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Exploring Native Speaker and Non-Native Speaker Accents: The English as a Lingua Franca Perspective

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Abstract

The relevance of the ideology of the native–speaker (NS) as a model and target in English language teaching (ELT) has over the recent years been increasingly questioned with the emergence of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF). Accents that do not conform to NS standards are termed as 'foreign' and are usually considered to be something to get rid of by training. This study examines how non-native speakers (NNS) of English view NNS accents in relation to NS accents. The findings show that the respondents consistently ranked NS accents higher than NNS in terms of correctness, acceptability, pleasantness and familiarity.

Keywords: English as a lingua franca; accent; native speaker accents; non-native speaker accents; Malaysia

1. Introduction

There are now more non-native speakers of English than native speakers of English, and this has brought about a change in the roles and functions of English in many different parts of the world in recent times (Crystal, 1997; Graddol, 1997; Jenkins 2007; Kirkpatrick, 2007). Along with the growth of speakers of English, non-native speakers have also brought about a variety of Englishes, in the fundamental linguistic sense. These varieties of English flourish and exist in many parts of the world and often imbued with local flavors and senses. However, these diverse varieties of English are very rarely recognized as legitimate varieties representing their respective users. External, native speaker models are propagated in the curriculum of many countries. An apparent

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manifestation of English as a lingua franca in different parts of the world is the spoken language, where the 'local' accent is the evidence of the diversity. External NS models may be imposed for written forms of English, and imposing external NS models on speech may be possible on paper, but impossible in reality. Accent, or the way a person sounds, is difficult to standardize (Trudgill, 1999) and is closely linked to the speaker's personal and group identity (Jenkins, 2000). In upholding linguistic diversity, variation in accent is acceptable as long as intelligibility and conversational flow is clear and comprehensible. Although, local English varieties are spoken in local contexts, often the NNSs themselves seem to prefer external NS English accents (Holliday, 2005; Jenkins, 2007, 2009). This paper examines trainee teachers' attitudes towards NS and NNS English accents, specifically how they rate and rank order these accents in terms of correctness, acceptability, pleasantness and familiarity. There is a need to examine if the shift in the roles and functions of English has also resulted in a change of attitude towards English as a lingua franca and the value of the native-speaker in the Malaysian context. This would be an indication of the acceptability of integrating and adopting local norms in the Malaysian English curriculum.

2. ELF : Ideology, beliefs and attitudes

The study of English as an International Language (EIL) or ELF had gained validation with the growth of NNSs of English and the shift of roles and functions of English worldwide. Jenkins (2006) defines ELF as a "world language whose speakers communicate mainly with other non-native speakers, often from different L1s than their own" (p. 140). ELF interactions involve members from different linguacultures for whom English is not a first language (L1). English often plays the role as a language for communication for intranational as well international contexts. Jenkins (2009) explains that in ELF interactions, English is used as the common language of choice among speakers who come from different linguacultural backgrounds. NSs of English may not be present in ELF interactions, and English is used and learnt mainly for communication with other NNSs of English; thus the de-facto interlocutor is no longer the NS of English.

The relevance of the ideology of the NS as a model and target in English language teaching (ELT) and second language acquisition (SLA) has over the recent years been increasingly questioned with the emergence of ELF. In SLA and ELT, the ultimate goal or target of acquisition has been the speech of a NS of English. Thus the NNSs of English are seen as deficient as compared to the NSs of English. Accents that do not conform to NS standards are termed as 'foreign' and are usually considered to be something that should be corrected by training and practice. ELF does not compare between NS and NNS norms and accents and prioritizes relevance and intelligibility in ELT, and in language use in general (Seidlhofer, 2001). ELF shifts the focus from the NS being the model, and suggests that the model in ELT could be based on the proficient, international speaker of English. ELF implores that we view varieties of English all over the world as legitimate varieties and not deficient or inferior varieties or interlanguages in comparison to the NS English varieties (Jenkins, 2009). Seidlhofer (2009) states that ELF has allowed us to ask "difficult, unorthodox questions and posed major conceptual challenges" (p. 237). It is time to re-examine and reconsider the relevance and appropriateness of the traditional NS English models in English language teaching in contexts like Malaysia, where English is no longer used for the sole purpose of international communication with NS of English from Inner Circle countries and the interlocutors in most interactions are not NSs of English. Often, English in Malaysia is used for intranational communication between Malaysians of various ethnicities. Research in ELF flourishes and provides novel insights of the users and uses of English in local contexts; however, attitudes towards ELF are often less than satisfactory even among NNSs (Holliday, 2005). The model of English that is adopted in the curriculum is rarely questioned and discussed. There is a mismatch between what is stated in the curriculum, i.e. NS model and what is used in our daily lives. The model that we aspire to and the norms and language use in the society are not necessarily aligned.

Jenkins (2007) found that most NNSs display a more positive attitude towards NS English models than local or NNS English models. This could be due to the deeply entrenched ideologies as most textbooks, teacher education models and theories, syllabus etc. are based on NS English standards. Success and failure in the English language is judged based on NS English norms and standards. The NS English ideology is deeply rooted in NNS English contexts' like Malaysia and moving away from this 'standard' is usually considered wrong and may be detrimental. ELF, thus is often not accepted and viewed as being inferior to NS models, and often ELF is termed to be too accepting of 'errors' and as being 'anything goes' (Jenkins, 2007; 2009). NNS English speakers or ELF speakers

themselves have been shown to be biased towards the NS ideology, where NS English is considered to be the norm and anything else as being deficient or non-standard (see Holliday, 2005; Jenkins, 2000; 2007).   Jenkins' (2007) study showed that NNSs English teachers showed attachment towards 'standard' Inner Circle NS English models.

3. Methodology

3.1. Instrument

The findings of this study were collected using a questionnaire adopted from Jenkins (2007). The questionnaire designed by Jenkins (2007) was based on perceptual dialectology. Perceptual dialectology aims to explore people's beliefs about various language varieties by exploring how people categorize and judge the varieties (Jenkins, 2007). Jenkins (2007) argues that the perceptual dialectology method would be able to elicit attitudes and beliefs towards ELF and NS English accents. The questionnaire that was used in this study comprised two parts; the first part elicited personal information of the respondents which included sex, age, L1, and other languages spoken. The second part of the questionnaire comprised five items. However, in this paper only answers pertaining to items four and five will be discussed. The fourth item required respondents to rate the ten specified accents (the USA, the UK, Brazil, Spain, Germany, Sweden, India, China, Japan, Australia) in terms of correctness, acceptability for international communication, pleasantness and the respondents' familiarity with the accent. The fifth item was an open question which allowed the respondents to give comments that they wished to.

3.2. Respondents

The questionnaires were distributed to 72 pre-service English for young learners' teacher trainees, in their final semester in a public university. However, only 36 questionnaires could be tabulated for the final analysis. The age range of the respondents was between 22 to 25 years of age. These teacher trainees had undergone six years of training; i.e. two years in pre-university Ministry approved foundation program, followed by a four-year undergraduate teacher education training at a local public university. These teacher trainees have been exposed to concepts relevant to this study such as ELF, EIL, NS and NNS in their undergraduate courses. Of the 36 responses, 16 were from male respondents and 20 from female respondents. 29 of the respondents listed Malay as their first language (L1), 2 listed Tamil and five respondents listed indigenous languages (Iban, Melayu Sarawak, Dusun, Bajau, Melanau). The respondents' second as well as third languages included English, Bugis, Malay, Arabic, Kadazan, German, and Mandarin.

4. Findings and discussion

4.1. Rating of English accents

The respondents were asked to rate all the ten specified accents on four dimensions. These dimensions were correctness, acceptability for international communication, pleasantness and respondents' own familiarity with the respective accents. The respondents were asked to rate each accent on a scale of 1 to 6, with 1 representing 'very correct', 'very acceptable', 'very pleasant' and 'very familiar' and 6 representing the polar opposite.   The overall means for all the ten English accents can be seen in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Means for the rating task.

Accent	Correctness	Acceptability	Pleasantness	Familiarity
US English	1.82	1.86	2.06	1.64
Brazilian English	3.44	3.19	3.14	4.08
Spanish English	3.72	3.50	3.36	3.72
UK English	1.57	1.86	2.00	1.81
German English	3.42	3.50	3.75	3.92
Swedish English	3.44	3.61	3.67	4.11
Indian English	3.42	2.83	3.53	2.64
China English	3.47	3.06	3.42	2.86
Japanese English	4.00	3.69	3.61	3.42
Australian English	2.61	2.44	2.72	2.33

In general, from Table 1, it can be seen that the NS English accents were rated to be more correct, acceptable, pleasant and familiar than the NNS English accents. While descriptive statistics, especially means cannot be used to make generalizations, especially with a small number of respondents as in this study, certain tendencies and trends emerge from the ranking task. Overall, the three NS English accents, i.e. UK, US and Australian English, had the lowest means indicating that these were perceived and rated to be the most correct, most acceptable, most pleasant and most familiar by the respondents. Among the three NS English accents, UK and US English accents were more favored in all four dimensions compared to Australian English. There was a substantial gap between Australian English and the UK and US English accents.

In order to further discuss the results of the rating task, the means for all the English accents were reorganized into descending order for each of the four dimensions. This is shown in Table 2 below. As mentioned above, the three NS accents appear in the first three places in the rating task. UK English accent was rated better than US for correctness, acceptability and pleasantness; however, interestingly US English accent was rated as being marginally more familiar to the respondents than UK accent. This is an interesting finding as all the respondents are trainees who are taught to adhere to UK standards in terms of the Malaysian English curriculum, yet they acknowledge that the US accent is more familiar to them. This could be due to the exposure to US English through American media, films, popular culture etc. The Australian accent as mentioned above although rated third in all four dimensions, the gap between the top two accents was by far relatively higher.

Apart from the three NS accents, the rating patterns for the other English accents are difficult to identify and explain in detail. There is no clear pattern. The Indian English accent was consistently rated as the best of the remaining accents, with it being fourth on all dimensions except pleasantness. For the pleasantness dimension, Indian English accent was rated as being seventh. China English accent was rated as being fifth in terms of acceptability and familiarity; and ranked as being eight in terms of correctness and sixth for pleasantness. Japanese English accent was rated as being the least correct and acceptable among all the ten English accents. This shows that the best English accents perceived by the respondents are the NS English accents. The NS English accents are not only perceived to be correct, but also more acceptable for international communication, pleasant and familiar.

Table 2. Rank ordering of respondents' accent rating means

Correctness		Acceptability		Pleasantness		Familiarity	
UK English	1.57	UK English	1.86	UK English	2.00	US English	1.64
US English	1.82	US English	1.86	US English	2.06	UK English	1.81
Australian English	2.61	Australian English	2.44	Australian English	2.72	Australian English	2.33
Indian English	3.42	Indian English	2.83	Brazilian English	3.14	Indian English	2.64
German English	3.42	China English	3.06	Spanish English	3.36	China English	2.86
Brazilian English	3.44	Brazilian English	3.19	China English	3.42	Japanese English	3.42
Swedish English	3.44	German English	3.50	Indian English	3.53	Spanish English	3.72
China English	3.47	Spanish English	3.50	Japanese English	3.61	German English	3.92
Spanish English	3.72	Swedish English	3.61	Swedish English	3.67	Brazilian English	4.09
Japanese English	4.00	Japanese English	3.69	German English	3.75	Swedish English	4.11

4.2. Beliefs and attitudes: reactions

Item 5 requested the respondents to comment on any additional points to the issue of NS and NNS English accents that they felt relevant. There were only 18 respondents that responded to this section. The responses were wide-ranging; some were vague, some were detailed and relevant, others irrelevant, some were general and some highly incisive. A few themes that can be related to the patterns that emerged from the rating task will be discussed in this section. The themes that emerged were based on the researcher's understanding of the ELF ideology and how the respondents identified and related their own accents with NS English accents. It must be noted that in this questionnaire reactions to the Malaysian English accent was intentionally left out; so as to probe respondents' reactions without bringing in their beliefs of regarding their own accent.

- *Malaysian English*

One of the largest categories of comments was related to the issue of Malaysian English and non-native Englishes. As respondents were not asked to respond to Malaysian English, they found an opportunity to talk about it here. Most commented that Malaysian English was a valid variety in itself and did not pose a problem in terms of intelligibility for international communication. There was even a response that argued Malaysian English as being better than Received Pronunciation. Some responses:

As Malaysians, we should be proud of Malaysian English. It is because even though we are considered not so correct in pronunciation, we should be acknowledged because our English is intelligible for others from other country.
Malaysian English is much better and clear pronunciation as compared to British Received Pronunciation.
Based on my observation, non-native English speakers in Malaysia are interesting. I find that most of them do not represent RP but nevertheless their speech is often grammatically decent. E.g. Tun Mahathir – I believe that he doesn't sound like an Englishman yet he is fluent and grammatically competent.

- *Native English accents as prestigious, popular and familiar*

A second theme that emerged was about the prestige of NS English accents. NS English accents were associated with ease of understanding and an affinity of with these accents via social media. For example:

I think I like the way both US and UK English accents. Both are easy to understand and I am familiar with them. Their English can be listened everyday in movies.
In my opinion, native or non-native accents don't bother me so much as long as it is able to convey your message. Sometimes, due to my studies of English language, the ability to master popular accents like RP or American can be seen as a prestige. It shows that you are well verse in the English language. So most of the time, my preference depends on the situation that I am in.

- *Identity and NNS English accent*

Another theme was about the identity of a person and the accent. Intelligibility was indicated as the crucial factor in determining if the accent was acceptable. Some of the responses included:

In my opinion, we cannot look down on non-native English accent as it's symbolize the identity of the speaker, they can just use their non-native English accents as long as the English that they use is intelligible. Their English accent is their identity, so they did not have to change it into native speaker English accent such as General America and etc.
As long as it is understandable, non-native speakers should not mind using their own accent.

5. Conclusion

The findings revealed that the respondents ranked the NS English accents as being more correct, acceptable for international communication, pleasant and familiar than the NNS English accents. Overall, the three NS English accents, i.e. UK, US and Australian English, had the lowest means indicating that these were perceived and rated to be the most correct, most acceptable, most pleasant and most familiar by the respondents. Among the three NS English accents, UK and US English accents were more favored in all four dimensions compared to Australian English. The Indian English accent was consistently rated as the best of the remaining NNS English accents, with it being ranked fourth on all dimensions except pleasantness. For the pleasantness dimension, Indian English accent was rated as being seventh. Overall, NNS English accents were rated as being less correct, acceptable, pleasant and familiar as compared to NS English accents. One reason for the more favorable and positive attitude towards NS English accents could be the deeply entrenched attachment to NS English accents as most textbooks and materials in Malaysia are NS-centric. The NS of English is still considered as the norm provider and the model of English in Malaysia. The NS English accents were rated as being more correct, acceptable, pleasant and familiar to the respondents. NNS English accents may be viewed as being deficient in these dimensions in comparison with NS English accents. However, the qualitative section provided slightly different insights to this issue in terms of the position of NNS English accents and identities of NNS speakers of English. It is important to investigate the attitudes and beliefs of teachers of English as this will give us insights into the viability of using ELF norms in international communication and as models in ELT in Malaysia. However, a note of caution, very little generalization can be drawn from the findings here as the sample size in this study is rather small. The findings, however, show that we need to re-think the role of the NS as the sole norm provider for Malaysia. Local norms based on local use of the English language needs be incorporated in the curriculum. Depending solely on exornormative models may prove to be a futile endeavor in our context.

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