeed produce a sentence like this. I teach in the English Department of the Freie Universität in Berlin to students who have already studied English for at least ten years by the time they enter university. In order to study in our department, the students must pass a proficiency-level entrance exam. These students then have English as one of their major subjects, so their knowledge of the language is fairly sophisticated and their contact with the language regular.

My initial reaction to an utterance such as “I learn English since ten years” was: “This is wrong!” I decided that because there is no perfective or progressive in the German language that it was hard for German learners to master the English tense and aspect system. I also concluded that since there is only one word in German, *seit*, for both for and since (in time expressions), German learners often confused these prepositions.

However, I am no longer convinced that the production of a sentence like “I learn English since ten years” is simply a ‘*typical* German error’. After reading about certain features of New Englishes—the Englishes of post-colonial countries like Ghana, India, Nigeria, and Singapore—I noticed that several features of the so-called New Englishes were the same ones manifesting in my classroom. The linguistic features which are apparently gaining ground in their native contexts are judged as errors when made by German students. In other words, according to the research, certain grammatical formations are now considered part of the standard in India, for example, but are still dismissed as incorrect in Berlin. Once I had realized this, I started to ask myself why, if standards of English are supposedly expanding, should I still be correcting a student when she writes, “The story was touching me deeply”?

My moral quandary about what to count as correct or incorrect on my students’ papers is a perfect example of the debate about standard English rearing its head in the second language classroom—the so-called ‘widening standard language debate’ (Bex and Watt 1999). The expansion of English and the continual recognition of other varieties of English make questions about correctness more problematic than ever before. What should we consider correct or incorrect in a world where more and more varieties of English are gaining institutionalized legitimacy? What form of the language should we be teaching to students who use English internationally? And, more pressing, where should I use my red pen?

In Germany, and perhaps in Europe in general, we need to reconsider whether we need a different kind of language teaching in order to suit the needs of today’s learners—an English pedagogy which reflects how English is currently being used around the world. In order to do this, it is necessary to understand the role that English plays in the teaching environment, in my case in Berlin. We need also an analysis of the type of English our learners are acquiring and producing. One way of doing this is to follow Ferguson’s model of a sociolinguistic profile (1966). This type of analysis can provide a description of the English using community, the uses they make of it,

their attitude towards it, the model of English they choose to approximate, the degree of intelligibility they seek to achieve, and the kind of communicative competence in English they want to develop (Berns 1992: 7). And this is precisely the type of data I have started to collect for my PhD research.

### **A Brief Sociolinguistic Profile of My Students—Freie Universität Berlin**

In Germany, English has no official status and there is no institutionalized domain for English; however, Germans often use English for interpersonal as well as professional purposes and do not have to wait to go abroad to use English and interact with English speakers. “Germany’s post-war history with an abundance of American and British speakers present, their involvement in the European Community, and their connections with American products and culture expose Germans across social groups to English” (Berns 1995: 8). There are several international firms, such as Siemens, that use English for upper-level business communication, and it has been claimed that in Germany “you cannot pursue an international career without English” (Hutton 1999: 1).

Berlin, now the capital of Germany, is an international city and English can be heard on almost every bus or subway. English language television shows and films are still generally dubbed into German, but there is a strong presence of English language in society-- there are plenty of English language bookstores and cinemas, and English can be found on shop signs, menus, on the radio, in songs, in advertising, etc. These days English seems to be a trendy advertising technique and certain advertisements even require some knowledge of English for their comprehension. (Ex: “We kehrl for you” or McDonald’s slogan, “About this Fruestuecksei lachen ja die chickens”.)

### **English education**

English is not the medium of instruction in most German schools, except in a small number of private and international schools. However, it is generally the first foreign language taught in school. Some primary school children are now starting to teach English in the third grade, although most still start in the fifth and carry on at least until the tenth, depending on the learner’s plan for future education and employment. At university, some seminar classes of English departments may be carried out in English, but in general, the language of the university is German. Students of political science, business, medicine, and law, however, need at least a passive knowledge of English, since much of the literature in those fields is written in English.

In our department at the Freie Universität, we teach English only to students who are majoring in English Philology, North American Studies, or English Pedagogy. These students are already proficient in English when they start their studies and my job is to teach them the subtleties of the language. I teach, for example, the conventions of writing and rhetoric; these courses actually have more in common with composition courses for native speakers than any other EFL courses I have taught. Although there are some linguistic errors I pay attention to, the main concentration of the course is to force students to analyze texts, think critically and then respond to the texts in a well-focused, well-structured, and well-written essay in English.

Most of the students in our department encounter English in their daily lives—on the Internet, at work, and socially. They write, read, and speak English everyday in both academic and social contexts. The students are also generally well travelled. Many of them have already studied or worked abroad for an extended period of time in an English-speaking environment: They may have been *au-pairs* in Chicago or worked for the summer at the Edinburgh festival, but they also may have volunteered in a hospital in Calcutta, worked on a farm in Ghana, or studied for a semester in Singapore. If students haven’t been abroad before they start university, many of them

take six months to a year off to study or work abroad as a result of the Erasmus/Socrates programs and other exchanges and international internships.

These students come back with authentic accents and vocabulary, marking the place where they have spent their time. One student, for example, has problems in her pronunciation class because she learned her English in Ireland and pronounces ‘three’ as ‘tree’. Another student, after volunteering in Calcutta for one semester, complained: “Living in India really screwed up my English”. When I asked her to clarify that statement she confessed that the experience had actually helped her with communications skills, but she thought that it had “spoiled” her grammar skills and made university classes more difficult for her. I have also known students from Nigeria and Ghana, who have English as a second mother-tongue, who failed the entrance exam to study English at university and were required to take a remedial course for a semester in order to boost their language skills in grammar.

And this is where my suspicions began to arise. Should students who have learned other Englishes be disadvantaged in the university system? Does the system simply have a bias for standard British or American English and no room for deviations from this model? In a world where English both functions as a global language and is appropriated to several different local contexts, it seems as if we are still clinging to an out-dated model of a standard ideology that is no longer possible or even useful to maintain.

### **Features of New Englishes vs. Features of German English**

To demonstrate the blatant tensions arising in the widening standard English debate, I have picked a few features of New Englishes to analyze. What is puzzling about these features of English is that, not only do they span Africa, Asia and the subcontinent of India, they also appear in many second language classrooms around the world. The most prototypical features of New Englishes—the problems of non-count nouns and tense and aspect—regularly appear in the German classroom. These are features of English that courses in my department spotlight as typical problem areas that students need to work on. Some features of New Englishes that can be found in African, Asian, and South Asian contexts as well as in the German EFL classroom are:

#### **1. The occasional loss of distinctions between count and non-count nouns (Trudgill and Hannah 1985: 104):**

- I lost all my *furnitures*.
- Did you pick up all the *luggages*?
- She gave me *an advice* that I’ll never forget.

I had previously thought that Germans produce the word *informations*, for example, because the word has a plural form in the German language. It is often explained that this type of noun is susceptible to pluralization in cases where the reason for their classification as uncountable is not obvious (Jibril 1982: 78). There are no rules for the employment of these non-count nouns and no means of mastering them apart from memorization.

Crystal claims that “countability is a tricky area of English grammar, posing a problem regardless of the learner’s language background” (1995: 361). This means that *informations* is not, as I had originally thought, ‘a typical German error’. On the contrary, the pluralization of words like *informations* and *advices* is perhaps found in all places where English is used as a second language. In fact, some are even being accepted as standard in New Englishes.

In spite of the variation in the pluralization of these words in other varieties of English, in our department, a student would undoubtedly lose full-points for the production of *informations* or *advices* in an exam. But if every outer and expanding circle member has difficulty with the pluralization of these words, is it really an essential grammatical matter that we need to fixate upon in the language classroom?

## 2. Variation in the usage of tense and aspect:

- a. The use of the present tense (instead of the present perfect) with phrases indicating a period from past to present. (Trudgill and Hannah 1985: 109):
  - I learn English since ten years.
  - I am here since two o'clock.
  - I am reading this book since two hours.
- b. The use of progressive aspect with stative verbs (Trudgill and Hannah 1985: 110):
  - She is having many shoes.
  - I am understanding it.
  - He is knowing the answer.
- c. The use of the present perfect instead of the simple past (especially with past time adverbs) (Trudgill and Hannah 1985: 110):
  - I have been there ten years ago.
  - I saw a book the other day and it reminded me of the one you *have lost*.

In our department, the varied employment of tense and aspect is explained as a common 'German error'. For example, because there is no progressive aspect in the German language, the typical German overuse of the progressive has traditionally been blamed on over-compensation. Similarly, in New Englishes, the divergences from so-called standard English have often been attributed to interference from the mother tongue which has a set of rules which are in conflict with those of English and which the learner of English frequently falls back upon (Jibril 1982: 82). For example, in rationalizing why Nigerian English is different from world English, Jibril explains that "in Nigerian languages tense is not as important as aspect in the verbal system, and such distinctions of tense as are made are not as fine as those made in English" (Jibril 1982: 79).

In our department, teachers spend a great deal of time and effort on correcting these 'errors'. In fact, a good part of a semester is used for going over the distinctions between the simple past, the present perfect, and the perfect continuous and the subtleties of the English system of tense and aspect. But the discouraging fact is that even with eight weeks dedicated the verb phrase in a grammar class, I am not convinced that the students make any improvement, or even if they need to. It seems as if the reason why students are showing resistance to learning these characteristics of English is that they are not communicatively crucial (Jenkins and Seidlhofer 2001). Students often make comments like, "I thought I was good at English until I took this course". Previously they had not noticed that they used tense and aspect incorrectly, nor did they struggle to communicate when doing so. Students go back to using the tense and aspect system 'incorrectly' once their grammar course is over, and this does not seem to affect their communicative competence.

### **Widening standard English**

The common ‘errors’ of proficient German learners of English who have studied the language for at least ten years and use English regularly are similar to features of New Englishes. It has been noted that “there seems to be extensive international overlap between the so-called errors that non-native speakers make” (Crystal 1995: 361). There are certain idiosyncrasies in English—like non-count nouns and the aspect system—which are likely to pose particular difficulty to learners. These idiosyncrasies are difficult for learners irrespective of the language family they come from. Since many non-standard grammatical features are widely distributed among second-language Englishes, the claim that these constructions occur because of interference from the mother tongue seems improbable. This implies that these ‘errors’ have been falsely analyzed. It is more likely that these common features are actually a symptom of a change in the language which is coming about in non-native contexts but is being held back by the standard English tradition.

Some features of New Englishes are being institutionalized in their native contexts, but they have yet to be acknowledged by the inner circle. It has been argued that since most non-native speakers of English are ignoring the linguistic domination ascribed to them by standards, the rules should expand to accept New Englishes. Even though it was grammatically correct to say “It is I” when someone asks who’s at the door, no one does that anymore. So the standards of English were changed to codify the actual use of the language. In the same vein, standard English should be more open to features of New Englishes. The Nigerian scholar, Samuel Ahulu, suggests the need for a standard that is common to both groups of native and non-native speakers of English for the purposes of international communication (1997: 19). He proposes that variations of New Englishes should be subsumed within the concept of Standard English.

### **German English as a New English**

So could German English be classified as a New English? Is Germany a place where English use is so established that its own variety is developing? A framework which may provide an answer to this question is Kachru’s model of the concentric circles of English. These circles display the range of English uses in the world:

1. The inner circle is made up of places where English is used as a native language, which have traditionally been the norm-producing countries (e.g. Great Britain and the United States).
2. In the outer circle countries, English is institutionalized but its speakers have created indigenous varieties (e.g. Indian English, Singaporean English). The outer circle is norm-developing in the sense that “the role of English in these communities is fostering an internal standard of educated usage which has a status and dynamic of its own” (Berns 1995: 8).
3. In the expanding circle, English has the role of international language and is generally taught as a foreign language. It is norm-dependent in that learners are expected to acquire the norms of behavior appropriate to the users in the inner circle (e.g. Japan, Russia).

So, does Germany belong to the expanding or to the outer circle? Although English in Germany does not entirely meet the criteria, Berns argues that Germany has certain qualities of its English use which make it more similar to outer circle countries than to expanding circle ones (1995). For example, although English is not institutionalized in Germany, it does play a role in the media and in interpersonal uses. Germans have much more opportunities to use English and more contact with the language than most expanding circle members do. Its own variety has not yet been recognized nor has it developed its own nativized literary domain up till now, but these developments may not be far off. Due to the wide use of English, “it is hard to dismiss English in

Germany from the outer circle given the functions it serves in various social, cultural, commercial, and educational settings” (Berns 1995: 9).

### **Conclusion**

When reconsidering the role of English in Germany we see that the language is entrenched in the country. German students are already proficient in English by the time they get to university, in both academic and social settings, and for many of them, English plays an important role in their lives. They use the language daily in many contexts and they are regularly exposed to the diversity of English. Because of Internet technology, the international air of Berlin, and regular travels and stays abroad, students have unrestrained access to the diversity of the language in all its global contexts. Since students acquire much of their English in non-academic settings, language teachers need to adopt a more flexible approach towards the standard which allows a wide range of styles corresponding to the various functions to which the language will be put. Teachers need a more accepting, creative, and dynamic methodology of teaching English to cope with the more fluid, ever-changing English language and to support students in their global uses of English. When analyzing the student body and the uses they make of English, it is clear that we need a broader interpretation of the standard to include the sociolinguistics of English in a world context.