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Accent attitudes: Reactions to English as a lingua franca

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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.

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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;

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