

The Art of Speaking English(es): An American Perspective

Nancy Rose Steinbock, M.A., CCC-SLP

Inglese Dinamico



Venice (Italy)

NRSteinbock@hotmail.com

When I lived in America for many years, I thought I spoke English. My father's family emigrated from Eastern Europe early in the 20th century. Eschewing all that they had left behind except their love for education and social causes, he along with his five sisters, grew up in New York speaking, well, English. For my father, precision with the language was essential –the typical attitude of immigrant children then. My mother's family, originally from Whittlesey, England who had emigrated eleven years after the Pilgrims, were model educators and other professionals for whom the language was a passionate essential for their lives in literature, political science, banking and medicine. My father was the guardian of correct usage and my mother the involuntary teacher through her reading aloud of both American and English literature to me and my siblings from early childhood and exposing us to the theater –both living experiences in the language.

I grew up at a time when English was taught in the old style, i.e., in late elementary and middle school through learning the “parts of speech” and regular book reports and poetry writing. In high school, Miss Gibson, an elderly, elegant protector of the language, taught us essay writing, more book report writing techniques and more grammar training. Mrs. Dawson, then young, gentle and serious, pushed more vocabulary, literature and diagramming sentences, an exercise I loved because it allowed analysis and schematizing the language that I controlled. Though studying English was not most students’ first love, for me it was a natural passion. I gobbled up stories and novels, British and American, to escape into other worlds conveyed to me in my mother tongue. Not surprisingly, I majored in English for my first degree in university (emphasis in British literature) before moving into therapeutic language intervention for speech/language learning-disabled children.

After undergraduate studies, through another inveterate reader, I was brought into the realm of American writers, particularly the extraordinary work of the early, middle and later 20th century novelists and short-story writers and the growing body of feminist literature which proliferated in the 70’s, 80’s and 90’s. Living close to New York City, I regularly attended the theatre to listen to classic and new American and British playwrights’ words brought to life onstage. Ideas (cultural, social, psychological) that flowed from the likes of Tom Stoppard, Neil Bute and the Greek playwrights were realized in formal and informal language forms, their purpose to *communicate* and to *provoke* thought in the listener. The language forms varied from brutal to sublime depending on the context, the thematic content and its realization in the choice of words and phrasing couched in intonational and gestural interpretation to convey and heighten the cognitive and social-emotional impact upon the audience, participants in the theatrical interaction of observing, listening and thinking.

Then, I moved to Italy in 2003 and since, have learned differently. Among my many projects which have developed through the English language intervention project, *Inglese Dinamico*, was one scholastic year spent with three levels of middle school students. My contract stated that I was there to provide 'mother-tongue' hours for them. Presumably, this meant modeling the 'correct' way to pronounce the language and interestingly, the students expected that there would be exercises, for example, reading an article from an "English-language newspaper," and then, being corrected as they spoke. When I tried to introduce the concept of *learning in English about English* and spontaneously used forms brought in from my experience as an American, a student in the middle school in which I taught flatly told me that I don't speak English. Well, knock me over with a feather! Since September when I began the school year, I struggled with my classes to convey, illustrate and wrest from them, the realization that English is used for communication and that we generate words and chunk them together to re-present our thoughts, sometimes in conventional "talk" routines. It is a language that is there to serve them as communicators. Therefore, we must choose our words carefully and organize forms logically since comprehension resides in our listener(s) and our job is to make ourselves understood. In other words, do what you do in your mother tongue! Grammar and vocabulary were taught within the context of what they were trying to say. And, it was while making a point at the blackboard about the particular use and conjugation of a verb that sometimes carries different meanings that I learned I speak "American," a "language" according to this student, totally diverse from "English".

Now, I had bumped up against the notion (always conveyed to me in Italian), usually from the grandparents of preschoolers I had taught in the past laboratories, that they had studied "proprio inglese (real English)". Further questioning revealed "from England, not America". Turning away from the board I asked how was it that I could communicate to my English colleagues without difficulty? Well, the answer lay in the fact that there were some things similar as

though with “English” speakers I had to find a common, but necessarily restricted set of forms that we could successfully use! Pointing out that even in Italy, given the number of dialects and regional differences people could still communicate with each other did not suffice. No, Italy was a *country* and so everybody spoke a common language –well, try being Venetian and having a conversation with a Napolese taxi driver and tell me how easy that is (or vice versa!). The middle-schoolers weren’t buying it. I wondered if I should march myself to the principal’s office and resign on the grounds that I was feigning speaking English and should be summarily dismissed!

I put the question to some elementary school children the following week. One thought that I might not speak English since England and America were different countries. This was roundly disputed by a classmate who pointed out that in Italy, there were many different dialects and forms that were used in different regions but still, people from the north, south, east and west could reasonably communicate with each other. He gave great examples, including imagining speaking to a person from Puglia or... Naples! Out of the mouth of babes.

A few years later, I was called in to provide mother-tongue hours at a ‘liceo-classico’ or high school committed to studying the humanities as its curriculum base. Working directly this time with the classroom teachers, they generously gave me the opportunity to provide materials that are often utilized in our own laboratories to forward phonological, thematic and vocabulary concepts that furnish active learning strategies which can then later be invoked for other activities. Most of the classes were studying directly for the First Certificate or English language literature. In both cases, the base for the activities was British English. While the teachers found the strategies, e.g., word-maps, pre-teaching vocabulary, etc., interesting, it was clear that approaching the “task” of “teaching” English was a set routine. In one class, nearly 98% of the students

could not speak, read or write fluently in English but were finishing a segment on Jane Austen before moving on to Charles Dickens. I was asked to teach the segment on Dickens.

Using a densely written textbook loaded with sidebars, study guides and grammar guides, I tried to engage the students by bringing in a timeline downloaded from Public Broadcasting in America (www.pbs.org) to stimulate interest in the social, emotional and often traumatic events from the life of Dickens, a man of many contradictions and bouts of bad behavior. In the few short hours that I had, I decided to take another tack. It was clear that for the majority of the students, 'studying' English meant numerous exercises and discussions about language structure and even the introduction of ancillary material was not going to make it more palatable at this point.

Closing the book, I announced we would not read Dickens and brought in an article on animal communication. Starting from the question, "What is nature and what is communication?" we moved on, in guided steps to the question of "What is the nature of communication?" None of the students was aware of the communication studies conducted for the last 40 years with various primates. They were fascinated by the grammatical constructions that lay beneath the messages that these animals were producing to reflect their cognitive and emotional intelligences as well as the fact that animals and humans were finding a common path through language, in this case, American Sign Language. While the classroom teacher himself enjoyed the development of the classroom interaction around the theme, he announced to the class that the reason I had not continued with Dickens was that I was American and therefore, could not read his work properly!

As I was finishing my teaching stint, I asked students to evaluate what they had learned. One of the most fluent, a girl in her fifth year, observed that she realized that she would not learn how to speak English as it is used today by

studying historical literature such as Dickens. It is an amazing fact that students think that what they are reading in the standard literature class is a reflection of the language as it used today and is meant to deepen their communication skills. The rich body of literature that abounds in the English language is to be studied and savored. But, students need to begin with approachable, contemporary literature that speaks to them of issues and ideas that are important to them in language that they can use to communicate with others. We have to hook students into reading. Strangling them with English language classics before they can barely hold a conversation at any level past five or six conversational turns will squelch motivation as well as continue to diminish the connections between spoken and written language. Build the foundation first before adding on all of the embellishments of the historical ages.

The rigidity so often evident in our teaching methodology was recently revealed again in a laboratory for preparation for the TOEFL exam. To give further immersion in the language, I have been reading aloud an interesting, well-written contemporary novel by Meg Rosoff, *Where I Live Now* (2004) for 20 minutes a session to give a sense of the rhythm along with expression of speaking/literary devices such as irony, incisive commentary, self-deprecating humor and use of modern language to express contemporary real-life possibilities. These skills are transferable to the speaking and writing section of the on-line examination. More importantly, this group of adolescents is reading a book that could be shared with peers. Interestingly, the story's narrator Daisy, a brash, neurotic but insightful teenager from America wittily comments on her wonderment at sharing thoughts and experiences with her special English cousins and as well as ironic insights into cultural differences. When unfortunate circumstances force a dislocation of the family and she becomes a volunteer laborer, Daisy makes the ingenuous observation that "*My partner was a local woman called Elena who was from Liverpool originally so I didn't understand most of what she said for the first few days and vice versa. Eventually we started chatting about this and that and soon*

the stories started coming out... and though she was a lot older than me and we barely spoke the same language she turned out to be the kind of person you could talk to about pretty much anything without worrying that she'd report you to the Pope" (p. 100). What is seen as problematic among students and teachers, i.e., the seeming incomprehensibility of English(es), becomes an illuminating throw-away line in an absorbing story. Enjoyment moves these older students beyond the text and into the realm of sharing ideas through vicarious experience and reflection upon it.

One student had exasperatedly before this moment in the text, lamented the use of different words in the book I was reading out-loud from America and the version bought from Amazon.com in England that had a few different word alterations in them. "Why do they do this in English! It is ridiculous! It should be the same!" Rather than understanding that English is a linguistic gymnast that follows certain rules but then, bends them to accommodate the music of different phonologies, the forms of variable mother tongues and the shape of societal contexts, this student reflected the rigid expectations of "school English". Instead of being inculcated into the global richness of a language of wider communication, she had been carefully schooled in grammar as though it were the norm for English *speakers*.

In his entertaining but carefully researched book, *The Mother Tongue: English and how it got that way* (1990), American author Bill Bryson, a long-time resident of England, takes on this very notion that has been debated since the first settlers arrived in America. Even though the preponderance of teaching materials feature "British English" in Europe, I presume to be considered the most regular and authoritative form (and geographically more proximal), the flexibility of the English language argues against this idea. Bryson notes that from the time England colonized North America, it was necessary for the residents to invent or acquire from other native speakers and residents, words that would serve them

for the new regions, objects, flower and fauna they encountered as they pushed inward into the mainland.

Two of the founding fathers of America proper, Thomas Jefferson and Ben Franklin, were constantly defending accent and word variations, many of which had come originally from England, lost favor there and then, were later transported back into usage in more modern times! Further, these learned men along with many other brilliant creators of American government did not even feel the need to declare English as the national language –it was perforce since that was the common language of the time in the colonies. Interestingly as Bryson notes, paradoxically England, the country which has housed people from a common heritage for eons in a relatively small piece of real estate has more variations of English that are incomprehensible across its villages and hamlets, than America, a vast country that has absorbed many cultures in its formation but is notable for the fact that even travelling across from coast to coast, the language remains relatively uniform and comprehensible among different cultural and language groups.

One of the current popular academic trends now is the discussion and dissection of the concept of *global English*. Perhaps we need to shift the discourse from “global English” to “global ideas” in which we search for those pathways of wider communication to breach the divides between *speakers*, *writers* and *thinkers*. Certainly, English languages play a role as a communicative medium. Turning classrooms into microcosms of self-expression, reflection and meaningful production of skills that move our students into improved self-awareness, higher-order thinking and problem-solving should be the explicit goals of ‘teaching Englishes’. Pride in being American and having a solid grasp of my first language does not exclude me from the acceptance that English is not my language but is everybody’s language. I am growing to appreciate the beauty of English forms that appear, for example, in Indian English (Costenaro, 2006). Thanks to

wonderful teachers like Mrs. Dawson and Miss Gibson, I may have a stronger appreciation of the structure that nuances my self-expression. But, the underlying impulse is my desire to communicate with different people. I am tolerant of less-than-perfect control of the language in others having now become an imperfect Italian language speaker and sensitized to the barriers posed by my knowledge gaps. The enthusiasm to share, however, drives my increasing oral language skills in Italian and as I interact, my sensitivity to the sounds and words of the language (as it is spoken in Venice!) improves as well.

It is important to give students, whether young or adult, the courage to communicate in English. Imparting biased or judgmental attitudes about what constitutes 'correctness' should be discarded in favor of what constitutes 'authenticity' and communicative success between individuals. Thus, we must learn to open our minds and ears to the art of speaking many Englishes.

References

- Bryson, B. (1990). *The Mother Tongue: English and how it got that way*, New York, HarperCollins.
- Costenaro V. (2006). Postcolonial Literature and Indian English: introducing Sociolinguistics in the EFL Classroom. *Rassegna Italiana di Linguistica Applicata*, 2-3, 175-189.
- Rosoff, M. (2004). *How I Live Now*, New York, Wendy Lamb Books.