

Available online at www.sciencedirect.com**ScienceDirect**

Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences 134 (2014) 3 – 12

Procedia
Social and Behavioral Sciences

ICLALIS 2013

Accent attitudes: Reactions to English as a lingua franca

Paramjit Kaur^{a*}^a *School of Education and Modern Languages, Universiti Utara Malaysia, Sintok 06010, Malaysia.*

Abstract

The emergence of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) and English as an International Language (EIL) has implored us to re-examine the relevance and necessity of the ideology of the native speaker as a model in English language teaching. ELF celebrates the diversity of the various varieties of Englishes that are used in non-native as well as native speaker environments. One obvious manifestation of the diversity of English spoken in the various parts of the world is the accent that is often ascribed to the various diverse speakers of English, wherever it is spoken and used. Generally, the aim of this paper is to examine how non-native speakers (NNS) of English view NNS accents in relation to NS accents. Specifically, the study will discuss the findings of a study that explored the attitudes and beliefs regarding ELF accents in relation to NS accents. The data for this study was collected using a questionnaire adapted from Jenkins (2007). The respondents were a group of trainee teachers of English in a Malaysian public institution of higher learning. The findings show that the respondents perceived the NS accents as being better and described them in more positive categories than the non NNS accents. The NS accents are preferred by the respondents. The findings here reveal biasness towards NS accents as being more correct and proper as opposed to NNS accents. Although there is a shift in the number of users and uses of English in recent times, these teachers still think and believe that 'proper' English remains the preserve of inner circle countries.

© 2014 The Authors. Published by Elsevier Ltd. Open access under [CC BY-NC-ND license](#).
Selection and peer-review under the responsibility of the Organizing Committee of ICLALIS 2013.

Keywords: English as a lingua franca; accent; attitudes and beliefs; native-speaker accent; non-native speaker accent

* Corresponding author: Paramjit Kaur. Tel.: +6-019-417-0666; fax: +604-928-5382.
E-mail address: paramjit@uum.edu.my

1. Introduction

The roles and functions of English in many different parts of the world have shifted and changed given the growth of NNSs of English around the world in recent times (Crystal, 1997; Graddol, 1997; Jenkins 2007; Kirkpatrick, 2007). With the changing functions of English, there has been an emergence and growth of a variety of Englishes around the world. These varieties of English flourish and exist in many parts of the world. However, these varieties of English are very rarely recognized as legitimate varieties representing their respective users. One obvious manifestation of these varieties is the 'local' accent that is ascribed to these varieties of English. Although external NS models are imposed for written forms of English, 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). 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' beliefs and attitudes towards NS and NNS English accents, as this can indicate a change of attitude among English language teaching professionals towards the English language. 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 what is considered 'English' in a particular community. This would give an indication of the acceptability of integrating and adopting local norms in the Malaysian English curriculum.

2. English as a Lingua Franca (ELF)

The study of English as an International Language (EIL) or English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) had gained validation with the growth of NNSs of English and the shift of roles and functions of English worldwide. ELF is defined as a "world language whose speakers communicate mainly with other non-native speakers, often from different L1s than their own" (Jenkins, 2006, p.140). ELF interactions involve members (usually from different cultures) for whom English is not a first language (L1). Jenkins (2009) states that in ELF interactions, English is used as the common language of choice among speakers who come from different linguacultural backgrounds. Most often NSs of English are not present in ELF interactions, and English is used and learnt for communication with other NNSs of English. In the ELF paradigm, there is a shift in how the NNS varieties of English are viewed. These varieties of NNS English that exist and are used in various contexts are viewed 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 and the interlocutors in most interactions are not NSs of English. Often, English in Malaysia is used for intranational communication between its users 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, p.10) states that "native speakerism is so deep in the way in which we think about TESOL that people are standardly unaware of its presence and its impact". The users of English rarely think and question the model of English that is taught in schools, and the mismatch between what is stated in the curriculum and what is used in their daily lives. However, when most NNSs are asked to state their preferences, most display a more positive attitude towards NS English models than local or NNS English models (Jenkins, 2007). This could be due to the reliance on textbooks, teacher education, syllabus etc. that are based on NS English standard norms. 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' norm is usually considered to be wrong. Thus, attitudes towards ELF are often disparaging and ELF is often described as accepting errors, whereby '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 deficit or in error (see Holliday, 2005; Jenkins, 2000;

2007). Jenkins' (2007) study indicates that NNSs English teachers show attachment towards 'standard' Inner Circle NS English models.

3. Objectives of study

The general objective of this study is to examine the perception towards NNS English accents in relation to NS English accents. Specifically, this study examines how a group of trainee teachers view NNS and NS English accents, i.e. if NNS accents are perceived to be inferior and deficient accents or as legitimate English accents for lingua franca communication.

4. Methodology

4.1. Questionnaire

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 this 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 from the respondents, which included sex, age, L1, and other languages spoken. The second part of the questionnaire comprised five items. These items were meant to elicit how the respondents perceived ELF accents in relation to NS English accents. The first item required respondents to comment on ten pre-selected accents that were shown on a map. These ten accents included English accents from the USA, the UK, Brazil, Spain, Germany, Sweden, India, China, Japan, and Australia. The second item required respondents to label and comment on the English accents that they were familiar on the map itself. The third item required the respondents to select and rank the best English accents, based on their own perception. There were no choices given for this item. 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 last item was an open question which allowed the respondents to give any comments that they wished to. However, in this paper only answers pertaining to items one, four and five will be discussed.

4.2. Respondents

The questionnaires were distributed to 72 pre-service English for young learners' trainee teachers, 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 trainee teachers had undergone six years of training; i.e. two years in a pre-university ministry approved foundation program, followed by a four-year undergraduate teacher education training at a local public university. These trainee teachers have been exposed to concepts relevant to this study such as ELF, EIL, ENL, NS and NNS in their undergraduate courses. Of the 36 responses, 16 were from male respondents and 20 from female respondents. Twenty-nine 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.

5. Findings and discussion

5.1. Describing attitudes and beliefs about NS and NNS English accents

Item 1 required the respondents to comment on ten pre-selected accents which included English accents from the USA, the UK, Brazil, Spain, Germany, Sweden, India, China, Japan, and Australia. All these countries were indicated on a world map together with a key that labelled the countries. These accents included accents from NS circles (USA, UK and Australia) as well as NNS English accents (Brazil, Spain, Germany, Sweden, India, China, Japan). The NNS English accents consisted also of Asian English accents that included India, China and Japanese English accents. Respondents were asked to use their own words to describe the ten pre-selected accents to discover more precisely how NS and NNS English accents are evaluated and categorized by these NNS teachers of English. Item 4 required the respondents to rate each of the ten accents on four dimensions of correctness, acceptability for international communication, pleasantness and the respondents' own familiarity with the accent. The respondents were asked to rate on a scale of 1 to 6, where 1 represented 'very correct', 'very acceptable' very pleasant', 'very familiar'; and 6 represented the opposite i.e. 'very incorrect', 'very unacceptable' very unpleasant', 'very unfamiliar'. The responses to items 1 and 4 will be discussed together. However, due to limitations of space, only responses to 5 accents will be discussed, i.e. the UK, USA, Spanish, Indian and Japanese English accents.

Overall for item 1, the descriptions provided by the respondents were wide ranging. Some English accents were commented on in detail and some were described in vague ambiguous terms. There were also some strong, pejorative and emotional words for some accents. In this paper, the focus will be on two NS English accents (the US and the UK English accents) and three NNS English accents (Spanish, Indian, and Japanese English accents) for both items 1 and 4.

5.2. The US English accent

Some respondents who liked the US English accent made pejorative and negative comments about the UK English accent. For example one respondent who used 'plain and simple' for the US English accent but 'snobbish and a little classy' for the UK English accent. Another respondent used 'normal' to describe the USA English accent, but used 'snobbish' for the UK English accent. However, there were also respondents who favoured the UK English accent over the US English accent. One respondent described 'RP' for the UK English accent but 'fast, harsh' for the US English accent. 'Standard' was used by five respondents to describe the US English accent. The term, 'standard' was only used to describe the US English accent and the UK English accent. 'Standard' was never used for any of the NNS English accents. Some of the responses were tabulated as being positive and negative comments and these are shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Description of the US English accent

Positive terms	Negative terms
Standard	Show off
Intelligible	Harsh
Understandable	Simplified
Normal	Overexposed
Cool	Fast
Tone is clear	Colloquial
Easy to understand	
Clear	

For item 4, the overall means for the five English accents are shown in Table 2 below.

Table 2. Means for the rating of the UK, US, Spanish, Indian and Japanese English accents

Accent	Correctness	Acceptability	Pleasantness	Familiarity
US English	2.25	1.9	2.3	1.6 (lowest among the 10 accents)
UK English	2.07 (lowest among the 10 accents)	1.87 (lowest among the 10 accents)	2 (lowest among the 10 accents)	1.6 (lowest among the 10 accents)
Spanish English	3.57	3.4	3.2	3.79
Indian English	3.08	2.5	3.6	2.7
Japanese English	3.97 (highest among the 10 accents)	3.62 (highest among the 10 accents)	3.57	3.3

N=36

The results in Table 2 indicate that the respondents viewed the US English accent favorably in terms of its correctness, acceptability, pleasantness and familiarity, compared to the three NNS English accents. The US English is ranked second to the UK English accent in all the three scales of correctness, acceptability, and pleasantness; and shares the same rank as the UK English accent in terms of the familiarity scale.

5.3. The UK English accent

As explained above, some respondents who favoured the UK English accent would make negative comments about the US English accent. For instance, the UK English is ‘understandable’ but the US English accent is labelled as ‘harsh’; or ‘show off’ for the US English accent and ‘professional’ for the UK English. However, there were also respondents who described both these English accents (UK and US) as being ‘easy to understand’ and some respondents who attributed both as being ‘standard’ (and Australian English accent as being ‘ok’). Some of the responses were tabulated as being positive and negative comments and these are shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Description of the UK English accent

Positive terms	Negative terms
RP	Its like there is something in their mouth
Standard	Hard
Very good accent	High class
Easy to understand	Lots of speed speech
Clear	Fast
Quite ok	Snobbish
Understandable	A little bit classy
Beautiful	Like a bullet train
Melodious	
I love this accent	

As for the rating task in item 4, it can be seen in Table 2 that the UK English accent was the most favored English accent amongst the 10 accents in terms of its correctness, acceptability, pleasantness and familiarity. In fact, the UK

English accent was rated the lowest in all the four scales. This could be due to the exposure the trainee teachers have to British-based educational materials; in addition the Malaysian English curriculum is based on UK English standards (Kaur, 2009). Thus to these respondents, the UK English accent is familiar and correct as opposed to other NNS English accents.

5.4. *The Spanish English accent*

Many respondents gave rather vague answers for this accent and some even indicated they did not know the accent. Some of the responses for the Spanish English accent were tabulated as being positive and negative comments and these are shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Description of the Spanish English accent

Positive terms	Negative terms
Fast and precise	Harsh
Still easy to understand	Sharp
Clear	Cannot be understood
Melodious	Barely intelligible
Sexy	Hard to understand
Expressive, lots of stress	Fast
Romantic	
Classic	

As for the rating task in item 4, it can be seen in Table 2 that the Spanish English accent was rated higher than the two NS English accents in terms of its correctness, acceptability, pleasantness and familiarity (i.e. had higher means). This accent had the highest means amongst all the five accents in terms of familiarity to the respondents. Most probably some of the respondents did not have a clear idea of a Spanish English accent. They were more familiar with the UK and US English accents.

5.5. *The Indian English accent*

Similar to the Spanish English accent, many respondents gave vague answers about the Indian English accent, but were more responsive to this accent as compared to the Spanish English accent. Some of the responses for the Indian English accent were tabulated as being positive and negative comments and these are shown in Table 5.

As for the rating task in item 4, it can be seen in Table 2 that the Indian English accent was rated higher than the two NS English accents in terms of its correctness, acceptability, pleasantness and familiarity. However, on a positive note, the Indian English accent had a lower rating in terms of correctness, acceptability, and familiarity as compared to the Spanish and Japanese English accents. Nevertheless, the Indian English accent was perceived to be the least pleasant of the five accents. This is surprising as Indian English is an established institutionalized variety, yet the respondents did not perceive it to be on par as the NS English accents. This finding is similar to what was found by Jenkins in a similar study (2007). However, as the terms and scales used here are subjective and involve attitudinal dimensions, caution needs to be taken in drawing conclusions. The Indian English had a rather low means for the familiarity scale; thus, this could be an indication that the respondents may know about the accent; however it was not rated as high as the two NS English accent in terms of familiarity.

Table 5. Description of the Indian English accent

Positive terms	Negative terms
Precise	Thick
Easy to understand	No idea
Fluent and fast	Hard to understand
Can be understood	Drawly
Like Malaysian English	Twisted
Melodious	Machine gun
Clear	Tongue twister
Fluent	Confusing
	Difficult to understand
	Fast

5.6. The Japanese English accent

The responses for this accent, were rather similar to those for Spanish and Indian English. Generally, the terms that were used were rather vague and there were less responses as compared to the two NS English accents. The negative comments seemed to be more than the positive comments and there were some pejorative terms that were used to describe the accent. Some of the positive and negative terms used to describe this accent are given below in Table 6.

Table 6. Description of the Japanese English accent

Positive terms	Negative terms
Uniqueness of pronunciation	Not easy to understand
Rhythmic, use of L1 ending sounds	Hard to understand, they add sounds
Nice 'sounds'	Hard to understand
Sometimes acceptable	Machine gun
Polite	Maybe not correct
Too nice, slow pace	Not clear in pronunciation
	Weird
	Very robot-like
	No intonation
	Feel too tired to listen to them
	Like a snail

As for the rating task in item 4, it can be seen in Table 2 that the Japanese English accent was rated higher than the two NS English accents in terms of its correctness, acceptability, pleasantness and familiarity. The Japanese English accent had the highest means for the correctness dimension amongst the 10 accents. However, the Japanese English accent was rated as being a bit more pleasant than the Indian English accent. In terms of familiarity, the respondents indicated that they were not too familiar with the Japanese English accent as compared to the UK, US and Indian English accents.

5.7. Beliefs and attitudes: reactions

Item 5 requested the respondents to comment on any additional points that they felt relevant. There were 18 responses in all 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. There were a few main themes that emerged from these responses which will be discussed below.

5.7.1. Malaysian English: standard and intelligible

There were comments that discussed Malaysian English stating that it posed no problems in terms of intelligibility for international communication. One even commented that Malaysian English is better than RP. For example:

- Respondent 33: “Non-native English speakers have their own accent due to influence of their mother tongue. Although we have a standard English accent, but many new countries are starting to adopt English and there is a strong influence of their mother tongue which now gives us a variety of English accents.”
- Respondent 10: “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.”
- Respondent 5: “Malaysian English is much better and clear pronunciation as compared to British Received Pronunciation.”
- Respondent 1: “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.”

5.7.2. NS as prestige, ‘popular’ and familiar accents

There were also responses that argued that although intelligibility was no problem for NNS accents, NS English accents represented prestige. Some even indicated the ease of understanding of NS English accents and familiarity with these accents via social media. For example:

- Respondent 4: “In my opinion, native or non-native accents don't bother me so much as long as it is able to convey your message. But, it may cause some problems when two people from different backgrounds try to communicate successfully. Sometimes, due to my study of the English language, the ability to master popular accents like RP or American can be seen as a prestige. It shows that you are well versed in the English language. So most of the time, my preference depends on the situation that I am in.”
- Respondent 32: “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 every day in movies. Besides, the accent of Russian English also is very interesting – I really like the way they speak and pronounce their English. This questionnaire made me realize that there are a lot of other English accents that I don't know. So thank you because I can learn from it.”

5.7.3. Some accents better than others

Some indicated that some English accents were more pleasant than others. For example:

- Respondent 7: “I love it when foreign speakers like the French or Italians, incorporate their own language's rhythms into English, making their accent more interesting. But only for some. I don't find it the same with the Japanese because it becomes incomprehensible.”

5.7.4. *NNS English better than NS English*

There were also responses that voiced that NNS English accents were better than NS English accents. The issue of intelligibility was also brought up although the questionnaire never touched on this issue. Thus intelligibility could be the deciding criterion in terms of accent. Some of the responses were:

- Respondent 35: “Sometimes a non-native English accent is much better than the native English. For example, in Malaysia, India and Singapore, the English is intelligible to everyone who’s listening. Maybe the way we were taught the language made us more aware of the pronunciation and the intelligibility of our speech.”
- Respondent 27: “I am interested in commenting on the aspect of intelligibility. Sometimes, I feel that the English accents spoken in the ‘so-called’ English speaking countries such as the US, UK and Australia are not that ‘intelligible’ for us, non-native speakers of English. Perhaps this is due to the speed in the way they are spoken, or the slang used. To be honest, I find it easier to understand a Russian speaking English compared to an American speaking English.”

5.7.5. *NNS English accent as identity*

Some respondents even indicated that accent was part of identity and it was not necessary to use NS English accents. Intelligibility was indicated as the crucial factor in determining accent. Some of the responses included:

- Respondent 31: “In my opinion, we cannot look down on the non-native English accent as it symbolizes 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 do not have to change it into native speaker English accent such as American.”
- Respondent 28: “As long as it is understandable, non-native speakers should not mind using their own accent.”

6. Conclusion

The findings reveal that the respondents favored NS English accents over NNS English accents. Overall, the NS English accents were described in more positive tones; pejorative and emotional words were used more often with the Asian English accents like Japanese and Indian English (e.g. robot-like, flat, drawly, tongue twister, weird, confusing etc.). There seemed to be a pattern of favoring the NS English accents over the Asian English accents. The Spanish, German, Brazilian and Swedish English accents did not elicit as strong and negative descriptions as the Asian English accents. NS English accents had lower means compared to NNS English accents in terms of correctness, acceptability, pleasantness and familiarity. The findings from the map task were supported by the findings from the rating task. NS English accents, particularly the UK and US English accents were viewed as being ‘standard’ and ‘understandable’ compared to the other NNS English accents. One reason for the more favorable and positive attitudes towards NS English accents could be the deeply entrenched attachment to NS English accents as most textbooks and materials in Malaysia are NS-centric. These trainee teachers, although exposed to concepts of ELF and EIL, still consider the NS as the norm provider and the model of English in Malaysia. This is supported by findings in the rating task where the NS English accents were rated as being correct, acceptable, pleasant and familiar to the respondents. NNS English accents may be viewed as being deficient in comparison with NS English accents. There were however, positive responses in the last section where some respondents provided rather insightful comments on the position of NNS English accents and identity construction. The issue of intelligibility is also inextricably linked to accent choice and preference. 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, on 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, do invite us to re-think the role of the NS as the norm provider for Malaysia. There is a need to turn to local norms for local use rather than to benchmark ourselves based on exornormative models that may prove to be futile in our context. In terms of researching accents and attitudes, it will be useful in future to lend credence to the voices and insights of the respondents rather than merely decoding their responses from questionnaires.

References

- Crystal, D. (1997). *English as a global language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Holliday, A. (2005). *The struggle to teach English as an international language*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Graddol, D. (1997). *The future of English*. The British Council.
- Jenkins, J. (2000). *The phonology of English as an international language*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Jenkins, J. (2006). Points of view and blind spots: ELF and SLA. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 16(2), 137-162.
- Jenkins, J. (2007). *English as a lingua franca: attitude and identity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Jenkins, J. (2009). English as a lingua franca: interpretations and attitudes. *World Englishes*, 28(2), 200-207.
- Kaur, P. (2009). Phonological intelligibility: a study of Malay and Chinese learners of English in Malaysia. Unpublished dissertation, National University of Singapore.
- Kirkpatrick, A. (2007). *World Englishes: implications for international communication and English language teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Trudgill, P. (1999). Standard English: what it isn't. In T. Bex & R.J. Watts (eds.), *Standard English. The widening debate* (pp.117 – 128). London: Routledge.