THE ROLE PLAYED BY EDUCATION, AGE AND SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT IN THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE USE. A CASE STUDY ON A GROUP OF EFL SPEAKERS

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Abstract:This study carries out research on the way that EFL use by a group of young speakers is marked by some features of the society they live in, the great majority of the group being from Romania. With the aid of a questionnaire designed to reflect their perceptions on the role played by education, age and social environment this research shows the improvements and variation in English language use. There is a complex relationship between the movement through life and changing. C. Llamas, L. Mullany and P. Stockwell (2007) remarked that in most societies our age influences what we should do and should not do to a greater extent than any other global categories. Drawing on Rudolf P. Botha (1981)'s point of view that some of the factors which influence characteristics of a particular instance of linguistic performance may vary, this paper identifies how these speakers perceive mentioned aspects. Changes experienced by the respondents during high school education may be considered as improving factors in their linguistic knowledge, also factual knowledge of the world around us and of the complex environment is enlarged during the course of life. Results indicate that the more people discover the complex world, the more their language enriches in order to convey properly the intricate perceived environment.

Keywords: language use, social background, age, education, sociolinguistics, linguistic patterns

Introduction

Social dimensions and contextual factors in language learning (Tarone 1997; Norton 2000; Tarone 2000) and use in interactional situations (van Lier 1996) are of increasing interest in a world using English more than any other language. Do the changing features of the society represented by education, age and social environment affect language use? Are the changes experienced as positive or negative for the use of EFL? According to Rudolf P. Botha (1981), the

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nature and characteristics of a particular instance of linguistic performance and its product are, in reality, determined by a combination of factors. Some of these factors are: the linguistic competence or unconscious linguistic knowledge of the speaker-hearer, the nature and limitations of the speaker-hearer's speech production and speech perception mechanisms, the social environment and status of the speaker-hearer; the idiolect and individual style of speaking of the speaker-hearer, the speaker-hearer's factual knowledge and view of the world in which he lives, etc. Each of the factors mentioned is a variable in linguistic performance and, as such, may influence the nature and characteristics of a particular instance of linguistic performance and its product (Botha 32). Thus, language performance and competence are likely to be affected by any or all of aspects of social organization: gender, peer group, health or disability/body image, occupation (physical work, trades, law, politics, news media, journalism, etc.), social class, age, ethnic group (may be link to regional variation), etc. So people belong to poles apart social classes in special social roles, as well as carrying on different occupations, greatly affecting language they use.

If language is a social tool for communication, critical for anyone who wants to network socially with the society, than English as a foreign language (EFL) receives a well-deserved attention in the actual world. Moreover, language often helps to bring together diverse cultures, extending the range of communication and thus contributing to the expansion of community. Students of languages sometimes stress their potential role in cementing a community of world-wide dimensions and the great benefit of befriending people all around the world by the means of English language.

Language helps people to understand the world’s culture and life styles as well as to be active in other societies than their own, which is nowadays more prevalent than ever, in an internationalized world. Language is the answer to share one’s feelings, emotions, ideas, and beliefs with other people, and that helps people to gain knowledge and become aware of the great diversity among human beings. Jobs are available nowadays in different countries without being necessary to live in that country, but on the basis of the performance of the work and, of course, using the same language. On the other hand, interconnections between language and society are an intriguing and important subject for all who are concerned with man’s problems and accomplishments and understanding the nature of language and its functions is of utmost importance. The role of society in linguistic patterns employed deserves much attention, and it could reward the analysis and investigation in helping to understand how it is involved in progress of EFL use. Thus, what role does play society’s features in linguistic change and personal development?

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Features of Society that Affect Language Use

Language is affected by the society in a general sense, and at the same time, every person's language is moulded by the actual society in which that person lives. Berger L. and Luckmann P. T. (1966) say that "the individual <…> is not born a member of society. He <…> becomes a member of society. In the life of every individual… there is a temporal sequence, in the course of which he is inducted into participation in the social dialectic" (129). On the other hand the same authors say that "by 'successful socialization' we mean the establishment of a high degree of symmetry between objective and subjective reality" (163). Any important aspect of social structure and function is likely to have a distinctive linguistic counterpart. People belong to different social classes, perform different social roles, and carry on different occupations (Crystal 2003).

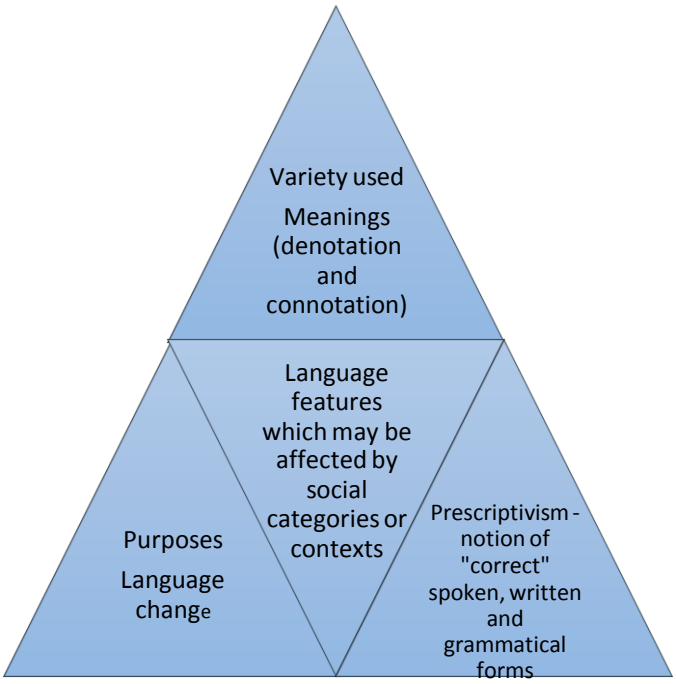


Figure 1: Language features

John Searle (1997) describes language itself as a social institution, broadly speaking. And some peculiar language that does not "match the world" but the world matches it, does not first of all have a true or false proposition, but makes its proposition true. Scattered through his books, Searle refers to this characteristic of performative language. Searle not only describes language broadly as a social institution, but as a crucial component of all social institutions. It is a move from sociology to linguistics, marking the last as crucial. The complexity of the society evinces some categories of features that affect language use: static features (such as gender, ethnicity, class background), changing features who can vary in time and those given by the situational and contextual circumstances.

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Education, Age, and Social Environment as Features of Society Affecting Language Use

Some features of the society may be more or less changing such as education, age, social environment, attitudes and fashions because these aspects may vary from a period to another in the life of the same person. Popular movements and changes in the institutions of society may be reflected in changes in language in a general sense. Rassool N. (2005) remarks that "language represents an important means of exerting power not only to control meaning, but also to influence life changes of different groups of people within society" (2). On the other hand, languages are potent instruments for preserving and developing culture from a generation to another. Education is a mean of increasing awareness and transmission of linguistic and cultural traditions throughout the world, and to motivate solidarity between diverse peoples. Language presence has an increased importance regarding the role of communication for access to education and information, and the construction of inclusive knowledge societies.

The age is as fundamental a dimension of the social and personal identities as it is the gender and ethnicity. There is a complex relationship between the movement through life and changing. Not only the amount of knowledge is increased by aging but the speech patterns used in communication differ throughout the life stages. Legislatively speaking, in most societies the age influences what we should do and should not do to a greater extent than other global categories (Llamas, Mullany and Stockwell 69). Our age determines whether we can vote, drive or marry. It can influence what types of clothes we wear, places we go, and, importantly, ways we speak. Our age is seen in relation to societal norms of behaviour, obligation and responsibility. It impacts considerably on how we are perceived and how we are treated, how we perceive and treat others. All these are mediated through language.

There are many examples of the physical environment in which a society lives being reflected in its language, in the structure of its lexicon – the way in which distinctions are made by means of single words. Whereas English has only one word for snow, Eskimo has several words because of their social environment. According to their lexicalized vocabulary of snow they are able to distinguish efficiently between different types of snow. In the same way the Sami (Lapp) languages of northern Scandinavia have many words associated with reindeer, and Bedouin Arabic has a large camel vocabulary. These examples show that life domains more prevalent in a society are evinced by the existing vocabulary.

The social environment can also be reflected in language and can often have an effect on the structure of the vocabulary. For example, a society's kinship system is reflected in its kinship vocabulary. The important kin relationships in English-speaking societies are those that are signalled by single vocabulary items like son, daughter, sister, uncle, cousin and so on. The distinction between maternal and paternal aunt is not important in English society, thus it is

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reflected in its lexicon. This is the case for concepts provided with the help of language that reveals the society's values.

That a society's development is reflected in its language is proven by the new modern things as camera, television, computers[1] and other sophisticated technological weaponry. Words like these have not existed in most languages until recent centuries. They appeared as a need and as a mean of expressing new issues that have not existed before the technical development. Due to the fact that one leading language in the world is English, this study focuses on the use of English language in everyday life.

Case Study

The main aim of the study is to find out how the informants' attitudes towards EFL use are moulded by the society in which they live and develop. One of the main ways of achieving this goal is finding out if and how their environment affects them in language usage, their perception as individuals as well as members of the society. In addition, the informants' changing experienced during their lives are questioned in order to discover the relations between their actual use of language and their social background.

The research instrument mainly used is the questionnaire consisting of a series of questions for the purpose of gathering data from my respondents. The response options of the close-ended questions are intended to be exhaustive and mutually exclusive. There are few questions with dichotomous response scale, but most of the questions consist of ordinal-polytomous response scales with more than two ordered options. The questionnaires were largely presented on paper to the respondents, but there were also some cases when the questionnaires and their responses were applied via email for people living abroad.

In this research the analysis of the gathered data was turned into statistics that helped to the interpretation of the results. The quantitative questionnaire was chosen as one of the main sources of information for this study in order to get a larger sampling of the target group than would be possible using only a few interviews. But the starting point in this research was given by my observations during a decade. In the case of this study, the central fieldwork took place in Hunedoara County, but I strived to extend the fieldwork as much as it was possible to me, in order to get a general overview of English speaking people as to enlarge the relevance of the analysed results.

[1] *The first use of the word "computer" was recorded in 1613 in a book called "The yong mans gleanings" by English writer Richard Braithwait I haue read the truest computer of Times, and the best Arithmetician that euer breathed, and he reduceth thy dayes into a short number. It referred to a person who carried out calculations, or computations, and the word continued with the same meaning until the middle of the 20th century. From the end of the 19th century the word began to take on its more familiar meaning, a machine that carries out computations. Oxford English Dictionary – word etymology computer http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/37975?redirectedFrom=computer#eid*

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Beside the questionnaires employed as the main instrument, informal interviews and participant observation were used as complementary instruments. My observing was not always organized or methodical, but it happened also automatically during everyday life as a teacher at the Technical College Matei Corvin Hunedoara then at the Secondary School of Șoimuș. All gathered data through questionnaires were input into Microsoft EXCEL spreadsheet after returning from the survey trips. In the next section the data and the informants of this study are introduced.

Sources of Data and the Participants

The questionnaire contains in the first section personal information to find out the demographical and sociological background of the informant, including age, place of birth, education, languages spoken and parents' occupation. The second section of the questionnaire is not specially marked, but the questions flow from the least sensitive to the most sensitive, from the factual and behavioural to the personal attitude, and from more general to more specific ones. Most questions of this section were aimed to probe the EFL speakers' attitudes that the respondents hold in social life and their perceiving of the English language use by the people around them. The questionnaire was applied from December 2014 to March 2015 to a number of 61 high-school learners. Most of the informants (52) are aged under 18 years, four are aged between 18 and 22 years, and all these 56 young people are high school learners. Other four respondents indicated their present life stage between 23 and 45 years and only one person is aged between 46 and 65 years. This age group was especially chosen mainly from high school learners because the changing is most experienced by the youth category of the people and because they have enough opportunities in using EFL. There are changes experienced throughout entire life, but at this age they are fully perceived and have been recently faced. The great majority of the respondents were born in Romania and the definite majority of the respondents stated their present proficiency of speaking English as good. The very good English proficiency level at present was rated by 23 respondents. English and Romanian are languages spoken mainly by the target group but there are other languages spoken by the respondents named in the order of frequency French, Romani, Hungarian, Russian, Spanish, Italian and German.

The target group of this study can be viewed as a representative part of the society: there are teenagers whose growing and developing is influenced by the society they live in, young people at the moment of discovering life on their own. Instead of analysing every question of questionnaire and the results obtained, it seems more meaningful to discuss the results only for the relevant answers.

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THE QUESTIONNAIRE

The questionnaire consisting of 21 items was concentrated on finding out the languages attitudes of a group of 61 participants regarding changing features of the society that affect EFL use and choice. Some of the features that are considered changing according to social studies are represented by education, age, social environment, fashion and others.

In the first part of the questionnaire the informants provide us information related to their parents' education and occupation in order to make clear their familial background. It helps us to understand better the changing features experienced, if there are some at all, and what role they play in the language's change and development. We can see in the table below that a little over 50 percent

Level of education Parent	Secondary school		High school		University degree		Post-University degree	
	Number	Percentage %	Number	Percentage %	Number	Percentage %	Number	Percentage %
Mother	4	6,5	33	54	15	24,5	9	15
Father	4	6,5	38	62	13	21	5	10,5

Table nr. 2 Parents' level of education

is represented by the high school education of the respondents' parents. And only 15 percent among the respondents' mothers have university degree and 13 percent of the fathers. From the question 8 our informants provided us their parents' occupation as it follows. Six mothers and three fathers have an intellectual job, 13 mothers and 17 fathers are enrolled in a public job, and physical work is done by 23 mothers and 29 fathers. Despite of their education, there are 12 fathers unemployed and 19 housewives.

It was stated in the first part of this paper that there is a complex relationship between the movement through life and changing experienced. C. Llamas, L. Mullany and P. Stockwell (2007) remarked that in most societies our age influences what we should do and should not do to a greater extent than any other global categories. The age is seen in direct relation to societal norms of behaviour and it impacts considerably how we perceive and treat others not only how we are perceived and how we are treated. These norms of behaviour determine specific linguistic patterns in order to communicate adequately and fit to the social group in which the youths from our case have to grow and become adults on their own.

Answers given at question 13 (Can you see any difference in the style of speaking used by particular groups of people according to their age?) is in line with above mentioned position where 55 respondents ticked that they see difference in speaking style used by people according at levels of age.

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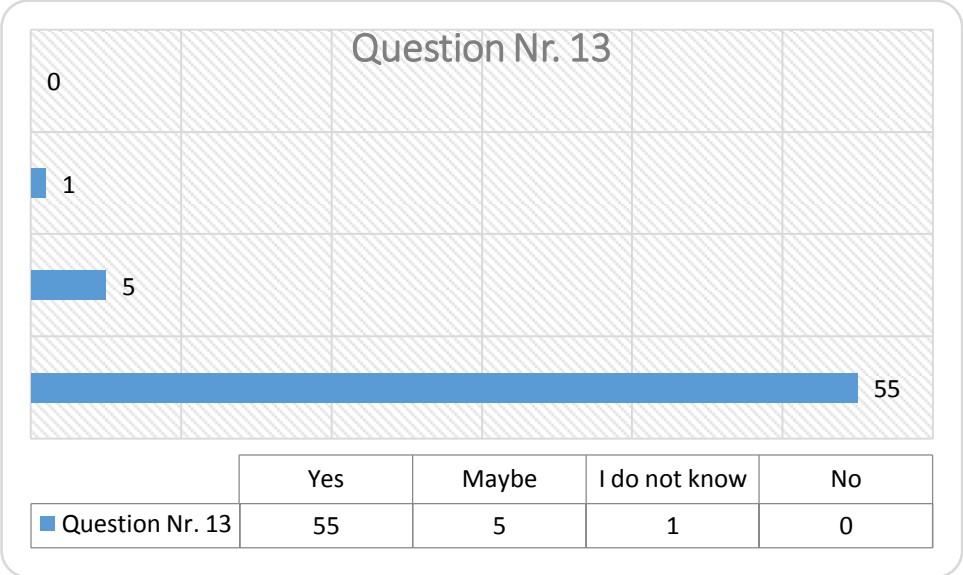


Figure Nr. 3

Additionally, the result obtained here is confirmed by the question 18 (In your view is age a reason for differential linguistic using?) where 36 respondents agreed and 13 of them strongly agreed. To this question six neutral answers were given, one is not sure, two disagreed and three of them strongly disagreed. The great majority of the given answers maybe explained by their own experienced change according question 12 (How do you characterize your language performance now compared to that before the high school?) where only five respondents declare their language performance the same as before high school and none of them has a worse language performance. As obvious from Figure Nr. 4 the great majority (44%) have a much better performance now and even more, 29 informants (48%) consider their linguistic performance better than before. Undoubtedly, education plays an important role in the changing of linguistic patterns used in general, and in the same time in the improvement of EFL use. For now it is enough to mention that the target group perceived linguistic changes in their lives and in others' lives directly related to age. It may be said, therefore, that for the language used not only the age is a defining element of a particular group of people, but there are other features of society, too.

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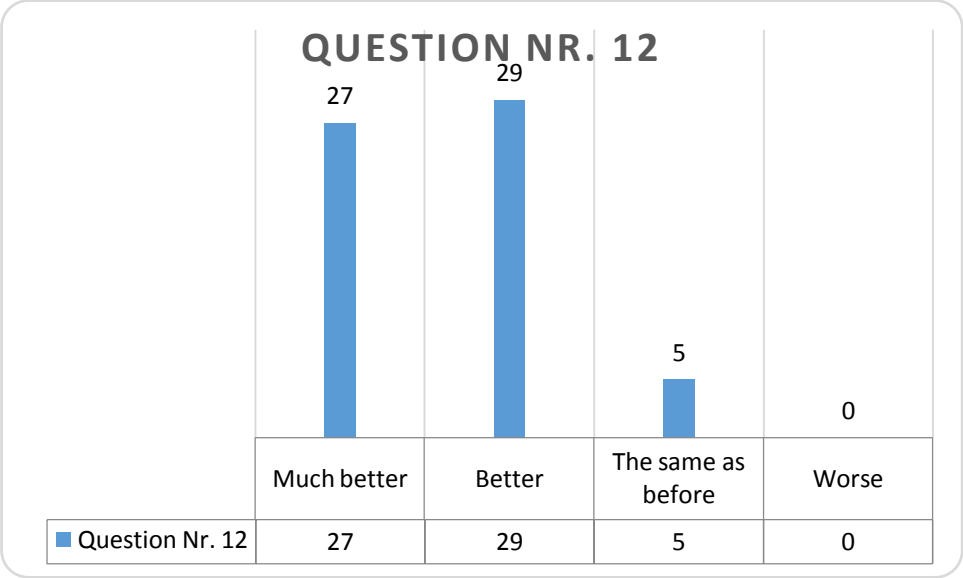


Figure Nr. 4

As we agreed in the first part of this paper with Rudolf P. Botha (1981)'s point of view that some of the factors which influence characteristics of a particular instance of linguistic performance may be: the linguistic competence or unconscious linguistic knowledge of the speaker-hearer, the nature and limitations of the speaker-hearer's speech production and speech perception mechanisms, the nature and limitations of the speaker-hearer's memory, concentration, attention and other mental capacities, the speaker-hearer's factual knowledge and view of the world in which the person lives, the speaker-hearer's state of health, his emotional state and other similar incidental circumstances. Each of the factors mentioned is a variable in the linguistic performance and, thus, may influence the nature and characteristics of a particular instance of linguistic performance and its product.

Changes experienced by the respondents during high school education may be considered as improving factors in their linguistic knowledge of EFL, acquiring competences in production and perception of speech mechanism, attention and other mental capacities, as well as, they enlarged factual knowledge and view of the world in which they live. From their point of view (according question 14), as illustrated in Figure Nr. 5 teenagers speak mostly freely, without language conventions. Students representing the second age category speak simple and clear and only adult people use sophisticated and complex words.

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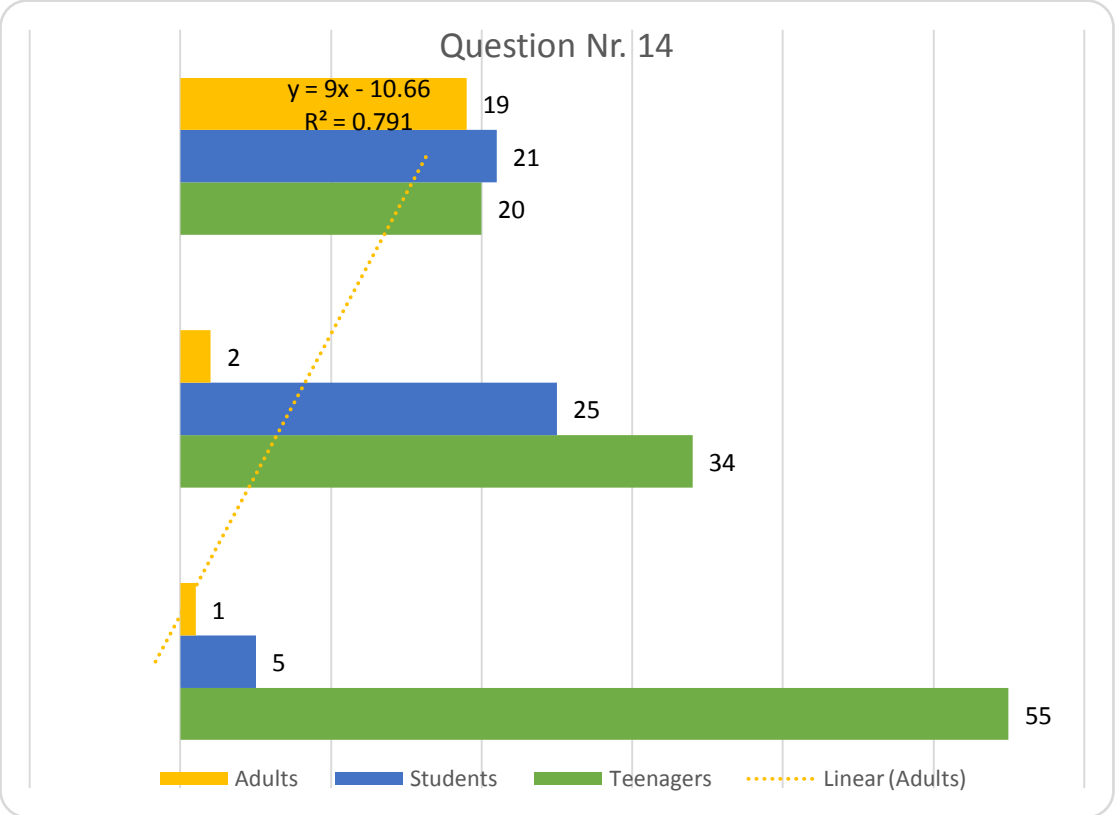


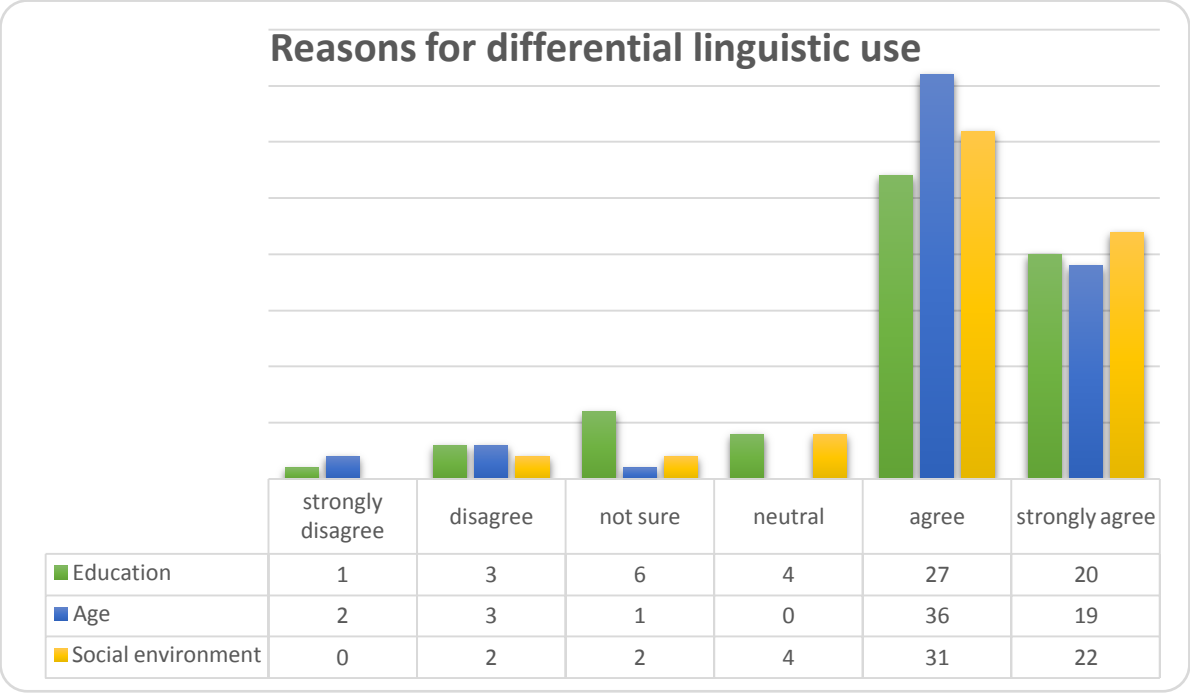
Figure Nr. 5

As showed by the yellow trend line linguistic conventions are encountered often in adults' speeches. Their observation may be explained by the fact that most of the people encountered by them except their friends and families are represented by teachers, public employees, mass media speakers and others whose choice of words is an utmost feature. Over and besides, factual knowledge of the world around us and of the complex environment is enlarged during the course of life, as well as, occasions for the use of English. Thus can be deduced that the more people discover the complex world, the more their language enriches in order to convey properly the intricate perceived environment.

Answers given at question 11 analysed in relation to those at question 17 indicate that besides age, the education is a reason for differential linguistic use. Figure nr. 6 is a comparison image of the responses obtained for questions 17, 18 and 19. It is obvious that education influences linguistic performance offering not only examples to follow but, moreover, it increases scientific knowledge of the EFL learners. At once education unfolds in time being coupled with aging, therefore age and education have almost the same prevalence in our respondents' point of view.

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	strongly disagree	disagree	not sure	neutral	agree	strongly agree
Education	1	3	6	4	27	20
Age	2	3	1	0	36	19
Social environment	0	2	2	4	31	22

Figure Nr. 6

Social environment is considered a reason for differential linguistic usage by 31 respondents who agreed and other 22 who strongly agreed. The same idea is supported by question 16 (Could you see some change or progress in your language or other people's language due to the development of the social environment?) Thus the target informants have noticed a considerably change in language use related to the development of the social environment, as long as there is only one answer I do not know and no one answer no. Thus, it can be concluded from the above findings that EFL use is a representational feature for the people's age and education received as well as for the effect of social environment.

Conclusions

Despite the fact that this is a small-scale study, it has resulted in some intriguing findings. Firstly, the results of this paper show that English language plays a significant role in social life in general. Language not only unites a group of people but it is the mean of expression for the members of a social group, too. Language is not only a mean of communication making people capable of receiving and understanding their purpose of life but it helped the following generations to understand the living patterns of mankind by preserving the records of history.

As regards to the EFL performance and competence, they are affected on the one hand by some of the static aspects of the social life such as gender, social class, ethnic group and on the other hand by changing features like age, education and social environment. Written English is proven to be more formal than spoken English and people use more complex and sophisticated words when they write a message than in speaking. Moreover, language varies not only according

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to the social characteristics of the speaker given by the background, but also according to the social context in which the speaker finds.

This study, however, has a number of limitations as well. Due to time, place and resource limitations this study consists of only 61 participants, which does not ensure the generalizability of the results. Additionally, the data was obtained mostly from people living in Romania, only few of the informants live abroad, and so the results do not reflect the perceptions of the English native speakers but of young learners using EFL.

In conclusion it can be said that language interacts with society and it is an essential component of individual and social development. Thus, EFL use is both cause of the progress of the actual society and also it is the effect of things in our social environment. Education and age interweave in the linguistic patterns used providing new and rich contexts for modern speakers.

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