SOCIOLINGUISTIC VARIATION IN LEARNERS' CLASSROOM DISCOURSE

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Abstract : This study investigates the use of the sociolinguistic variation in classroom discourse by learners of English as a foreign language. By using qualitative descriptive method, this study finds out that (a) sociolinguistic variation tends to be used more in informal speech than in formal settings; (b) higher English proficiency and frequent interaction with peers in the classroom and with native speakers of English promote the appropriate contextual usage of sociolinguistic variation; and (c) females tend to adopt more formal language style than males. This study also finds that learners' patterns of sociolinguistic variation closely follow those of their teachers and textbooks, suggesting the necessity of explicit instruction in sociolinguistic variants in classrooms.

Keywords : sociolinguistics; sociolinguistic variation; inter-language; language acquisition.

INTRODUCTION

It is not uncommon to find that even after many years of classroom language learning experiences, second language learners often find it difficult to produce sociolinguistically appropriate speech in authentic situations. Therefore, in recent decades, the development of learners' sociolinguistic competence, that is, "the ability to recognize and produce contextually appropriate language" (Lyster, 1993: 36). This later has become a key issue and various sociolinguistic approaches, including the variationist approach, have increasingly attracted the attention of scholars in second language acquisition (SLA). Variationist researchers have convincingly argued that the acquisition of patterns of target language variation is an indispensable part of sociolinguistic competence. In other words, the ability to style-shift appropriately and consistently in accordance with different social contexts is one aspect of sociolinguistic competence that learners need to acquire.

The basic underlying assumption of variation approach which underlines this current study is that sociolinguistic variation in language use is not random but highly systematic and characterized by orderly heterogeneity. As Bayley (2002: 117) explained, "speakers' choices between variable linguistic forms are systematically constrained by multiple linguistic and social factors that reflect underlying grammatical systems and that both reflect and partially constitute the social organization of the communities to which users of the language belong."

The other consideration for studying sociolinguistic variation in the context of language acquisition is that examining this language variation helps to understand learners' competence in inter-language or speech actions. In this context, there are two basic assumptions in sociolinguistic variation studies in language acquisition. First, inter-language variation, like variation in native languages, is highly systematic instead of random; and, second, inter-language is an entity that shares equal status to and is, to some extent, independent of learners' first and second languages (Chambers, 2003). For example, Bortoni-Ricardo (1997) completed the first assumption of variationist study in language acquisition by examining phonological variability in the speech of Japanese speakers of English. She found that learners produced more target-like variants in situations in which they were able to monitor their speech, such as reading word lists, and fewer target-like forms in situations in which they were less able to monitor their speech, such as free speech. Following

Dickerson, more and more studies in SLA on variation in inter-language were carried out, especially in recent decades (Dewaele, 2004; Mougeon, Rehner, and Nadasdi, 2004). These studies on sociolinguistic variation have indicated that it has increasingly become an important subject of investigation in both SLA and sociolinguistics.

RESEARCH METHOD

The design of this study is primarily qualitative descriptive in which the description of the qualitative data is supported by the quantitative data. The use of qualitative descriptive method here is motivated by the fact that qualitative methodology is the most widely used method in sociolinguistic variation studies and has proven to be quite efficient and successful in understanding and analyzing inter-language. However, quantification of some factors are required to support the real social practices, which call for the addition of a qualitative component. For example, when determining the variable of proficiency level, this study used class placement in combination with observations and discussion with the teachers because class placement alone could not always tell a complete story. Sometimes, the learners came into a certain class or subject from the very beginning level and progressed all the way through to the advanced levels, but their actual proficiencies were better described as high-intermediate.

Furthermore, participant observation in the classrooms and extracurricular activities helped constantly modify and reconstruct interview questions in order to elicit natural speech data from the participants. Recording the students' conversations during the classroom interactions, both with peers and instructors of four classes during classroom teachings was done. This is intended to get the data that were analyzed for the purpose of examining the effect of teachers' input on learners' use of sociolinguistic variations. The textbooks used in the four classes were also collected for analysis in order to examine the effect of educational input besides teachers' speech on learners' competence on the use of sociolinguistic variations.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Proficiency level was found to be significant in learners' competence in using sociolinguistic variation, with an inverse relationship between proficiency and sociolinguistic variations production. This finding conforms with the findings of previous studies (such as Ghafarsamar, 2000) that also found a significant effect of proficiency level in L2 learners' use of target forms, with higher proficiency learners producing more target-like forms than less proficient learners. Because the learners involved in this study are all rather advanced, the effect of proficiency is not very robust but still significant, and proficiency was found to interact with gender and the functions of the sociolinguistic variations being used in the classroom discourses.

One of the interesting findings suggests that gender is one of the important factors that reached significance. Within the same proficiency group, females tended to use sociolinguistic variations more than males did. It is in some ways surprising and in other ways expected to find gender difference in learners' use of sociolinguistic variations. The gender difference is surprising because sociolinguistic variation is not a gender-salient marker. It is also found that male and female learners used sociolinguistic variation differently only in two function conditions, that is, genitive marker and when sociolinguistic variation constructions are followed by a demonstrative and classifier phrase. There is no existent evidence to indicate that the use of sociolinguistic variation is an index for gender. However, the gender difference is, to a degree, expected because learners may notice different gender speech styles.

In addition, the results of the analysis of the transcribed data indicate that sociolinguistic variations are used more often in informal situations, as in classroom settings in the forms of learners' speech by using tag questions. Learners may recognize the stylistic difference and consider the speech style used in classrooms as more standard or correct. In addition, language learners usually tend to follow prescriptive norms of language use strictly, among whom female learners might be more attuned to prescriptive norms and formal language styles than male learners. Therefore, a feminine preference of more formal and standard speech styles, which has been widely documented in other research studies (Major, 2004), was also found in this study.

Because so many factors seem to be operating in learners' use of target-like variable usage, gender difference in inter-language use can be interpreted as a gender dichotomy. There

may be many factors other than those explored in the current study that also interact with gender, such as personality, educational level, age, social status, and so on. This might be attributed to the fact that classrooms are formal situations in which teachers deliberately adopt a more formal speech style. Moreover, language teachers are professionals of language (Halliday, 1977) who are predicted to use standard variants more than other professionals and, consequently, are especially justified to prescriptive norms of language use. It might also be possible that teachers are, to some extent, trying to accommodate the students. Whatever the reasons, the types and patterns of sociolinguistic variations use in the learners' educational input is very different from the speeches that are produced in everyday interactions.

Implications for Classroom Language Instructions

As mentioned earlier, the results of this study showed that learners' use of target language sociolinguistic variant is highly complex but systematic and constrained by multiple linguistic and nonlinguistic factors. In addition, the factors involved often interact with each other. Therefore, this study supports the use of a multidimensional model to examine sociolinguistic variation and foreign language learning and use. Sociolinguistic variation is characterized by the interplay of multiple linguistic, social, and developmental factors that constitute multiple dimensions of inter-language grammars. In other words, in order to better understand foreign language learning and use, consideration of the factors in multiple dimensions is essential.

The results of analysis of the educational factors showed that educational input, including teachers' speech and instructional materials, has an important influence on learners' use of target language sociolinguistic variants. Therefore, this study supports the claims proposed by Mougeon and Rehner (2001), who advocated the necessity of rethinking foreign language instructions to help learners efficiently develop sociolinguistic competence. Lyster (1993: 44) supported this claim by contending that "the justification for teaching sociolinguistic variation lies not in the conveyance of prescriptive rules but rather in the provision of descriptive rules which aim to develop the students' *ability to make choices*." Normally, teachers tend to avoid teaching the

complexities of linguistic features to demonstrate variation, motivated by the concern that they might confuse learners or fail to convey accurate information. So, teachers very often choose to direct the students to a clear-cut and easy, or "safer," way of using certain language features that actually require a richer and much more detailed explanation. By so doing, teachers are actually leaving the task of noticing, trial-and-error, hypothesizing, and then possibly acquiring the language forms to learners themselves in real-life interactions.

It is suggested that such strategy of avoiding formal instruction of variability does not help students to find "safety"; rather, it puts them in a more "dangerous" situation because sometimes errors in the variable usage of certain language forms might result in stylistic inappropriateness or misunderstanding between interlocutors. In addition, it can take a very long time for learners to acquire the sociolinguistic variation merely from authentic interactions with their peers. Next come the questions of whether it is necessary to include target language variability into classroom instructions instruction and what strategies the teachers might employ to accomplish the task. First, teachers need to be aware of the use of the target language sociolinguistic variations. Then the strategies teachers can use might include incorporating more opportunities in classrooms to develop learners' sociolinguistic competence, such as explicit teaching of sociolinguistic variation and designing materials specifically targeting sociolinguistic variation. Thus, formal instruction of sociolinguistic variability in the target language needs careful planning and consideration and must take into consideration the proficiency levels of learners and the complexity of target language forms.

In addition, the study also recommends that the prolonged experience in the target language environment and more interactions for learners' development of sociolinguistic competence might be attempted to develop. Therefore, teachers or conversation partner programs are necessary complements to formal classroom instruction for learners in which the target language is taught as a second or foreign language. These extracurricular activities can provide learners with more opportunities to interact and use authentic situations to use the target language which might aid significantly in consequent learning and use of target language forms.

CONCLUSION

The findings of the present study indicate that more sociolinguistic variation studies will help students develop their sociolinguistic competence. This study found further that there are many other aspects that require further investigation, such as how speakers perform in the use of multiple modifiers, the variable phonological realizations of sociolinguistic variations, the effects of various subcategories under each function of sociolinguistic variation, and the effects of specific speech contexts. Also, additional factors that have been explored in other variation studies merit investigation, such as different levels of formality, social class of the speakers, attention to speech, interlocutor ethnicity, and personality.

All these findings suggest the direction for future research, that is, the study on the comparison of sociolinguistic variation variable usage by foreign language learners in non-native and native speaker contexts. Additionally, this study showed that sociolinguistic variations used by foreign language learners are systematic and constrained by various linguistic and nonlinguistic factors. Studies of other dependent variables such as aspect marker and discourse markers are also necessary to better understand the linguistic and sociolinguistic nature of English, inter-language development, and the effects of optionality. The results of the present study may provide a resource and basis for such studies. More studies along these lines will help learners and practitioners to understand variability in native language and inter-language, as well as foreign language learning and use.

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