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THE REPRESENTATION OF THE SOCIOLINGUISTIC COMPETENCE IN THE ISRAELI ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEXTBOOKS

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Abstract

This paper aims at clarifying the concept of sociolinguistic competence and at investigating its representation in the English language textbooks most commonly used in Arab Israeli high schools. It provides an analysis of the oral activities aimed to find out whether they encourage the development of the sociolinguistic competence through meaningful negotiation and authentic communication. The paper contains a qualitative research which answers two questions related to the representation of the sociolinguistic competence in the commonly chosen EFL textbooks used in high schools in the Arab sector in Israel, and the didactic strategies and techniques suggested by these textbooks for the implementation of the sociolinguistic component of the communicative approach. The main finding is that the Israeli textbooks used in the EFL classroom do not illustrate the principles of the sociolinguistic competence. The speaking activities offered by the chosen textbooks fail to introduce a variety of cultural settings, where learners need to appropriate their use of lexis, grammar and register to various social and cultural codes. In addition, these textbooks do not suggest any didactic strategies meant to implement the learners' sociolinguistic competence. They do not raise the learners' awareness to the way they are supposed to appropriate their language in terms of formality, register, relationships between the participants in the communication performed in various social settings.

Keywords: Sociolinguistic competence, EFL textbooks, oral activities, Israel

1. Introduction

Successful oral communication cannot be achieved only by learning grammar and vocabulary. The students' awareness of the sociolinguistic dimension of the oral activities in the EFL classroom has been recognized as essential for their ability to express themselves in different cross-cultural contexts (Canale & Swain, 1980; Larsen-Freeman, 1986; Richards & Rogers, 1986). In his article "Incorporating Sociolinguistic Norms into an EFL Program", Rodolfo (1976), doctor in bicultural studies at the University of Texas at San Antonio, USA, defined the term sociolinguistics as;

> the science that has sought to capture, not only the description of the code, but also the complexities of speech itself. The learner of a foreign language, if he truly strives for proficiency in the target language, must obviously go beyond the mere knowledge of its phonological and grammatical rules and internalize in addition the communicative rules that tell him how the code becomes alive in a real life situation. (p. 411)

A foreign language learner must develop the language speaking potential to be able to talk about any topic appropriately in a wide variety of settings with very few errors. However, after many years of studying a foreign language, learners often fail to achieve the level of speaking proficiency at which they can express themselves like native speakers, as they may lack knowledge of actual speech acts, of idiomatic expressions and slang, or they lack the motivation to produce native-like speech. Another important contributing factor may be their ignorance of the utterances that are appropriate in the social situation in which they are speaking.

2. Problem Statement

Developing communicative skills is emphasized as the target of English teaching pedagogy in the Israeli Revised English Curriculum (2018)[1], whose core objective is to enable speakers of both Hebrew and Arabic in Israel "to use both spoken and written English in order to progress in their professional, business, or academic careers, as well as in order to travel, enjoy international entertainment, or to take advantage of the opportunities offered by the internet." (7) It also states the goal that by the end of the twelfth grade, the learners should be able to "interact effectively in a variety of situations; access and make use of information from a variety of sources and media; present information in an organized manner; appreciate literature and other cultures, and develop linguistic awareness." (8) In other words, the Israeli Curriculum emphasizes the significance of teaching for interaction and oral communication. However, the main objectives of the Israeli curriculum do not seem to be achieved by the end of high school. According to a previous research that I have conducted, a large number of high school students are not able to communicate with proficient users of English.

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[1] The Israeli English curriculum provides the standards and the principles for learning and teaching English as an international language in Israel.

3. Research Questions

Developing oral communicative skills entails the inclusion of a sociolinguistic dimension with a vital role not only in the syllabus, teaching methodology, and teacher training, but also in the textbooks and teaching materials. In order to examine the representation of the sociolinguistic competence in the Israeli textbooks, qualitative research methods have been used. They aimed at answering two questions: (a) Do the commonly chosen EFL textbooks used in high schools in the Arab sector in Israel relate to the sociolinguistic competence and meet its main principles? (b) What didactic strategies and techniques suggested by these textbooks may be used to implement the sociolinguistic component of the communicative approach?

4. Purpose of the Study

This study aims at clarifying the concept of sociolinguistic competence and at investigating its representation in the English language textbooks most commonly used in Arab Israeli high schools. It provides an analysis of the oral activities aimed to find out whether they encourage the development of the sociolinguistic competence through meaningful negotiation and authentic communication.

5. Literature Review

The sociolinguistic component of communication started to gain ground in the mid-twentieth century as a reaction to Noam Chomsky's definition of the communicative competence in *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax* (Chomsky, 1965). Chomsky (1965) pointed out that grammar "purports to be a description of the ideal speaker-hearer's intrinsic competence" (p. 4). By contrast, Dell Hymes (1972) emphasized that a foreign language learner has to acquire different kinds of competences in addition to linguistic knowledge (knowledge of grammar and vocabulary) in order to be able to communicate for everyday life purposes. Hyme's perspective on communicative competence places great emphasis on the learner's ability to use language appropriately in a wide range of cultural contexts. The sociolinguistic competence, as emphasized in Hymes' model of communicative competence refers to the learners' ability to use the language appropriately in different social contexts. In other words, Hymes' perspective relates to the foreign language learners' potential to apply communicative functions appropriately in different sociocultural contexts.

Following Hymes (1972) believed that there are various language skills involved in the process of communication in addition to grammar knowledge. They emphasized that the communicative approach is based on the use of different communicative functions such as apologizing, describing, inviting, and promising. Besides, they point out that a language learner needs to acquire sufficient language knowledge in order to be able to express these functions appropriately. Based on "contextual factors such as a topic, role of participants, setting, and norms of interaction", Canale and Swain (1980) pointed out that the sociolinguistic competence may also include "the extent to which appropriate attitude and register or style are conveyed by a particular grammatical form within a given sociocultural context" (p. 30). They also stated that the sociolinguistic competence is "made up of two sets of rules: sociocultural rules of use and rules of discourse. Knowledge of these rules will be crucial in interpreting utterances for social meaning,

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particularly when there is a low level of transparency between the literal meaning of an utterance and the speaker's intention" (Canale & Swain, 1980, p. 30) Otherwise stated, the sociolinguistic competence requires adjusting one's expression to the setting in which communication takes place, paying attention to factors such as age, status, and the sex of the participants, and the formality of the setting. Moreover, in a foreign setting, the situational factors may call for different speech reactions than they would in the home culture.

A more recent definition of the sociolinguistic competence is offered by the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR): "[the] sociolinguistic competence is concerned with the knowledge and skills required to deal with the social dimension of language use […]" linguistic markers of social relations; politeness conventions; expressions of folk-wisdom; register differences; and dialect and accent" (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 17).

Ya (2008) provided some examples of the social context that foreign language learners are supposed to understand, such as role relationships, the shared information of the participants, and the communicative purpose for their interaction. He added that learners should master the "social-culture code of language use: to appropriately apply vocabulary, register, style, etc. in a given situation" (p. 82).

The new recognition and insights concerning the significance of the development of EFL learners' sociolinguistic competence have operated huge changes in the EFL teaching and pedagogy. Developing the sociolinguistic competence has received particular attention in the field of EFL curriculum, course design and textbook evaluation. Therefore, when examining *The Revised Israeli Curriculum*, one can notice the presence of detailed descriptions of objectives, standards, domains and benchmarks for each language skill at different learning levels. According to it, communicative competence should be the foundation of the foreign language teaching materials and textbooks. Therefore, the communicative-oriented activities comprised in the textbooks are expected to relate to the sociolinguistic competence as an essential component of the communicative approach.

Examining the characteristics of the communicative textbooks, Seyyed Ayatollah Razmjoo, Professor at the Department of Foreign Languages and Linguistics, Shiraz University, Iran, summarized the characteristics that should be considered when designing a communicative textbook, at the end of an interview with Jack Richards, American applied linguist and textbook writer. Razmjoo (2007) reported that Richards believed that textbooks need focus on communication as the target of language learning. They need to include different communicative activities which create opportunities for meaning negotiation, interaction through introducing tasks of information sharing, problem solving, and role-play. These should create coherent links between reading, listening, writing and speaking, and grammar learning. Besides, Richards stressed the significance of an authentic learning atmosphere and that of the manner in which language is used in a particular context in order to fulfill social purposes. Therefore, the materials and tasks used in the EFL classroom should serve social situations and everyday life purposes (Razmjoo, 2007).

6. Research Methods

A qualitative research was conducted in order to examine the representation of the sociolinguistic competence in the EFL textbooks used in the Israeli Arab high schools. The oral activities presented in the textbooks were analyzed in order to find out whether they may lead towards the development of the

sociolinguistic competence, and whether they provide opportunities for meaning negotiation and authentic communication.

7.   Research

The qualitative research includes a detailed analysis of the most commonly used English textbooks in the Israeli classroom. The analysis answers the research questions, formulated starting from the definitions of the sociolinguistic competence model which were presented in the literature review. It has as objective to determine whether the sociolinguistic competence is promoted in the speaking activities offered in the selected Israeli EFL high school textbooks, and to what extent.

7.1. The Mini Quantitative Research

Before starting the research proper, a mini research was conducted which lies at the basis of the qualitative research. It had to answer the question: where do Israeli teachers get their teaching materials from, and what are the most commonly used textbooks in the Israeli Arab English high schools? The English teachers in Israel are allowed to choose the textbooks and the supplementary materials they want to use from a list of approved books issued by the Israeli Ministry of Education (2018). The approved list includes books provided by two Israeli leading publishers: Eric Cohen Books (ECB), and University Publishing Projects (UPP). In order to determine what the most commonly used textbooks are in the Arab Israeli high schools, I conducted a short phone survey in mid-September 2019, at the beginning of the school year, and asked as many teachers as I could, about the textbooks they use. Forty-two Arab high school English teachers offered answers in the above-mentioned survey.

The results of the survey showed that the most commonly used textbooks in high schools in the Israeli Arab sector are *Take a Stand* (used by 10 teachers), Turning Points (used by 9 teachers), and *High Five* (used by 8 teachers). In the following section is analyzed the representation of the communicative competence approach in these three most widely used textbooks. They are used for good to excellent classes (the so-called 4 and 5 pointers) in the 10th and the 11th grades. *Take a Stand and High Five* are designed for 5 pointers (excellent students) and Turning Points is designed for 4 pointers (good students). It is worth mentioning that the teachers who use these textbooks are not obliged or expected to finish the whole textbook by the end of the school year.

The textbooks analysis examined whether the educational policy encapsulated in the Israeli English Curriculum to promote the learners' sociolinguistic oral competence is efficiently illustrated by the textbooks. It focused on the main principles of the sociolinguistic approach defined in the CEFR, including foreign language cultural awareness, and on functions such as greeting, addressing and showing interest, introductions, invitations, and requests, politeness, suggestions and offers, expressing opinions, apologies, polite refusals, gratitude, and so forth. Furthermore, this analysis related to strategies and resources and the kind of activities used in the classroom in order to facilitate the acquisition of oral sociolinguistic strategies.

8. Findings

The speaking activities offered by the three chosen Israeli EFL textbooks (*Turning Points, High Five, and Take a Stand*), focus mainly on the accurate implementation of the linguistic knowledge, including grammar and vocabulary, rather than on promoting the sociolinguistic competence. All the speaking activities allow intensive practice of different lexical and grammatical items, and the instructions for most of the activities direct the learners to apply specific grammatical structures. Though the speaking activities relate to different types of oral communications that perform such functions as expressing opinions, making presentations, apologizing, suggesting solutions and giving advice, the students are not helped to understand the way in which language should be used appropriately according to different kinds of settings and social contexts. In other words, they are not encouraged to understand the sociocultural code of language in order to use the appropriate lexis, register, and style. The speaking activities do not suggest real communications between different kinds of participants, such as men and women, employers and employees, friends, young and elderly people, but are carried out mostly between young people that are friends or classmates, in the context of the classroom. Consequently, the students cannot be expected to appropriate their lexis to different social contexts, according to their relation with the other participants. Furthermore, the activities offered by the chosen textbooks do not require students to respond spontaneously to a variety of authentic situations in a wide range of social and cultural settings.

High Five and Turning Points, contain more authentic and interesting topics for discussions. Besides, the two textbooks offer more group and pair work where the students are engaged in various types of interactive activities such as presentations, conversations, dialogues, role-plays, discussions and problem solving. The students are introduced to and are asked to practise stereotypical language for expressing opinions, suggesting solutions, apologizing, and so on. In contrast, in Take a Stand, there is less variety of communicative oral activities, since the textbook focuses more on presentations, discussions and expressing opinions, and there are fewer activities which guarantee the active participation of all the students in the classroom.

The topics of the speaking activities discussed in *Take a Stand and High Five* are more authentic than the ones offered by Turning Points. However, the topics discussed in all three textbooks fail to prepare the students for using English in travel, business or other common situations in which the students may need English after graduation. In addition, neither of these textbooks provides sufficient input for promoting meaningful negotiation. Furthermore, the students are generally given separate items of vocabulary that they may use in order to make up sentences, not paragraphs. In other words, the students are more encouraged to work at sentence rather than at discourse level.

It is also worth mentioning that speaking and listening are not presented as interrelated skills but rather as separate skills. Moreover, these textbooks fail to create links between listening and speaking because useful tools are missing such as accompanying video materials. As a consequence, the students are not provided with sufficient authentic language exposure through listening like in real life. Interestingly, Turning Points is the only textbook which provides speaking checklists for most of the speaking activities according to which the students can self-evaluate their speaking performance. The checklists assess both content and language, just like in the national oral exam.

9. Conclusion

The results of the research described above indicate that the Israeli textbooks used in the EFL classroom do not illustrate the sociolinguistic competence principles. In contrast, they focus mainly on the implementation of the linguistic competence. The speaking activities offered by the chosen textbooks fail to introduce a variety of cultural settings, where learners need to appropriate their use of lexis, grammar and register to various social and cultural codes. In addition, these textbooks do not suggest any didactic strategies meant to implement the learners' sociolinguistic competence. They do not raise the learners' awareness to the way they are supposed to appropriate their language in terms of formality, register, relationships between the participants in the communication performed in various social settings.

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