

INTELLIGIBILITY, ACCEPTABILITY, TARGET-LIKENESS: TEACHERS VS. STUDENT PERSPECTIVES ON THE TEACHING OF PRONUNCIATION WITHIN AN EIL FRAMEWORK

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With the spread and development of English around the world, a great many places have adopted and adapted the language of Shakespeare, and numerous varieties have been formed. A case in point is China, where the English language has gained an unprecedented and high status today. This paper explores the standards and models of teaching and learning pronunciation in Chinese universities at the example of one medium-sized tertiary institution in southern China. For this purpose, different samples of varieties of English were presented to teachers and students at the local English Language Center. Using a questionnaire, the study furthermore aimed to identify the varieties of English which teachers and/or students prefer and the level of pronunciation the latter would try to achieve. Finally, the conclusion will suggest a more appropriate model of teaching and learning English pronunciation for both teachers and students in Chinese universities.

Key words: English as an International Language, Language Awareness and Attitude, English Language teaching, intelligibility, standardization

INTRODUCTION

With the unprecedented spread and development of English around the world historically and geographically, the English language has naturally branched into many new varieties, leading, amongst other things, to the widely discussed current pedagogical focus on the English as a World Language or a Global Language (see, for example, Crystal, 1997; Kachru, 1992a). With the high status English has gained today, it is common to hear the saying that “English is an Asian language” (see, for example, McArthur, 2003). English in countries such as India, Nigeria, Singapore, and the Philippines are regarded as second language (ESL) and the term “New Englishes” is created to refer to these varieties of English. With the globalization and glocalization of English, Kachru (1992b, p. 10) also points out that “English acquires a new identity, a local habitat, and a name.” However, as the term “New Englishes” or “International Varieties” of English describes “indigenized” or “nativized” varieties (see, for example, Bolton, 2003; Brutt-Griffler, 2002), which normally refers to the varieties of English in the Outer Circle, other varieties in the Expanding Circle (see Kachru’s World Englishes Model, 1985, 1992b), such as English used in China, tend to be ignored. Europe, where English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) has led to a relatively recent but highly dynamic research agenda (cf. Seidlhofer, 2004), may be the exception to this overall trend.

1. ENGLISH AS AN INTERNATIONAL LANGUAGE (EIL)¹ IN CHINA

¹ “International English” is a term which means that English can be used as a global means of communication. Intelligibility is the main criterion when using the concept “International English.”

Because of the rapid development of the English language alongside the economic development and globalization, it seems that it is not sensible to overlook the variety of English in the Expanding Circle countries such as China. As the variety of English in China has been greatly influenced by “Chinese Pidgin English” (CPE), which is regarded as one of the oldest English pidgins in the world (see Lang, 2005, pp. 200-1), it should be recognized and studied in the big picture of “World Englishes.” As evidenced by language policy decisions (Wen & Hu, 2007), textbook sales and student enrolment, compared with other foreign languages, English enjoys a preference in China. Along with the hosting of the 2008 Olympic Games and the economic development of China, the wave of English learning is gaining momentum, and the significance of the English language in China is also firmly established. The English language is becoming increasingly crucial in China nowadays, and the trend of learning English is inevitable. According to Chen and Hu (2006, p. 232), there are currently over 250 million English learners (estimated) in China, outnumbering the entire population of the United States. English is widely taught and learned in primary schools, high schools, universities, and even in kindergartens. Even the middle-aged and senior people cannot ignore this trend. As evidenced by official figures, English is also learned in a wide range of areas in China (see, for example, Bolton, 2003, p. 250). As Adamson (2004, p. 195) points out:

At present, the role and status of English in China is higher than ever in history as evidenced by its position as a key subject in the curriculum, with its growing use as a medium of instruction as many schools adopt a bilingual approach to education, and as a crucial determinant for university entrance and procuring well-paid jobs in the commercial sector.

Although English gains its high “reputation” as the principal foreign language taught and used throughout China, people have a different attitude toward the language of Shakespeare. English is not used as a dominant language in people’s daily lives since “the use of English in China was quite different from its use in Africa and South Asia in that it was much more limited in range and depth” and “did not achieve the same institutionalized status as in India or the Philippines” (Zhou & Feng, 1987, p. 111). People may argue that there is no need for them to learn English well because they never use English after graduating from college, and even if they pay more attention to their English study, they cannot study English well or use English proficiently to communicate. This is because of the lack of opportunities of using English as a medium of communication, a situation not likely to change radically in the near future. A report (see Zhou & Campbell, 1995) reflects that many students only learn English “because of the importance of the language for educational advancement” and “purely because they have to” (Bolton, 2003, p. 250). However, we cannot neglect the trend that the English language has become a prevalent and international language in China, and worldwide.

2. LANGUAGE AWARENESS AND ATTITUDE

As with any case of language variation, the concepts of awareness and attitude are inextricably linked to the question of English as an International Language and the teaching of pronunciation in China. For this study, language awareness has been conceptualized both from a pragmatic and political standpoint. On the pragmatic side, a wide range of research ranging from Cummins’ (1978) Interdependence Hypothesis to Thomas’ (1992) metalinguistic awareness in second and third language learning and Renou’s (2001) metalinguistic awareness and second language proficiency, underscore the importance of this concept in promoting student learning. Thus, we maintain that a familiarization of students with varieties of English in an EIL framework will enhance their communicative competence (cf. Kunschak, 2004). On the language policy side,

scholars like Fairclough (1992), Pennycook (2001) or Van der Walt (2000) are positing critical language awareness as a powerful tool to challenge the status quo. This standpoint seems particularly relevant in Expanding Circle varieties such as the Chinese variety of English, where the native speaker paradigm and the deficit hypothesis are still prevalent. Looking at language awareness in depth and breadth, James and Garrett (1992) have tried to bridge the divide between the two approaches by offering five dimensions of language awareness: affective, social, power, cognitive, and performance, all of which can be addressed within the framework of an EIL/ ELF approach.

Language attitude is the second crucial factor in the success or failure of a diversified approach to teaching English such as EIL/ ELF. With its three components, i.e., affective, cognitive, and behavioral (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975), attitude, just like awareness, presents us with a complex set of variables. In fact, recent studies (see, for example, Volet, 2001) emphasize the multidimensional, contextual, and dynamic nature of attitude as motivation. For the purpose of the present study, the complexity of the issue is reflected in the recent design, which, through questionnaire and voice samples, addresses both conscious and subconscious processes as well as verbalizations of planned action. Status and solidarity as in Standard American vs. Standard British English (Bradac & Giles, 1991), degree of familiarity through previous exposure (Dalton-Puffer, et al., 1997), and origin of attitudes in family, school, and society (McGroarty, 1996) all contribute to the preference of one variety over another. The preparedness of the listener (Brown, 1988) and the perceived degree of intelligibility (Van der Walt, 2000), which may or may not coincide with the actual level of comprehensibility, serve to round off the broader picture. In order to move towards the teaching of pronunciation with the EIL/ ELF framework in mind in China, it is thus indispensable to examine both students and teachers' attitudes to identify points of resistance, windows of opportunity, and degree of preparedness for such an approach.

3. METHODOLOGY

The present study was conducted to explore teachers' and students' awareness and attitudes towards varieties of English, with a view to suggesting possible avenues for designing a pronunciation teaching model that would take into consideration stakeholders' opinions while honoring the principles of teaching English as an International Language. In order to explore this issue from multiple angles, the following five research questions were devised by the researchers:

1. What level of language awareness concerning varieties of English can be detected among teachers and students?
2. What kinds of language attitudes and preferences seem to be prevalent among teachers and students?
3. What differences in the above aspects can be observed between Chinese and international teachers and lower and higher-level students?
4. What aspirations do students and teachers have concerning the desired level of their receptive and productive competencies in varieties of English?
5. What ways to reach these competency levels are considered most effective by students and teachers?

The instruments chosen to address these questions were a set of language samples with corresponding answer sheets, as well as a parallel questionnaire for students and teachers, participants of the study included 21 teachers, both foreign and local, as well as 96 students in intermediate and advanced levels at the English Language Center of a public university in southern China.

In this study, a total of 14 different voice samples of both genders from native and nonnative varieties of English were used. The native voice samples included British English,

American English, Canadian English, and New Zealand English, while the nonnative voice samples covered varieties of English from Austria, China, and Malaysia. The voice samples used for analysis were recorded by different people from these countries above, and sent via the Internet replicating the sample generating approach by Kunschak (2004). The samples consisted of free monologues about the speakers' daily routines, and were then reduced to snippets of 30-45 seconds each. In this way, consistency of topic was combined with the maximum degree of natural speech available in a non-dialogic situation.

A questionnaire (see Appendix) was also administered with the purpose of identifying the varieties of English teachers and students preferred and the level of pronunciation the latter would aspire to attain. More importantly, the questionnaire also aimed at compiling ways to attain the level of both English teaching and learning.

The questionnaire used in this study was designed based on the survey conducted by Chen and Hu (2006, p. 233). According to Fang's (2007) summary: "Their survey investigated the attitudes of speakers from the Inner and Outer Circles toward the English language in China, and attempted to ascertain other English speakers' attitudes towards 'China English' and the degree to which they accepted 'China English' or Chinglish neologisms as a new variation on Standard English" (p.10).

With this multi-level research design, combining student and teacher data, indirect and direct instruments, as well as quantitative and qualitative items, and basing the whole project on previously piloted data collection methods, we intended to provide a complex picture of the issue of language variation in the teaching of English as an International Language. In a follow-up study, it is hoped that the interviews will help to shed more light on the intricacies of beliefs and behaviors of language learners and teachers in this situation.

4. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS OF THE QUESTIONNAIRE

The questionnaire was distributed during class time for students and during a faculty meeting for teachers, which contributed to the significant return rate of 85% among the students and 57% among faculty. Respondents included 11 foreign and 10 local teachers, as well as 51 intermediate and 45 advanced students. While the faculty members received the questionnaire in English, students were provided with a Chinese version to ensure proper understanding of the issues.

Regarding the first research question, which aims to explore students' and teachers' awareness of and knowledge about varieties of English, not many students had heard of the term World Englishes or varieties of English. Only 13.7% students at the intermediate level gave an affirmative answer, while nearly a half of the students at the advanced level had heard of this term. However, not surprisingly, every teacher had heard of or studied World Englishes before.

The following paragraphs are dedicated to the second research question, which addresses the complex nature of students' and teachers' attitudes towards varieties of English. As to the item of which variety they consider standard, students at both levels believe that British English is still more "authentic", while quite a number of them also think that American English can be called "Standard English." However, many teachers eschew the term "standard." Two of the teachers believe that British English can be called Standard English, while another two stand on the side of American English. Overall, it can be shown from this question that both teachers and students think that British English and American English are two "standard" kinds of English.

Standard does not necessarily equal preference. Although more students may believe that British English is Standard English, more students still prefer American English. This phenomenon is even obvious for students at the advanced level. As Hu (2004, p. 30) in her study points out: "nowadays in China it is the fashion for people to speak American English. This can be seen on English TV programs. The majority of the TV speakers speak English with an American accent."

She also mentions other reasons for the dominance of American English in China. Two key reasons the researchers concur with are “the long line of immigrants from China to the States” and “the predominance of Americans among English teachers in China.”

The following item aimed at uncovering latent linguistic bias among students and teachers. Evidently, from a linguistic point of view, no language or dialect is inherently better or more prestigious than any other. However, it seems that people still possess some prejudice toward some accents. More than half of the students from both levels and even more teachers believe that certain English accents are better than others. Most of them regard the General American (GA) accent as the more prestigious one. To look at a large picture, the relationship between language and identity is also worth discussing. As Wardhaugh (1986, p. 110) points out: “Speaking is not merely a social act that involves others; it is also a personal act in that it helps create one’s own identity. [...] Linguistic prejudice, either for or against particular dialects or languages, is a fact of sociolinguistic life, a fact we must recognize.” We can see that language always links with personal identity. Linguistic prejudice can hardly be avoided, as we interpret the language of others in ways we cannot always control.

Beyond subconscious attitudes and overt preferences, intelligibility or ease of understanding, represent a crucial aspect in the acceptance of certain varieties. Similar to item four, around 53% of students at the intermediate level and 64% of students at the advanced level, together with 90% of teachers, think that some English accents are easier to understand than other accents. It is true that some accents are familiar to some language users; especially since China is an EFL country, British and American accents may be easier for English learners in China to understand. However, we doubt that this case would be treated the same way in those countries where English is the native language or regarded as the second language. Table 1 below summarizes findings from item 1 to 5 of the questionnaire.

The third question, comparing high and low-level students, as well as Chinese and international faculty, has been partly discussed in the previous paragraphs but may be conveniently summarized at this point. On the one hand, higher-level students are more aware of varieties of English and also more positively inclined towards them. This indicates the possibility of developing variation awareness and a positive attitude over time in a program that is communicatively oriented and includes the development of sociolinguistic and socio-cultural competence in its mission statement. On the other, no significant difference between Chinese and foreign teachers have been detected. This finding suggests a high level of preparedness of teachers in this area and may be partly due to the mixed foreign teachers from different backgrounds and regular interaction between Chinese and foreign teachers for teaching and other purposes.

Table 1.

Perspectives towards World Englishes and varieties of English among teachers and students

Questions	Options	Interm. students	%age	Adv. students	%age	Faculty	%age
Have you ever heard of World Englishes or varieties of English?	Yes	7	13.7	22	48.9	21	100
Which kind of English do you think is Standard English? (First choice)	American English	17	33.3	14	31.1	2	9.5
	British English	23	45.1	24	53.3	2	9.5
	Australian English	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Canadian English	0	0	0	0	0	0
	New Zealand English	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Singapore English	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Indian English	0	0	0	0	0	0
	China English	3	3.9	0	0	0	0
Other Englishes	0	0	0	0	0	0	
Which kind of English do you prefer? (First choice)	American English	17	33.3	26	57.8	6	28.6
	British English	13	25.5	10	22.2	3	14.3
	Australian English	1	1.96	1	2.22	1	4.76
	Canadian English	1	1.96	0	0	0	0
	New Zealand English	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Singapore English	1	1.96	0	0	0	0
	Indian English	0	0	0	0	0	0
	China English	3	5.88	0	0	0	0
Other Englishes	0	0	0	0	0	0	
Do you think that some English accents are better than any others?	Yes	15	29.4	37	82.2	11	52.4
Do you think that some English accents are easier to understand than others?	Yes	27	52.9	29	64.4	19	90.5

The fourth research question was designed to compare students' perceived and desired levels of competency in receptive and productive skills. Concerning the number of different accents that Chinese students should be expected to understand. Answers varied from standard accents to native accents, or accents that a native speaker would understand. Both students and teachers believe that native or standard accents are still norms of pronunciation, while the importance of intelligibility was now put forth for discussion.

When moving from the receptive skill of listening to the productive skill of pronunciation, a shift towards practical concerns can be detected. While five students each at both intermediate and advanced level think that native-like competence is the ultimate goal for them, more students still see the significance of "intelligibility" as a "norm" of their pronunciation level. Nearly all the teachers also select the term "intelligibility" as their preference. As the "native model" has been questioned in recent years, especially in Outer Circle countries such as Singapore, the Philippines, and Nigeria, where English has developed into an "indigenized model" (see, for example, Kachru & Nelson, 2006, p. 94; McKay, 2002, p. 39), we argue that the native-like model is no longer the ultimate goal of learning and using English because more and more bilingual or multilingual

speakers use English in different ways, and “their use will be significantly different from that of monolingual speakers” (McKay, 2002, p. 39).

Concerning the fifth research question about how to achieve the level of pronunciation, listening to BBC and VOA English, and practicing with native speakers, are both preferred among students. Interestingly, more teachers would like their students to listen to varieties of English, which clearly emphasizes the importance of English as an International Language.

As regards the following related item of which English to actually teach in the classroom, Standard English and International English were two kinds of English chosen by students at both levels, “Chinese English” was also chosen by some students at the intermediate level and some teachers, from which we can see that to some extent, importance is attached to the local variety of English as well. As McKay (2002, p. 41) observes, “teaching English as an international language requires that researchers and educators thoroughly examine individual learners” specific uses of English within their particular speech community as a basis for determining learning goals.”

Regarding the components of Standard English, it is widely accepted that Standard English is hard to define. The question of “what components make up Standard English” also seems somewhat too fuzzy to answer conclusively. Students and teachers believe that pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar are three key components of Standard English. Although most researchers nowadays tend to avoid judging spoken English (pronunciation) as an aspect of Standard English (see, for example, Gupta, 2006, p. 96; Trudgill, 1999, p. 118), it seems that pronunciation is still emphasized in the Expanding Circle, where English is learned as a foreign language in formal settings.

5. LANGUAGE SAMPLES

An analysis of students’ reactions to the language samples confirms findings from the questionnaire data concerning intelligibility and preferences. While North American varieties were most easily identified—American and Canadian samples were collapsed for that purpose—students only identified one of the British and one of the Chinese speakers, in both cases the female voice. Varieties from New Zealand, Malaysia, and Austria were only recognized by a non-significant number of students. As could be expected, advanced-level students were able to identify about twice as many samples as intermediate-level students.

As far as the evaluation of the different samples is concerned, the acceptance level of different varieties ranged from 1.98 to 3.57 out of five among intermediate-level students and from 2.238 to 3.9 among advanced-level students, demonstrating an expected higher level of acceptance among advanced students. The higher average acceptance for a sample among advanced-level students was 4.16, the lowest average 2.1, while, among intermediate-level students, these figures amounted to 3.83 and 1.94, respectively. Again, the female voices stood out, with the Canadian female speaker gaining the highest acceptance in both groups, and the Malaysian female speaker the lowest overall.

6. DISCUSSION

From the analysis of the questionnaire, we can see that both teachers and students believe that “intelligibility” (although different varieties of English have their own standard of “intelligibility”) has become the highest goal for them, while a narrow focus on the standard tends to be avoided. The discussion about language attitude and language awareness is also meaningful and remarkable and clearly demonstrates a willingness among students and teachers to engage with the issue. As McKay (2002, p. 55) points out, “whereas all varieties of English are linguistically equal, they are not considered to be socially equal.” Therefore, it is not too surprising that both teachers and students show their preference for certain accents or varieties of English.

Another issue concerning the “standardization” of the English language also needs to be discussed. Since many varieties of English have been formed around the world, the term “standard” or the concept of “standardization” seems to have become vague and tends to be avoided. There is no absolute “Standard English” because a language is always changing, and “standard” is not a static concept anymore. Some features of Standard English today can become a kind of non-standard over a few centuries. Similarly, what we consider “non-standard” can develop into “standard” with the passage of time. The perception of “standard” can be regionally different as well. As Crystal (2004, p. 23) argues, “second/foreign-language speakers gain in national and international prestige, usages which were previously criticized as “foreign”—such as *three person, he be running, many informations*—can become part of the standard educated speech of a locality, and eventually appear in writing.”

Crystal uses an example—“*Welcome in Egypt*,” which has been included in English textbooks there, to tell us about language change and language variation. Edward (1985, p. 166; see also, for example, Crystal 2004, p. 24) also points out that “non-standard varieties, like standard ones, reflect group identity and solidarity and must be respected by the school.” This is in line with Canagarajah’s (2005) concept of glocalization, which heavily emphasizes the local stake in developing a regionally appropriate variety.

7. CONCLUSION

In summarizing the main points which have emerged from this study, we can emphasize the high level of language awareness among teachers but lower level among advanced students, and even lower level among intermediate students, which needs to be addressed. As far as attitude is concerned, while “standard” as a concept may be less popular than before, both teachers and advanced students still consider some varieties as better or more easily understood, with British English leading the standard count and American English the preference ranking. As to their preferred teaching model, whereas teachers would include all accents for listening comprehension, students still focus on standard and native accents. At the same time, the Chinese variety of English is gaining acceptance among teachers and advanced students. Consequently, in their quest for attaining intelligibility, which is the declared goal of teacher and students alike, students prefer native speakers and native audio sources, while teachers tend to favor a wider range of exposure.

Thus, based on the above considerations, two main avenues would seem to suggest themselves for further exploration. On the one hand, classroom implications to be derived from the results should include awareness training for students and exposure to a wider range of varieties through in-class or supplementary materials. This would require a range of measures to be taken, from curriculum expansion to materials development and teaching training. On the other hand, further research should include a wider range of Asian varieties, triangulation through selected interviews, and a factor analysis of teacher and student data, to isolate variables that may influence their level of awareness or attitudes. It is hoped that these measures will in the end contribute to enhancing English teaching and to facilitating communication among speakers of English as an International Language around the world.

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APPENDIX

The questionnaire and an example of the study of the voice samples

I. Demographic background data

Please fill out the following information about yourself. All personal responses will remain anonymous and are included for statistical purposes only,

- 1) Age: 18-22 23-30 31-40 61 and above
 - 2) Gender: Male Female
 - 3) Major: language-related non language-related
 - 4) Age when starting English: native primary secondary university
 - 5) Years of teaching English: < 1 year 1-5 years 6-10 years > 10 years
 - 6) Experience abroad: travel study work
 < 1 yr. > 1 year
- English speaking country: Yes No
- 7) Native language/ dialect? _____
 - 8) Other languages/ dialects: _____, _____, _____

II. Questionnaire

Please answer the following questions about language variation according to your experience and beliefs. There is no right or wrong answer. You can choose more than one option in most questions. If you can give some additional information, please do so.

- 1) Have you ever heard of World Englishes or variations of English? If so, please explain:
 No Yes: _____

- 2) According to the different English accents you have come across, which kind of English do you think is Standard English? Please rank (1,2,3, ...). You can choose more than one answer.
 American English Australian English British English
 Canadian English China English Indian English
 New Zealand English Singapore English Other: _____

- 3) According to the different English accents you have come across, which kind of English do you prefer? Please rank (1,2,3, ...). You can choose more than one answer.
 American English Australian English British English
 Canadian English China English Indian English

- ___ New Zealand English ___ Singapore English ___ Other: _____
- 4) Do you think that some English accents are better than any others? If so, why?
 ___ No ___ No idea ___ Yes, because _____
- 5) Do you think that some English accents are easier to understand than others? If so, why?
 ___ No ___ No idea ___ Yes, because _____
- 6) What accents should a Chinese student understand?
 ___ Standard accents, that is: _____
 ___ Native accents
 ___ Accents that a native speaker would understand
 ___ Any accents
 ___ Other: _____
- 7) To what level of English pronunciation should a Chinese student aspire?
 ___ Sound like a native speaker of English.
 ___ Make themselves understood to both English learner and native speakers of English.
 ___ Keep their own accent because their fellow student can understand what they say.
 ___ Pronunciation is not a priority in my class.
 ___ Other: _____
- 8) How do you think this can be achieved?
 ___ By listening to BBC and VOA English
 ___ By listening to a variety of English
 ___ By practicing with native speakers
 ___ By practicing with classmates
- 9) What kind of English should teachers teach?
 ___ Standard English, that is: _____

- ___ International English
- ___ Chinese English
- ___ The variety/ varieties the teacher is familiar with
- ___ A mix of native and non-native Englishes
- ___ Only native English
- ___ Other: _____

10) In your opinion, what components make up Standard English? Please rank:

- ___ Grammar ___ Spelling (Orthography) ___ Vocabulary
- ___ Pronunciation ___ Body language
- ___ Other: _____

III. Language samples

You will be listening to speakers from different varieties of English. Please check your reaction on the following scales as quickly as possible. (strongly agree, agree, undecided, disagree, strongly disagree)

Example strongly agree

	/				
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 strongly disagree

Speaker 1

- 1) I can understand this speaker.
- 2) I would like to have this speaker as my teacher/ I would use that speaker as a model for my teaching.
- 3) The speaker knows what he/she is talking about.
- 4) The speaker seems like a nice person.
- 5) The speaker speaks properly.
- 6) I would like to have this speaker as my friend.
- 7) I have heard this type of English before.
- 8) I can identify this speaker's nationality (please name)

Speaker 2

- 1) I can understand this speaker.
- 2) I would like to have this speaker as my teacher/ I would use that speaker as a model for my teaching.
- 3) The speaker knows what he/she is talking about.
- 4) The speaker seems like a nice person.
- 5) The speaker speaks properly.
- 6) I would like to have this speaker as my friend.
- 7) I have heard this type of English before.
- 8) I can identify this speaker's nationality (please name)
