English-Speaking Countries' Literature and Prospective Teachers' Perceived Social Status

Lany Kristono  
Satya Wacana Christian University  
lan.kristono@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

The growing number of schools offering English as the teaching medium of, at least, several subjects, implies the public enthusiastic response and preference to such education institutions. Underlying this phenomena is a mindset that knowledge and mastery of English language is an access to a promising future; thus social status. At the same time, World Englishes is increasingly accepted and practiced. A means to resist the domination of particularly British and American English, World Englishes accommodate local culture that it is also considered different nations' own language. Such a wide acceptance should lower the prestige knowing English bears to Learning English as well as its literature, 37 Prose students who acted as participants of this study should be aware of this issue. As a social member, they may share similar perception as the society. However, learning English canon literature which provides authentic English, they also learn to break dominating forces. Aimed to find out how students perceive their social status as learners of English and how much English canon literature by native speaker authors affected their self-perception as those who knew English, this study utilized a reader-response approach. The same questionnaire given at the beginning of the course and after the class had discussed four short stories revealed that despite the diverse opinion the participants first had, they tended to reflect the societal notion. The literary works did influence their perception although it did not make a significant difference.

Key words: English speaking countries' literature, perceived social status, knowledge of English

INTRODUCTION

It has recently been acknowledged that the population of so-called non-native speakers of That SBI, which is aimed at producing internationally competent graduates, is characterized by the use of English as the teaching medium particularly in natural sciences subjects implicitly acknowledges the superiority of the English to Indonesian language. The growing number of education institutions adopting English as the language spoken within the school area signals the public unstated belief of the determining factor English active and passive skills have to their children’s future. As McKay presenting Kachru's notion maintains that knowing English means having linguistic power which is a ticket to "international business, technology, science and travel" (28).

The increasing use of English in advertisements, even in the naming of state institution's recently established division, such as the National Traffic Management Center (NTMC) by the Indonesian Police Force, indicates that the foreign language correlates with public trust and an
underlying cultural mindset that those western are identical with quality and reliability; thus, the success of sales and the new center. As Kirkpatrick (10) states, language is not only a means of communication, but also an identity reference. He elaborates that "people use language to signal to other people who they are and what group(s) they belong to." Pennycook elaborates that implied in one's acts of language use is his/her position within a social order and cultural politics (qtd. in Birch 34). Referring particularly to the English language, Birch explains what Pennycook means by one's position in a social order by saying that like it or not, one's socioeconomic status is determined by his/her knowledge of English since "knowledge creates the have /have not dichotomy (15)."

On one hand, the aforementioned phenomenon seems to contradict against the widening acceptance of World Englishes in the realm of English teaching as well as other realms of life. Bolton elaborates that regardless the various terms1 used, World Englishes has been getting an increasing attention since the last three decades (370). Associated with Braj B. Kachru, World Englishes counter the exclusive and monocentric approach to the study of English (Bolton 367) so that English is not exclusively British English or American English, two countries of the Inner Circle2. Birch argues that the spread of English has inspired each region to adjust the language to their culture so that it is also their own language (17). Borrowing Pennycook's term of the glocalization and worldliness of English, Birch informs that World Englishes is "globally general and locally specific" (17). Being locally specific, English in different cities, villages, and other parts of the world reflect the local culture, resulting in a shift in the language ownership as explained by Kachru and Smith that "The language now belongs to those who use it as their first language and to those who use it as an additional language, whether in its standard form or in its localized forms" (qtd. in Bolton 368). The dynamic of English fits what Pennycook maintains that "acts of language use always imply ... a struggle over different representations of the self and other" (qtd. in Birch 17). In this case, as Pennycook further explains, language not only reflects, but is also able to change culture and society—it is among others "a way for people to imagine and therefore transition to preferred future" (qtd. in Birch 18).

In my opinion, the power to change language carries is affected by the significant role a particular language plays globally as well as locally. English linguistic power has made the world express in and identify itself with English. Borrowing the economic principle of demand, goods availability and value3 as well as considering the present global situation in which the United States and United Kingdom economic leadership has been shifted to Brazil, Russia, India, and China, English should not be as linguistically powerful as it used to be4. Considering the increasing number of English-speaking Indonesians, who can then be called the owner of the language (cf. Bolton 368), and the fact MacKay shares that English speaking bilinguals in many EFL countries has outnumbered those in ESL countries (qtd. in Fernandez 87) and that there are more non-native speakers of English than the native ones, there should be a declining pride in knowing English. It is 'only' one of the common knowledge millions of individuals share. Being teachers in training, the students of the

---

1 World Englishes may be wrapped in different terms, such as global Englishes, new varieties of English, English as an international language, etc (Bolton 370).

2 The Inner Circle Countries are The United States of America, the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia and New Zealand, where English is the native language (Dawson, 2011:p.2)

3 Value increases if demand is high but availability I slow. In contrast, value decreases when demand remains or declines, while availability is high.

4 English linguistic power is inseparable from Britain's imperialist power and later the United States significant role worldwide,
Faculty of Language and Literature, Satya Wacana Christian University should be critically aware of this recent development of English. Therefore, they are supposed to have a different notion from the society's about the socioeconomic impact of being English literate as well as English proficient, except that it is an inevitable requirement to be English teachers. On the other hand, as members of a society which puts English in a high place, it is also possible that they share a similar perception about the linguistic power of English.

PARTICIPANTS AND METHODOLOGY

To find out how students of the Faculty of Language and Literature of Satya Wacana Christian University perceived their social position as those knowing English and studying native speakers' English literary works and how the literature of English-speaking countries affected such perception, a reader-response approach was utilized. Thirty-seven Prose students of semester 1 2011-2012 academic year were asked to participate in this study. Those students filled out a questionnaire of ten statements at the beginning of the first meeting and after the discussion of the literary works. In filling out the questionnaire, the students expressed whether they strongly agree, agree, are not sure, disagree or strongly disagree to each statement.

The literary works used were canon literature written by native speakers of English; namely "A Clean and Well-Lighted Place" by Hemmingway, "First Confession" by Frank O'Connor, "A Rose for Emily" by William Faulkner, and "Eveline" by James Joyce. There were two reasons for the selection. First, literature provides a good example of the use of authentic English, in this context native speakers' English. To understand English literature, one needs to be skilful at reading between the lines; to be good at reading skills. Second, canon literature invites readers to be critically aware of existing social injustice and to take side with the oppressed or less privileged as the text has demonstrated because no text is neutral (Storey 5). Since the medium of the identification with the marginalized is authentic English, reading literary works by authors of English-speaking countries is supposed to remind students that English is not only a language of or to be the 'have', but is also a means to defend the 'have not' which asked them to take side on the marginalized.

All participants, except one, were in their fifth semester and had never taken Prose. Being eligible to take Prose Course, these students have passed Introduction to Literature, which they were supposed to take in the third semester of study. If Introduction to Literature introduces learners to the three literary genres; i.e. prose, poetry, and drama and the intrinsic elements of each genre, in Prose class at least two approaches or perspectives are discussed to analyze short stories. In this semester, the participants talked about structuralism and cultural studies, and the aforementioned short stories were scrutinized from the perspective of structuralism.

PERCEIVED SOCIAL STATUS

The table below shows the number of students who agree and disagree to the statements, ranging from strongly agree, agree, disagree, and strongly disagree. The column "Not Sure" has been provided to cater for those who had never thought of such notions, and could not decide whether they should agree or disagree. Each column denoting students' agreement, disagreement or confusion is divided into two columns with numbers. The numbers in the left columns represent how many learners shared the same opinion about each statement at the beginning of the course. The
numbers in the right columns refer to students having similar belief after they had discussed the four literary works by American and Irish authors.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Statements</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Not sure</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Because I'm studying English, people think more highly of me.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Because I'm studying English, I think more highly of myself.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>People who understand English are more civilized.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Knowledge of English (language) increases one's social status.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Knowledge of English language will increase one's economic status.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>English literature provides good and correct examples of how the language should be used.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>Literature written by native speakers of English is better for me.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>Reading English literature requires a good knowledge of English.</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>Only civilized people can understand English literature.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>The ability to understand English literature makes people even more socially respectable.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Before the discussion of the literary works, 17 students or 45.9% of all participants agreed that people thought more highly of them because they were studying English. The number equals those who were not sure about the notion. Only two or 5.4% disagreed and one student or 2.7% strongly disagreed to the idea. No one strongly agreed that their studying English made people think more highly of them. After the stories had been discussed, the total number of learners who disagreed remain the same; i.e. three or 8.1% of the participants. However, they all agreed to disagree to the statement, and none strongly disagreed to it. The number of students who could not decide their attitude towards the statement declines by 2.7% from 17 or 45.9% to 16 or 43.2%. On
Regarding what students thought of themselves because they were studying English, the table reveals that same number of students; i.e. 14 or 37.8%, agreed that they had a good perception about themselves because they were students of English. If two of them strongly agreed to the statement at the beginning of the course, their level of agreement was lowered after the stories had been discussed. Almost one third of the number of students who disagreed to the statement; i.e. four out of 13 or 30.7%, turned to be confused whether they would agree or disagree. However, two students or 5.4% expressed an increasing level of disagreement to the notion.

One student who was not sure and another one who disagreed to the third statement; i.e. "People who understand English are more civilized" decided to support the notion after the stories had been discussed. Thus, the number of learners who agreed to the idea is slightly increased by 5.4%.

The learners perceived the fourth statement which associates knowledge of English to one's increased social status differently. While filling out the same questionnaire for the second time, two students or 5.4% strongly agreed to the notion; whereas none did in the first. On the other hand, the number of learners who agreed to the idea is reduced by one or 2.7%, and the number of those who could not make up their mind declines by 2 or 5.4%. Those who disagree is increased by one student or 2.7% who then strongly disagreed to the statement.

After the students had discussed the stories, four more students or 10.8% of the participants expressed their agreement to the idea that "knowledge of English increases one's economic status", although one student or 2.7% who first strongly agreed to the notion did not change his/her mind. The number of learners who were not sure of the idea is decreased by eight out of 17 or by 51.4% but the number of those who disagreed is increased by five of the previous seven or by 71.4%. The findings show that the discussion of the literary works might have contributed to students' understanding of the relationship between one's knowledge of English and their economic status although they developed different perceptions.

Statement number six that "English literature provides good and correct examples of how the language should be used" is meant to find out students' perception of how significantly reading English literary works enhance their knowledge of English language. At the beginning of the course, all participants, except four who were not sure, agreed to the statement. Even one student strongly agreed to the idea. After the discussion of the stories, most students were aware of it, although the total number of learners who agree declines by four out of 33 or by 12.1%. Even one student strongly agree to the idea. However, two more students expressed an increased level of agreement since the number of those who strongly agree to the statement rises by two; i.e. from one to three, or by 200%. Three more participants were confused about the statement, increasing the number from four to seven or by 75%; while one student decided to disagree when the questionnaire was administered for the second time.

The number of students who supported statement number seven; i.e. "Literature written by native speakers of English is better for me" increased from 15 to 21 or by 40% with two students or 5.4% remain strongly agree to the idea. Fewer students were confused about or disagree to the notion when the questionnaire was given for the second time. The number of those who were not
sure decreases from 19 to 15 or by 21%; while that of those who disagreed is reduced from three to one or by 67%.

More students support statement number eight; i.e. Reading English literature requires a good knowledge of English” when they were filling out the questionnaire again. Three more students agree to the statement, changing the number from 27 to 30 or increasing the number by 11.1%; whereas one more learner strongly agreed to the notion, altering the number from three to four or adding 33.3% to the number. The number of participants who could not make up their mind about the statement declines 80% from five to one. However, two participants remain disagree to the idea.

Statement number nine; i.e. “Only civilized people can understand English literature” seems to confuse more students after they have discussed the short stories as the number increases by 29.4% from 17 to 22. The number of those who disagreed to the notion declines from 15 to 10 or by 33.3% although the number of student who strongly disagreed to the statement is added by 100%, from one to two participants. The total number of participants who supported the idea remain the same; i.e. five or 13.5% of all participants, although the ratio of their level of agreement changes. One student who strongly agreed to the statement decided to ‘only’ agreed to it when the questionnaire was given again. In contrast, the number of those who strongly disagreed to the statement is increased by 100% as the number changes from one to two.

Seven more students were not sure about the last statement; i.e. “The ability to understand English literature makes people even more socially respectable”, changing the number from 13 to 20 or increasing the number by 53.8%. Out of the 37 participants, two remain strongly agreed to the statement. But the number of learners who agreed to the idea declines from 17 to 11 or by 35.2%. On the other hand, the number of students who disagreed to the notion is also reduced from five to four or by 25%. No participants strongly disagreed to the statement.

CONCLUSION

The data reveal that the participants have different perceptions of their social status as members of the society who are learning English and English literature to be English teachers. However, around half of them shares the ideas suggested by experts that knowledge of English puts them in respectable social position as well as opens the gate to a promising future. They imagine that other people share similar perception about them as English students. However, it is interesting that the number of students who oppose the idea doubles when the questionnaire was given after the class had discussed the short stories. Although the exact reasons can only be found out through interview, which was not done in this study due to time constraint, the discussion of the stories might have taught them to be more down to earth since canon literature depicts life as it is. In other words, as prospective teachers of English they might be aware of the reality that knowing English does not put the person in a high position anymore with more and more people are getting proficient in it. This perception is also reflected in their response to statement which relates the knowledge to economic status. The participants seem to differ social status and economic status; whereas one’s alongside with economic status is a factor affecting the person’s position in the social order.

The participants’ preference to read English literature written by native speakers of English leads to an assumption they are still trapped in putting native speaker and non-native speaker of
English in a dichotomy of preferred and not preferred, better and worse. Implied is an attitude that perceive World Englishes literature is not as good. However, more do not associate English literature with being civilized and social respect. Therefore, the reading and discussion of the short stories does not significantly change the participants' perception of their social status. They seem to separate reading literature and knowledge of English as reflected in their response to statements three and nine.

REFERENCES


