

Political Correctness in American English and Its Implication in TEFL

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Political correctness (PC) is both a cultural existence and a language phenomenon. It is used to describe language policies intending to avoid offense or disadvantages to specific groups in society reflecting the language norms of the Americans as well as withdrawing from language discrimination. This paper traces briefly the history of political correctness in American English, make analysis of the connotations of politically correct terms in American English, and illustrates the influence PC has on American English. Finally, some implications in political correctness in TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language) were drawn with the intention to enhance learners' competency in language as well as intercultural communication.

Keywords: political correctness, American English, TEFL, implication

Introduction

Political correctness is a useful area of consideration when using English language in foreign language learning and teaching. This is because both social and cultural contexts of language in communication are involved. Language is used for communication covering the ability to use language at the grammatical level, sociolinguistic level, discourse and strategic levels (Canale & Swain, 1980). But differences exist among people communicating with each other which might be religious, social, racial, gender cultural, or even ideological. This is especially true of political correctness in American language since half of the Americans attend universities. There was a wide ranging discussion over it and America has a tradition of free speech that protects even the most offensive forms of expression, as a result of which most of the politically correct languages have generated and become current. Therefore, it is crucial to know political correctness in American English in order to succeed in intercultural communication. This paper makes an analysis of political correctness in American English and draws the implication in using politically correct language suitable to the appropriate culture in TEFL.

A Brief History of Political Correctness

The term *political correctness* was first used in the 1930s among Stalinists and it reappeared in feminist circles in the 1970s. Another version is that it entered the language via the U.S. feminist and other leftwing movement of the 1970s. The use of PC language quickly spread to the parts of the Western world attempting to

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eliminate discrimination and prejudice against women in government, industry, religion, education, medicine, law, and labour unions.

Political correctness acquired a new vogue in the late 1980s on college campuses and later by the media, as a pejorative term to describe a collection of feminists, Marxists, multiculturalists, together with their leftist positions on race, sexual orientation, gender, religion, the environment, and related issues. It was considered politically correct, for example, to recycle newspaper, to oppose the wearing of fur coats, to denounce American capitalism and consumerism, to support a woman's right to abortion, therefore a mount of politically correct terms were created to replace existing terms, for example, to use the term "Chinese-American" instead of "chink".

By 1990 political correctness has become the focus of a national debate and lasted up till now. Newspaper articles, magazine cover stories, books, radio and television talk show, and numerous academic panels discussed the merits and dangers of PC popular on college campuses. Some hold that political correctness safeguards the rights of the vulnerable group and show concern and respect for them while the rest of the nation believe that is just political totalitarian regime forbidding the media, school, and public from touching and it should be ignored, as Trump did and said.

Political Correctness in American English

Political correctness (PC) is used to describe language, policies, or measures that are intended to avoid offense or disadvantages to members of particular groups in society. Since the late 1980s, Politically correct words or terms have been used to show differences between people or groups in a non-offensive way. This difference may result from race, gender, beliefs, religion, sexual orientation, mental or physical disability, or any difference from what is considered the norm. "political correctness" in American English can be categorized into the following types.

Political Correctness With Race

During 2004 Indian Ocean Earthquake, A New York City radio station named Hot 97 came under criticism for airing the Tsunami Song which used the phrase "screaming chinks" along with other offensive lyrics. Under public protest, the radio station fired a co-host and producer, and indefinitely suspended radio personality Miss Jones.

Chink, also *chinki*, *chinky*, or *chigga*, is an ethnic discriminative term referring to a person of Chinese ethnicity, the use of which is extremely offensive. One typical version of its origin is that it comes from the Chinese courtesy word *Ching* or that it was an alteration of *Qing*, as in the Qing Dynasty.

An example of political correctness with race is the changing terminology used to describe black Americans. Black people were addressed by *eggplant*, *nigra*, *nigga* which were politically incorrect. Then *Negro* and *colored* were used and became quite acceptable terms, but were dubbed offensive during the 1970s. Later *Afro-American* and *Black* were used, which in turn gave way to *African-American*, and *people of color*.

Other examples of politically correct words are *Japanese American* for *Jap* and *Nip*, *Pakistan American* for *Paki*, *Indian American* for *Chee chee*, *Mexican American* for *Tacohead*, *Hispanic* or *Latin American* for *spig* or *spik*, *Native American* for *redskin*, *Italian American* for *Dago*, etc.

Political Correctness With Gender

Throughout the 20th century, women fought to have the same rights as men. In PC language, this is seen in changes to job titles, such as policeman, postman, and chairman which now commonly go by the gender-neutral titles police officer, letter carrier, and chairperson or chair. Fireman or stewardess are replaced with firefighter and flight attendant. The landlord or landlady are replaced by politically correct terms like *proprietor* or *lessor*. The gender neutral language rule sets that job titles that add suffixes to make them feminine should be replaced by other words. For example, *usherette* is to be replaced by *usher*, *comedienne* by *comedian*, etc.

Advocators of non-sexist usage denounce terms, such as *male nurse*, *female doctor*, or *male model*, because these terms in their opinions are used gender irrelevant. They emphasize that the statement carries the exception implying the worker of that gender is somehow inferior or atypical of that occupation.

Facebook CEO Sandberg proposed to ban the usage of “bossy” in that it is used negatively to imply women who aspire to take up leadership roles at work. “Ambitious” and “pushy” are closely related words of gender inequality in work place. The “ambitious” can be positive when referring to men, but when applied to a woman it changes into a negative and mean word. Even Madonna, in a interview with Harpe’s Bazaar, has said she felt “being openly ambitious frowned upon”.

Political Correctness With Sex Orientation

People who are attracted to the same gender are usually referred to as *homosexual*. And those who are attracted to people of both genders are usually referred to as *bisexual*. Both of these terms are seen as being perfectly fine by the more politically liberal oriented people. However, some gay people argue that the use of *homosexual* as a noun is offensive, arguing that they are people first and their homosexuality is merely an attribute of their humanity.

The *The Associated Press* and *New York Times* style guides restrict the usage of the terms. A gay person may be described as “that way”, “a bit funny”, “on the bus”, “batting for the other team”, “a friend of Dorothy”, or “wearing comfortable shoes” (for women). But same-sex oriented people seldom apply such terms to themselves, and public officials and agencies often avoid them. For instance, the Safe Schools Coalition of Washington’s *Glossary for School Employees* advises that *gay* is the “preferred synonym for homosexual”. When referring to people, the terms “gay” and “lesbian” are preferred. People with a same-gender sexual orientation generally prefer the terms *gay*, *lesbian*, *out*, *out of closet*, or *bisexual*. The most common terms are *gay* (both men and women) and *lesbian* (women only). Other terms include *same gender loving* and *same-sex-oriented*. “LGBT” is used to replace *lesbian*, *gay*, *bisexual*, and *transsexual* as politically correct term.

Political Correctness for People With Disabilities

An example of political correctness is the changing terms used to describe handicapped people. In the past, the term “crippled” was perfectly acceptable and not considered offensive. At some point, Americans like Senate Republican leader Bob Dole held the word “crippled” was degrading and the preferred term should be changed to “handicapped”. This was eventually regarded offensive and “disabled” became the preferred term. Today, even “disabled” is considered derogatory to some and “differently abled” and “physically challenged” are used by those people. People who are blind may be referred to as “vision impaired” or “visually impaired” and those who are deaf are referred to as “hearing impaired” or “hard of hearing”. People who cannot speak are not “dumb” but

“mute” or “without speech”. The correct labels for conditions, such as schizophrenia and bipolar disorder, are urged to use, when needed. Other derogatory words like “insane”, “crazy/crazed”, “deranged”, or “nuts” should not be used for their negative meanings.

Disabled people do not want to be seen as “limited” by their disabilities, such as being “wheelchair bound” or “held back” by intellectual disabilities. Disabled people want to be seen as capable of doing anything that able-bodied people do and do not want to be described as succeeding in spite of their disability. Many people with disabilities see their condition as a part of who they are. They do not think of themselves as suffering. They do not want to be described as “challenged” either, which indicates that their lives are full of obstacles to overcome and miseries to suffer.

Some people with disabilities and their supporters insist that when talking about a person with a disability, people first language should be used. Namely, people should be mentioned before the disability, for example, people with emotional disorder and people with autism.

Some groups and organizations like “Abilities”, a Canadian lifestyle magazine for disabled people, have provided some guidelines on the correct terminology to be used for the individuals with disabilities. For example, People who are mentally disabled are now rarely described as “mentally retarded” (sometimes called M.R.) but may be said to have “special needs” and intellectually disabled; Correct labels for conditions, such as schizophrenia and bipolar disorder, are encouraged to use instead of *deviant*, *crazy*, *deranged*, *insane*, *abnormal*, too.

Political Correctness for Aging and Disease

Aging in American English means nagging, dependence, poorer health, and rigid mindset, as a result of which a variety of alternative words are created to avoid the abrupt usage of the politically incorrect terms. For example, *senior citizen*, *expert*, *second childhood*, *pensioner*, *veteran*, *third age*, *sunset years*, *elderly people*, *the longer living*, *golden ager*, *the seasoned*, *old dog* are the political correct terms for old man, old person, old timer, greybeard, bag, centenarian, monster, old hand, old geezer, nestor, weinkly, etc.

Although disease is a natural process in human life, people try every means to avoid the abrupt and direct mentioning. They will replace it with politically correct words when they have to mention it. For example, *acquired immune deficiency syndrome* is replaced by “AIDs”, *stroke* by “accident”, *influenza* by “the flu”, and *cancer* by the “Big C”.

Political correctness even infects the Center for Disease Control and Prevention. A list of words or phrases are prohibited when used in the government budget report. Terms, such as *vulnerable*, *transgender*, *fetus*, *evidence-based*, and *science-based* are forbidden to use as they are “clinical and distancing”.

Implication in TEFL

Political correctness is an indispensable part of American culture and language, for which its mastery and application are of great importance in intercultural communication. Implication in the TEFL can be drawn.

Raising Learners’ Intercultural Communication Awareness by Exposing Them to PC Language

Without knowledge of PC language, learners are likely to encounter failures in intercultural communication. Through systematic input of history, classification, and pragmatic usage of PC in American language, students will be exposed to them and know when, where, and how to use them. This can be achieved by audio visual

materials and reading excerpts, too. Intercultural communication awareness will be strengthened by designing situational dialogues and problem solving tasks. After the tasks, teachers will provide assessment and pragmatic failures as well as the appropriate answers. This type of teaching is bound to be highly motivating, interest provoking, as well as informative and competency enhancing. Learners need to be aware of language changes as a result of society change, so are PC terms. For this they need to get access to media and be conscious of the politically correct language in order to succeed in intercultural communication. For example, it is grammatically and semantically right but derogatory to say “If a student learns English, he will make more friends and gain a deep insight into the English culture”. Therefore, the user must say: (1) If students learn English, they will make more friends and gain a deep insight into the English culture. (2) If a student learns English, he or she will make more friends and gain a deep insight into the English culture.

Taking a Holistic and Critical Attitude to PC Language

Learners need to know the cultural phenomena of a country but at the same time they should take a holistic attitude to and critical view at them. They gain an insight into the multiculturalism, freedom, and egalitarian spirit of the target country through political correctness. During the process, they learn to follow the rules of political correctness and avoid politically incorrect terms to smooth over intercultural communication failures. However, political correctness has gone too far and brought chaos to some of the language uses. A professor at Harvard, for example, was forced to cancel a screening of a film he had assigned his class because one character was a black maid, which some students considered demeaning to all blacks. So is political correctness in American Language. Some PC languages are hard to understand and appear odd. “Seared Mutilated Animal Flesh” is used to refer to “Hamburger”; “Adding Insult to injury” is used to refer to “cheeseburger”; “Academic Dishonesty” is used to replace “Cheating” (in School); “Recycled Books” used to take the place of “Used Books”. Much of the language of the political correctness is ponderous and dour which is susceptible to satire and parody, such as *male chauvinist pig*, *carbon footprint*, and *cockocracy*. Even bad behaviors are replaced by seemingly political correct languages concealing the truth that they are bad. For example, young people who are in trouble with the law are called “children at risk” instead of being called “juvenile delinquents”. Therefore, teachers should warn the learners to be cautious when using them and take the holistic view when learning.

Conclusion

Political correctness has become a part of the modern lexicon and part of the modern mindset. The aim of political correctness is to conform to the body of liberal or radical opinion on social matters, characterized by the advocacy of approved views and the rejection of language and behavior considered discriminatory or offensive. (Knowles, 1997). It swept the whole America and has influenced both behaviors and languages. Teachers in TEFL should expose learners to PC languages in order for them to use the right words in the right situation. On the other hand, the overuse of PC languages is of great issue, too. Learners should be aware of the oddity and dourness when using language in order to engage in successful intercultural communication.

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