

VARIATION AND LEARNER LANGUAGE AWARENESS: THE CASE OF MOROCCAN EFL STUDENTS

Zoulikha Mehdaoui

Research Scholar, Mohamed V University-Rabat Morocco, North Africa

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ABSTRACT

The paper addresses variation from an educational perspective. It aims to determine which varieties of English, British or American, are used by Moroccan EFL learners (MEFLs), whether this usage is conscious, and the relationship between teaching practices and the development of learner language awareness. To this end, a questionnaire and a test were administered to 54 Moroccan undergraduate EFL students from Mohamed V University, Rabat. The results show that MEFLs use a mixture of British English and American English and that they have a limited language awareness as to what features distinguish each variety in comparison with the other. The findings provide corroboration for the adoption of the Language Awareness Approach to English language teaching which emphasizes the role of explicit knowledge in language learning and teaching.

KEYWORDS: *Language Variation, Language Awareness (La), British English (Bre), American English (Ame), Moroccan Efl Learners (Mells).*

INTRODUCTION

A homogeneous speech community is a myth since “every language has a lot of variation” (Yule, 2010. p. 239). In fact, usage of language is the product of numerous regional, social, and contextual factors. Thus, geographical areas, social class, education, age, gender, occupation, for instance, are but a few of many variables that interfere in the production of any oral or written discourse. Individual speakers or groups of speakers prefer specific accents, vocabularies, or particular grammatical patterns and, consequently, all aspects of language (phonemes, morphemes, syntactic structures, meanings, etc) are subject to variation. Such preferences, often markers of identity, are generally conscious choices and convey social meanings.

Variation may generate occasional difficulties in communication but may also be a barrier to mutual understanding. When significant linguistic and sociocultural differences are attested, variation does affect mutual intelligibility. Therefore, an intelligibility continuum can be assumed to explain why communication success ranges from total understanding to no understanding depending on the quality of differences existing between varieties or languages. In this regard, it is worth noting that even native speakers of varieties of English may fail to understand each other, as pointed out below by Christopher Davies (2005), a native speaker of British English:

“Why when we [natives speakers of British English and American English] have global communication on the Internet and we are all watching the same television shows, do we still have difficulty understanding one another?” (p.1)

Davies makes it clear that intelligibility problems among native speakers of varieties of English do arise.

However, non-native speakers, precisely EFL learners, generally expect the English they learn in formal settings will allow them to communicate with native speakers of all English varieties, assuming no significant differences exist between them. Such assumptions may emanate from a lack of awareness as to the kinds of differences existing between different varieties of English.

In fact, language variation is a source of difficulty, especially for L2 learners. Due to exposure to more than one variety (through media, teachers and classmates using different accents,), learners end up using features of different varieties interchangeably. Anyone observing MEFLs' performance in English will notice that "cube" and "either", for instance, may interchangeably be pronounced as /ku:b/ or /kyu:b/ and /'aɪðər/ or /'i:ðə/; "centre"/"center", "realise"/"realize", "colour"/"color" are likely to occur in the same written discourse. MEFLs will also use "flat" or "apartment", "holiday" or "vacation", "talk to" or "talk with", etc. In other words, features of both BrE and AmE tend to occur in the same performance. It seems that an unconscious conception of language variation engenders variability in EFL learner-language. In fact, variability is an intrinsic feature of foreign language learners' interlanguage at each stage of development (Ellis (1997). Modiano (1996, p. 5) points out that "many, if not most second language speakers in Europe and elsewhere have begun to speak a mixture, sometimes called Mid-Atlantic English."

Taking into account that BRE and AME are the two dominant varieties in the Moroccan context, and that variation may cause serious problems for communication, building MEFLs' consciousness of the attested differences between the two varieties should be a desirable objective of teachers and learners. The purpose of the present investigation is to explore whether variability in MEFLs, in the sense of using variants from the two varieties interchangeably, is a conscious choice or the manifestation of failure to differentiate between what is British and what is American, as a result of the adopted methodologies.

1. VARIATION AND THE LANGUAGE AWARENESS APPROACH

1.1 Differences between English Varieties

"*Divided by a Common Language: A Guide to British and American English*" is written by Christopher Davies (2005), a native speaker of British English to help natives of British English and American English understand each other. Davies asserts being "struck by the magnitude of the differences between British and American speech". He points out that "there are roughly 4,000 words in everyday speech that are used differently" (p. v) which, as mentioned above, tend to create intelligibility problems among native speakers of the two varieties of English.

Darragh (2000) provides a similar Guide for the same purpose, namely "for Americans and Britons who want to understand each other better" (p. IV). Obviously, when natives need Guides to understand each other, the implication is that variation is significant. Indeed, the two varieties display differences in grammar, pronunciation and spelling (Yaman, 2015; Di Carlo, 2013) but, more interestingly, "The main differences, and they are huge, are lexical and cultural" (Darragh, *ibid*, p. IV). The latter category of differences does not only cause problems understanding the other, but may generate instances of misunderstanding. Striking expressions are those that are neutral in one variety but offensive, vulgar, or belong to completely different lexical fields in the other. Consider the following examples:

Items	Meaning in BRE	Meaning in AME
Fag	Cigarette	Gay man
Pot plant	House plant	Marijuana plant

Wash up	Wash the dishes	Wash one self
Bomb (especially of a play)	Go very well	Go badly

Given that some differences may generate difficulties understanding/even misunderstandingspeakers of different varieties of the same language, an amount of awareness about languagevariation is considered necessaryfor EFL learners. Indeed, recent trends in education support the implementation of teaching methodologies which emphasize the role of explicit knowledge in foreign language learning and teaching.

1.2 The Language Awareness Approach (LAA)

The theoretical framework which underpins the present study is the Language Awareness Approach (LAA) to language teaching according to which consciousness and explicit knowledge are essential for language learning and teaching. It emerged out of a concern about literacy levels in L1 and poor performance in the learning of foreign languages in the UK (Hawkins 1981; 1984, in Andrews 2007). It wasthe outcome ofthe stakeholders' dissatisfaction with both the strong communicative approach, which tended to play down the value of grammar teaching, and the traditional approach, where grammar instruction was highly valued.Itstressed, instead, the role of explicit knowledge in language learning within a meaning-based Methodology.

Language Awareness (LA) is defined in Thornbury (1997, p.x) as “explicit knowledge about language”. So simply defined, the construct allows multiple interpretations (Thornbury, *ibid*, p. x). Thus, in the narrow sense, LA is equated with grammatical knowledge. Such explicit knowledge is claimed to enhance learners' attention, noticing, analysis, thinking skills to reflect on languages and understand how they work and, eventually, learn.

More comprehensive definitions associate LA with knowledge about aspects of language other than exclusively the formal ones. Thus, in Donmall (1985, p.7),it is identified as “a person's sensitivity to and conscious awareness of the nature of language and its role in human life” (in Andrew 2007, p. 11). The same broad character of the concept is revealed in Carter (1994). For Carter, LA involves at leastawareness of: a) some of the properties of language (creativity and playfulness, double meanings, etc); the embedding of language within culture, the forms of the language we use, the close relationship between language and ideology (p.5). In this regard, the scope of LA encompasses knowledge about accuracy, appropriacy, style, text types, among others (Thornbury, 1990 in Ellis, 2012, p. 7).

The present study adopts the broad view of LA. It focuses on the importance of promoting EFLLs' noticing formal and cultural differences between varieties to increase awareness, without the superiority of any being implied.

2. THE CURRENT STUDY

2.1 Method

The present study is descriptive and seeks answers to the following questions:

1. Do MEFLs use British English or American English?
2. Is this usage conscious?
3. Do teaching practices in the Moroccan EFL classrooms foster language awareness?

The questions will be answered in the light of the following hypotheses:

- a) MEFLs will use a mixture of British English and American English.

- b) This usage will not be conscious.
- c) Teaching practices in the targeted Moroccan classrooms will not foster language awareness.

The targeted sample consists of 54 Semester 5 undergraduate EFL university students from two faculties (Faculty of letters and Human Sciences and Faculty of Education), Mohamed V University, Rabat. Two instruments designed by the researcher were used to collect data: a questionnaire and a test (see appendices 1 and 2). The questionnaire consists of five items intended to have subjects report on the English/es they use, the one/s they like to master, whether they are interested in acquiring knowledge about variation, whether the Moroccan EFL classrooms help them in this regard, and whether, they think Moroccan EFL classrooms should help them achieve that kind of knowledge. The test includes 28 pair items representing pronunciation (seven pairs), vocabulary (four pairs), spelling (six pairs), grammar (six pairs), and cultural variation (five pairs). The subjects are required to identify every single item in a pair as British or American.

2.2 RESULTS

2.2.1 The Questionnaire Results

The subjects were asked five questions:

1. Which English/es they use when speaking and writing (BRE,AME, A mixture of both);
2. Which English/es they would like to master (BRE,AME, both varieties);
3. Whether they would like to learn the differences between the two English's;
4. Whether Moroccan EFL classrooms help them know the differences that distinguish between the two English's;
5. Whether they think Moroccan EFL classrooms should help learners know those differences.
6. Concerning question one, the results (see fig.1) show that: 61, 1% report that they use a mixture of BRE and AME; 22.2% use the American variety; 5.6% use British English and 11.1% could not identify the English they use by opting for "I don't know"

Table: 2 The Variety/IES the Subjects Report they Use

(1) Which English do you use when you write or speak?	Number of Students	Percentage
BRE	3	5,6
AME	12	22,2
A mixture of both	33	61,1
Not sure	6	11,1
Total	54	100,0

The results for question two indicate that 48.1% of the subjects aspire to master both varieties, 24.1% opt for AME, and 16.7% prefer to master BRE, as indicated in Table: 2

Table: 3 The Variety/IES Opted For

(2) Which English would you like to master?	Number of students	Percentage
BRE	9	16,7
AME	13	24
Both BRE and AME	26	48,1
« I don't know »	5	9,3
No answer	1	1,9
Total	54	100,0

The subjects' answers to question (3), reported in figure.3 below, show that 87% opt for "Yes" to express desire to learn about variation in English, whereas 5.6% opt for "No" and 7.5 for "Don't know":

Table: 3 Desire to Develop Awareness of Variation

(3) Do you like to learn the differences between the two varieties of English?	Number of students	Percentage
YES	47	87,0
No	3	5,6
Don' know	3	5,6
No answer	1	1,9
Total	54	100,0

The results for the fourth question reveal that while 64.8% and 13% of MEFLs "disagree" and "totally disagree", respectively, that Moroccan EFL classrooms help them develop awareness of differences between the two varieties of English, only 20.4% and 1,9% report the opposite:

Table: 4 The Role of Moroccan EFL Classrooms in Developing Awareness

(4) Moroccan EFL classrooms help learners know the differences between the two English's:	Number of students	Percentage
Agree	11	20,4
Don't agree	35	64,8
totally disagree	7	13,0
Strongly agree	1	1,9
Total	54	100,0

The subjects' answers to the fifth question show that the total number of those who "agree" and "strongly agree" that differences should be taught at school is 88.8% (48.1% and 40.7%), respectively):

Table: 5 The Expected Role of Moroccan EFL Classrooms		
(5) Moroccan EFL classrooms should allow learners to know differences between the two Englishes	Number of students	Percentage
Strongly agree	22	40,7
Agree	26	48,1
Don't agree	3	5,6
Strongly disagree	2	3,7
No answer	1	1,9
Total	54	100,0

2.2.2. The Test Results

The test administered to MEFLs to measure their receptive knowledge about the distinctive features of each variety starts with a question intended to reveal the kind of differences most familiar to the subjects: Pronunciation, Spelling, Grammar or cultural differences. The subjects' answers (see Table.6 below) indicate that 87.7% are aware of variation in pronunciation; 52.3% and 57.4% know that there are differences in vocabulary and spelling, respectively, but no subjects report awareness of the presence of variation in grammar or culture:

Table: 6 Kind of Differences Familiar to MEFLs	
What differences exist between the two varieties of English?	Percentage

Pronunciation	87.7
Vocabulary	52.3
Spelling	57.4
Grammar	00
Culture	00

The second part of the test is a Variety-recognition Task (VRT) which requires the subjects to identify each single item as British or American in 28 pair-items that represent five levels: vocabulary (four pairs), spelling (six pairs), grammar (six pairs), culture (five pairs), and pronunciation (seven pairs). The subjects' performance at a specific level is [+average] when at least 50% of the items at that level are correctly recognized as British or American, and [-Average] if recognition is below 50%. Thus, as indicated in Table.7, The performance of the majority of MEFLLs in the pronunciation component of the VRT is [+Average]. 89.6 % of them managed to recognize, at least four out of seven pairs as British or American. By contrast, most of them (81% and 84,7) preferred to tick the 'I'm not sure" column as far as vocabulary and spelling are concerned, and all subjects (100%) opted for the same answer in the case of grammar and cultural differences. See Table 7:

(6) In each pair below, which item is British and which one is American?	+Average	-Average	No answer
Vocabulary	4.3 %	14.7%	81%
Spelling	6%	9.3%	84.7%
Grammar	-	-	100%
Culture	-	-	100%
Pronunciation	89.6%	10.4%	00%

2.3 DISCUSSIONS

The questionnaire results reveal that the majority of the subjects (61.1%) report that they use a mixture of both varieties; 22.2% and 5.6% claim they use AmE and BrE, respectively (fig.1). The fact that MEFLLs could identify the varieties they use as mixed, American and British may be interpreted as indicating consciousness since the ability to identify one's language is part of explicit knowledge about that variety and presupposes familiarity with its properties. The test results, however, do not support such an interpretation. First of all, MEFLLs, when asked about the kinds of differences distinguishing the two varieties, 87.7%, 57.7% and 52.4%, respectively, expressed familiarity with pronunciation, spelling, and vocabulary differences and none of them claimed familiarity with differences pertaining to grammar or culture (Fig. 6). This implies that their identification of the variety they use as American, British or even mixed is based on a limited awareness as to the kinds of differences existing between the two varieties. For them, what distinguishes the two varieties is essentially phonological and lexical, particularly orthographic. Their performance in the VRT (Fig.7) provides further evidence for their limited consciousness. Though it was [+Average] for 89.4% with respect to phonological variation, it was very poor for lexical and orthographic variation: it was [+Average] for 4.3 % and 6% of the sample as far as the vocabulary and spelling levels are concerned. In addition, 100% of the sample avoided identifying any of the culture or grammar related items as BrE or AmE. Avoidance to perform in what concerns culture and grammar items can only be interpreted as emanating from lack of knowledge/awareness. These facts indicate that the subjects' use is not actually conscious since their LA is limited to the phonological level. These findings confirm the two first hypotheses, for MEFLLs (61.1% of them) report that they use a mixture of the two varieties, and this usage does not seem to be informed by knowledge/awareness.

Limited awareness is not unexpected in classrooms where consciousness raising is not enhanced in teaching practices. In such classrooms, when EFL learners come across different variants and ask their teachers about which items are correct, they are simply told that all variants are correct. The result of such teaching practices is that the impact of language variation ends up being underestimated by learners who associate it with features they consider unimportant, like pronunciation or orthography. Learners' discourse ends up displaying much variability. Actually, the questionnaire results show that Moroccan classrooms belong to this category where no reference to varieties of English is involved. 64.8% and 13% of the subjects "do not agree" and "totally disagree" that Moroccan classrooms play any role in this respect (Fig.4). Moroccan classrooms do not seem to contribute to fostering awareness in learners. This explains the poor performance in the VRT. Explicit instruction is empirically proved to be more effective than implicit instruction in a number of studies (see Norris & Ortega (2000)). The findings of the present study provide further support for this fact, as subjects show limited awareness and poor performance in the VRT.

Conversely, The results reveal that 40.7% and 48.1% of the MEFLs "strongly agree" and "agree" that classrooms should foster awareness about variation (Fig.5). Moreover, 48.1% aspire to master both varieties (Fig 2) and 87% show desire to learn about variation in English (Fig. 3). The subjects are both aware of the importance of this dimension of knowledge about language and are ready/motivated to develop it. These are two assets in learners necessary for an LA approach to be implemented: belief in the value of explicit knowledge and readiness/motivation to invest in developing it. Gass et al. (2003, p. 529) argue that learners' readiness intervenes in that more advanced learners might benefit from consciously attending to features they are unable to notice and process alone. Readiness is associated with advanced level because it refers to the ability to engage in language analysis. In the case of MEFLs, readiness is associated more with motivation and enthusiasm to build knowledge about a language they are eager to learn even at a non-advanced level. In the targeted context, an LA methodology can be successfully implemented with learners who, though not advanced, strive to construct a linguistic identity. Notice that 22.2% report that they use American English because, actually, they believe they do: they strive to master the American accent.

Taking into consideration that consciousness-raising is linked to attention, Gass, et.al (2003) also note that focused attention has the most effect in more complex areas: for example, more on syntax and least on lexis, where incidental learning seems to be most effective. By analogy, in comparison with formal variation, culture-related variation is a more complex area and may benefit more from explicit instruction. One can claim that more complex areas benefit more from an LA methodology whether they are rule governed (syntactic) or idiosyncratic (cultural) features of language.

As pointed out by Kramsch (1993:246), there is no reason why raising awareness be restricted to what characterizes the same variety. Comparisons between the standard and the dialectal varieties might be a frequent practice at schools, but involving learner L1 in such analyses would also help develop the ability to discriminate between different language codes. After all, building thinking skills is the goal of such consciousness-raising practices (Broek et.al, 2022). When L2 Learners are engaged in noticing, analysing, and reflecting on properties of language, acquisition, use, understanding, and conception of diversity are all affected positively. "LA is thus seen as having an importance and a value in itself, whether or not it facilitates language learning." (Svalberg, 2007, p. 288).

CONCLUSIONS

Current research, including the present study, has made it clear that language awareness, which refers to the development

in learners of an enhanced consciousness of and sensitivity to the properties of language and language use, is central to language education (Fairclough, 1992; Carter, 2003). Variation is a natural result of language evolution and, as pointed out in G. Cook (2003, p.53), "Whatever the degree of underlying similarity, it is the differences which are often more salient in cross-cultural encounters". Much language awareness work focuses on promoting the noticing of differences. With the growing role of English as a global language and the parallel development of local varieties of English, it is highly recommended that fostering awareness of variation in English varieties be one of the objectives of ELT classrooms.

The present study is descriptive and it targeted a small sample of intermediate EFL learners. For a better understanding of the value of explicit knowledge and its impact on learning, experimental research projects with larger samples of different categories of learners would provide more conclusive evidence for the impact of heightened awareness on language learning and, consequently, for a LA methodology

APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Questionnaire

1. Which English do you use when you write or speak?

BrE AmE A mixture of both I'm not sure

2. Which English/es would you like to master?

BrE AmE both I don't know

3. Do you like to learn the differences between the two Englishes?

Yes No I don't know

4. Moroccan EFL classrooms help learners to learn about the differences between the two English's

I strongly agree I agree I don't agree I totally disagree

5. Moroccan EFL classrooms should help learners to learn about those

I strongly agree I agree I don't agree I totally disagree

Appendix 2: Test

1. What kind of differences exists between the two English's?

Pronunciation: Yes No I'm not sure

Spelling: Yes No I'm not sure

Vocabulary: Yes No I'm not sure

Grammar: Yes No I'm not sure

Cultural differences: Yes No I'm not sure

In each pair below, which item is British and which one is American?	British	American	I'm not sure
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1.	a- holiday b-vacation			
2.	a - city centre b- downtown			
3.	a- film b –movie			
4.	a- flat b – apartment			
5.	a- humour b – humor			
6.	a- theatre b – theater			
7.	a- anaemia b-anemia			
8.	a- fulfil v-fulfill			
9.	a- speciality b- specialty			
10.	a- analyse b- anayze			
11.	a- I've got to know him over the years b-I've gotten to know him over the years			
12.	a- Have you ever read Macbeth? b- Did you ever read Macbeth?			
13.	a- He drives really fast b- He drives real fast			
14.	a- The boss wants to talk to you b - The boss wants to talk with you			
15.	a- One should always be kind to one's mother b - One should always be kind to his mother			
16.	a- The government intends/ or intend to cut taxes. b- The government intends to cut taxes.			
17.	When they answer their phone, they: a- just say "Hello," b- give their name or phone number			
18.	In response to "Thank you", they say: a- "You're welcome" and find the expression "cheers" odd b- "Not at all", or "cheers" (in casual situations)			
19.	When they greet someone for the first time, they: a- say "How are you?" b- Find it inappropriate to say 'How are you?'			
20.	a-They often give a parting pleasantry, such as "Drive safely" or "Enjoy" b- The expressions in (a) are not used because they seem to them rather like a command			
21.	On terminating a telephone conversation: a- They might say "Well, I'll let you go now," (they consider expressions like "I have to go now" impolite) b- They might say "I have to go now."			
22.	"Twenty" is pronounced: a- /'twenti/ b- /'twenni/			

23. "Cube" is pronounced: a- /ku:b/ b- /kyu:b/			
24. "Latter" is pronounced: a- /'lætər/ b- /'lædər/			
25. "Car" is pronounced: a- /kɑ:r/ b- /kɑ:r/			
26. "either" is pronounced : a- /'aɪðər/ b- /'i:ðə/			
27. "class" is pronounced a- /klɑ:s/ b- /klæs/			
28. "laboratory" is pronounced: a- /lə'brɒrətəri/ b- /'læb.rə.tɔ:r.i/			

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