

Chapter 11

Local Norms in CALL Language Practice

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ABSTRACT

This article presents an investigation into what norms are negotiated in a CALL classrooms by non-native speakers of English who are Internet novices. There is an on-going debate regarding the status of non-native speaker norms. Although there is more and more recognition that they are valid learner targets, native speaker norms are still reported to have the highest status for learners. Internet language use, though, has led to a change in the perception of norms, as communities of non-native speakers can set their own norms over those of native speakers. Data are analysed from academic textchat seminars which show that a community of inexperienced Internet users set their own norms, which go directly against their L1 community cultural norms of respect towards teachers. This paper proposes that it is an affordance of CALL environments that they can do this. This work is further evidence that it is smaller discourse communities that set norms separate from those of larger geo-political national communities.

INTRODUCTION

The linguistic norms learners have as their target vary depending on individual needs and attitudes. As argued for in sociocultural theories of language learning, learning takes place in interaction within communities, and norms are negotiated in such communities. Discussions in the literature concerning linguistic varieties and speech communities have moved from more idealised notions of static geopolitical entities to fluid transnational and highly local constructs. Speech communities in general have been argued to adopt their own linguistic practices through the use of language itself. Online communities are of special interest in this regard, as they inhabit both global and local spaces. Thus, we can ask what kinds of norms such communities converge towards: global or local? The issue we want to explore here is what linguistic norms are negotiated by second language users of English in a computer-mediated learning environment.

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Important features of the community under investigation are that the student members are mostly novice Internet users; they had never taken a net-based course before; and they come from cultures that value respect for teachers (Vietnamese and Bangladeshi cultures). Despite these potential hindrances, we found evidence that they created their own norms and practices independently of those enshrined in their native cultures and independently of the linguistic norms practiced by their native English-speaking teachers. We will give evidence for how these processes are enacted through language usage, and will argue that it was the affordances of distance education that allowed them to set their own norms in this specific speech community.

The specific norm analysed is a classic phenomenon of computer-mediated communication (CMC), namely so-called *reduced forms*, written forms that are reduced in size or in formality, such as writing *info* instead of *information*, or *yeah* instead of *yes*. The data analysed consists of text chatlogs from a distance MA programme in English Linguistics run by a Swedish university.

The theoretical background below takes up native speaker norms and their place in teaching and learning English, discourse communities as locuses of norm-setting, and reduced forms as a specific example of a CMC norm. We next present the informants, data and methodology. In the analysis which follows, we consider the processes of setting reduced forms as norms in an Internet community. As already alluded to, we argue that it is the second language users who negotiate and converge towards their own norms, and that the native English-speaking teachers have little visible influence on the process. The students also actively break with their cultural norm of visible respect for teachers by adopting informal address practices. These norms are the students' own; thus, this work constitutes strong evidence that it is the online community that sets its own language practices, and that it is an affordance of CALL communities that they can independently set their own language practices.

BACKGROUND

We start the background with a discussion of targets in language learning, move on to attitudes to native and non-native norms, norms in communities, and end with a discussion of norms in online communication.

Targets in Language Learning

The native speaker has had a privileged status with regard to linguistic norms. When it comes to second language acquisition, early research more or less explicitly focused on them as the only legitimate target for second language learners. Theories like Error Analysis (Pit Corder, 1967/1981) discussed the role in acquisition of learner mistakes or errors with respect to target language norms. While it was mostly not explicitly stated, these norms can be assumed to be native ones, and more specifically British or American English norms (Hamid & Baldauf Jr., 2013). Any production that reflected less than fully native proficiency was therefore seen as evidence of defective learning.

There have developed two research tendencies which have rather different perspectives of the target for learners of English. One is the English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) view of scholars like Seidlhofer, Mauranen and Jenkins, and the other is the World Englishes (WE) view of Kachru and Mesthrie, for example. Discussions on World Englishes have led to the view that non-native varieties of English are legitimate in their own right, and can be legitimate targets for second language learners. Kachru's (1985) classic work on English varieties identified three categories of Englishes, represented in the famous three

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