

# The Business English Learner and Teacher

—How Identity Can Impact Lessons—

Robert GEE\*

ビジネス英語の指導者と学習者

——アイデンティティーは授業にどのような影響を与えるか——

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## Summary

Most of the literature on business English tends to focus on teaching methodology and the materials to be used. This paper argues that the identity of learners needs to be recognized as an important element of business English, and that we as teachers need to acknowledge the types of English learners in the classroom as well as their work status and professional aspirations in order to develop more successful classes. The identity of teachers is also a factor which has impact on business English classes, both for native and non-native speakers. Identity is examined from the perspectives of culture, testing, as well as language use and prestige, including world Englishes.

ビジネス英語についての研究は教授法と教材に焦点を当てたものがほとんどである。本研究は学習者のアイデンティティーが授業に与える影響を考察し、指導者はその重要性を認識する必要があることを主張する。指導者は学習者の職業上のニーズだけでなく、どのような学習者タイプであるかを把握しなければ効率的な授業運営はできない。また指導者のアイデンティティーもビジネス英語の授業では重要な要因となる。アイデンティティーを文化、テストイングおよび英語使用と威信という世界英語の視点から論じる。

**Key words**   □ Business English   □ Language testing   □ Identity  
                  □ Intercultural communication   □ English varieties

## 1 Introduction

A quick examination of business English textbooks, reference books, journal articles, or conference presentations will soon demonstrate that the majority are overwhelmingly focused on

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\* School of Modern Management, Department of Modern Management

teaching methodology and the content to be used in lessons. Although this is appropriate because most classroom activity and time is devoted to these core elements, it is believed that we could be underestimating a key factor in the participants themselves, both learners and teachers.

Teachers will readily appreciate that all learners are different. They possess different personalities and learning styles, and have widely ranging English abilities, varying degrees and types of motivation, as well as attitudes which can change, dramatically from class to class. Class composition is another varied factor being composed of one or a mix of nationalities who may speak the same or vastly unrelated first languages (L1), and be made up of similar or an assortment of ages, genders, qualifications, occupational backgrounds, levels of work experience, etc., depending upon the teaching situation. The same factors also affect teachers, and therefore the identity of all classroom participants which this paper argues needs to be given greater recognition in business English classes, just as it is being given in more general language learning situations.

## **2 Identity & language learning**

While identity has long been the domain of philosophical and bureaucratic endeavors, the issue of language learner identity has been given increasing prominence in EFL and ESL literature, particularly over the past twenty years or so. The evidence of this trend can be seen in the number of inclusions of the term “identity” in the titles of conferences, presentations, books and articles. Much of this interest has been attributed to the writings of Norton (2000), and Pavlenko and Blackedge (2004) who have examined how language learning identity becomes established, evolves and is negotiated in dynamic social, cultural and historic contexts. For the purpose of this paper, identity is defined as the characteristics that define who you are and which others (groups) you identify with and/or aspire to. As such, an identity involves self-image as well as how you are perceived by others.

Language is considered to be an important factor for L2 learners primarily because of the role it plays in determining a speaker’s identity in terms of their gender, nationality, class, etc. Although learners have an established identity as a native speaker of their L1, they also assume a new identity as a non-native speaker of English (NNSE) which will be marked by their accent, pronunciation and (possibly) appearance. Learning a new language also requires understanding of the values of the L2 culture(s) using the language, such as learning gender-appropriate expressions or how to sound polite. For advanced learners, this often involves adopting a new identity resembling a native speaker who can use appropriate language, including body language, according to their age, occupation, gender, etc. Consider the experience of an American learning Japanese in Japan:

“My desire to fit in as much as possible to the society that was nurturing my new Japanese persona motivated me to work on producing softer, more polite and refined ways of speaking. The way Japanese was affecting me physically did not occur to me until the first time I saw myself on a video ... I watched this non-Japanese woman, sitting demurely on her knees, delicately covering her mouth with her hands as she giggled, speaking in a high-pitched tone

of voice.” (Ogulnick, 2000: 170).

Such a learner would be regarded as having a high level of integrative motivation, however, this is less likely to apply to business English learners who would more likely to be motivated by instrumental reasons (Gardner, 1985). That is, English is not being learned because of any strong attraction to a particular country or culture, but because it is necessary or advantageous for their career. Acquiring English is not the goal for business English learners, but is primarily a means to achieving their professional and/or career goals.

Identity also becomes a major factor in language classrooms because of the vulnerable situation learners are being placed in. They may often not know anyone else in the class at the start. It is inevitable that some students will come to the first class with more advanced English skills, and those with less ability are likely to be more introverted and/or less confident than they would be in their L1. Language students are being placed into potentially face-threatening situations because they inevitably make mistakes. As a result, they may feel insecure but are required to renegotiate new identities as a language learner and as a member of that particular class. In the case of younger business English learners such as those in university classes, these new identities are being negotiated even as they are establishing themselves in society as young adults in terms of their ethnicity, gender, sexuality, etc. This can be a very trying and confusing stage for many learners, which may manifest in their classroom attitudes and interaction. What can teachers do to make this process go more smoothly for learners?

### **3 Attitudes to English varieties**

Another fundamental factor when establishing an identity with peers relates to one’s English variety and NNSE accent. How do native speakers of English (NSEs) and NNSEs regard various English varieties? Surveys have shown that both NSEs and NNSEs have a distinct preference for NSE varieties over NNSE varieties. For example, British NSEs generally preferred standard US (network American) and British (RP) varieties, did not like other NSE regional varieties as much, and least preferred those from NNSE countries such as East Asia (Hiraga, 2005). Similarly, NNSEs are no kinder to their peers and closely mirror the above NSE preferences (Jenkins, 2007; Hanamoto, 2010). In classes with learners from various nationalities therefore, there will be students with more or less prestigious or familiar English varieties/accents. Should teachers be promoting a more egalitarian view of English varieties, especially the NNSE ones in our classrooms? How can we promote NNSE varieties given that there appears to be widespread agreement as to what are regarded as preferred and less-preferred Englishes?

The blossoming English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) movement champions the validity of NNSE accents and downplays the traditional bias for developing NSE accents. But many thousands of young South Asians and Filipinos owe their entry into their nations’ growing middle classes to their ability to mimic American accents and manners for their prestigious call center jobs. How does a teacher reconcile the desire to advocate a local English variety in order to combat linguistic

imperialism, with the very practical need of young students to get a sought-after job which depends mostly on their ability to pass themselves off as a NSE? There are certainly teachers and students who would be uncomfortable moving away from language teaching/learning and using class time to advocate these more political and controversial aspects of language prestige and power. Is it even appropriate for teachers to address such issues in language classrooms given that language attitudes are being promoted explicitly rather than being allowed to develop or evolve in society over time?

## **4 Intercultural Communication**

### **4.1 Culture and language**

As shown in the studies of Hofstede (2001) and Troupenars and Hampden-Turner (1998), different cultures have different ways of speaking and relating to others. When different cultures work together, they have often been found to hold negative views towards others since they inevitably judge others according to their own cultural values. Yamada (1992) analyzed the different approaches and communication styles of Americans and Japanese working together and uncovered numerous culture-based irritations and misunderstandings. Louhiala-Salminen et al. (1995) similarly found that when regionally neighboring Swedish and Finnish employees worked together in English, they also held negative views of one another based on the cultural communication styles of the other nationality as being either too direct or too polite, overly chatty or overly taciturn, etc. These traits are part of cultural identity. How do we as teachers reconcile these attitudes, or prejudices, in classrooms with more than one nationality present, and in the future when our learners interact at work with colleagues or clients of other nationalities?

### **4.2 Culture and Business English**

In EFL situations, teachers often face classes with a common L1. How do we deal with the use of L1 in business English classrooms? Some teachers try to explicitly ban L1 usage, others attempt to ignore the proverbial elephant in the room in the hope it will go away, yet others argue that the L1 should be incorporated into classes for the sake of efficiency (Canagarajah, 1999). Teachers should understand that L1 usage can be used as deliberate identity markers for students who feel frustrated or threatened in L2 situations; using L1 allows them to feel competent and empowered again. In ESL situations, the local vernacular or English variety may be similarly employed in classes as a tool of identity. The deliberate use of the local variety in code-switching or code-mixing establishes solidarity as well as offering a possible source of humor in classes of otherwise “standard” English.

For business English learners specifically, there are other potential identity issues depending upon the situation. Although they may also include almost uniformly aged students in classrooms in school or university situations, business English classes may also be made of wide range of ages if they consist of job-experienced learners, such as those being offered by private schools or classes sponsored by companies for their workers. Identity can also be affected by the inevitable struggles of mastering a new language since any difficulties involved may threaten self-esteem. Generally, older learners over fifty or sixty are not as likely to possess the mental agility of twenty year-olds

in the same class. Older learners, however, are likely to occupy more senior positions at work, and perhaps are accustomed to being treated deferentially. These factors may make their identity as a less proficient learner harder to accept given that they are suddenly in the position of being peers in a classroom where everyone is theoretically at the same or a similar level. People who are normally highly competent and respected at work may be vexed by their inability to perform at the same high level in L2 classrooms. The choice of L1 may also enable frustrated learners to express themselves comfortably after struggling to express what they wanted to say.

## 5 The BE Teacher and Identity

Although the principal focus of this paper has concerned BE learners, the identity of the teacher is also important since we, like our learners, vary greatly and bring different identities to the classroom. Depending on the situation, a teacher may become the knowledgeable lecturer, the facilitator, the revered professor, the EFL or ESL professional, the fluency fiend, the stickler for accuracy, the native speaker “expert”, the NNSE role model, etc. These roles reflect our professional selves as language instructors, however, there are also times in which identity becomes or can become a more personal issue for teachers. NSE teachers become the representative for their culture in EFL classrooms. Their accents could be viewed as desirable (for example, standard American or British Englishes) or undesirable (Singaporean or Broad Australian Englishes), irrespective of whether these views are warranted or not.

The professional self-esteem of NNSE teachers can suffer as most are aware that they may never achieve the overall mastery, perfect pronunciation and seemingly effortless fluency of NSE teachers, despite their very best efforts to do so. Perhaps this is a cause of the continuing practice of *yakudoku* in Japanese English classrooms. Using this teaching methodology, NNSEs can very effectively avoid the areas they may feel inadequate in, such as fluency, pronunciation, listening comprehension, or spontaneous conversation, and concentrate on their strengths which are typically grammar, reading, vocabulary, and translation. In a *yakudoku* class the subject matter is undeniably English, but the language being mostly produced by participants, the teacher and learners, is overwhelmingly Japanese. While this methodology may preserve the face of NNSE teachers, it probably does little to help students become confident producers of English in the real world.

Although many NSE teachers vocally support the ELF movement, these views are not being reflected in the important areas for NNSE learners. In Japan for example, entrance exams are argued to have a wash-back effect on high school curricula. The Center Exam has always accepted only NSE standard vocabulary, spelling and grammar, and uses only NSE (US, British and Australian) accents in its listening test. The same comments apply to the Japan-developed STEP EIKEN and TOEIC tests, despite the large number of advocates for NNSE varieties living and working here. Internationally as well, there seems to be a similar disparity with standard tests such as TOEFL, IELTS, Cambridge, etc., also not including or under-representing NNSEs. Until such high stakes tests allow the flexibility of non-standard or non-native Englishes, it is unlikely they will be considered as valid alternatives and will continue to be viewed as second-best.

This is not to suggest that only native speakers are to blame for the disparity. Jenkins (2007) interviewed seventeen NNSE teachers studying in the UK. She found that as English teachers, they sent very mixed signals in regards to their identity as non-native teachers of English. Although most claim to like their own NNSE accent, they generally preferred NSE accents. NSE accents were regarded as authentic and as their model for teaching while NNSE accents were definitely viewed pejoratively. Similar sentiments from NNSEs have also been found in other papers (Perrin 2011; Lee 2007; Chew 2007). As English teachers, however, it is not unnatural that NNSEs would aim to perfect their English as much as possible, and therefore aspire to native speaker varieties and standards. Conflict can easily arise, however, as they try to resolve their professional aspirations with the more democratic desire to not have their NNSE variety ignored, marginalized or trivialized.

## 6 Conclusion

The aim for writing this article has not been to provide answers but to ask questions that I felt needed to be asked in the interests of developing more effective classes and better classroom atmosphere. Ultimately, it is not possible to provide solutions as they will vary depending upon the actual situation of the class, which will vary greatly according to the many variables discussed above. This is because for our students, what they need to learn goes beyond mere knowledge of language. They need to be able to establish an identity or identities appropriate to their work situation or needs. They may need to become the authoritative leader, the flexible manager, the skilled negotiator, the sympathetic colleague, the confident presenter, the culturally-sensitive business traveler, the congenial host, the resourceful salesperson, the polite but demanding customer, and so on. It is in their *use* of language, particularly in their second language of English that these identities have to be negotiated, and that is where teachers can effectively contribute to business English needs. Teachers need to assist learners to develop the linguistic and personal skills to take on their new identity as a business English user.

The issue of identity is never going to be absent from classrooms. We need to take greater account of it as we strive to help learners gain the language and related skills they need to successfully adopt the roles they will have on the job. As Norton (2000) notes, identity in language learning is affected by how learners understand the possibilities for the future. Teachers need to appreciate that despite their own feelings about the legitimacy of English varieties, it is the future of learners that is at stake—not those of the teachers who have achieved a career—and therefore it is their needs that must be considered paramount.

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