



# Gender and attitudes towards English varieties: Implications for teaching English as a global language

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## ABSTRACT

The study reported in this paper adopted both direct (a large-scale questionnaire survey) and indirect (a verbal-guise test) measures to investigate gender differences in second language (L2) learners' attitudes towards different English varieties in secondary schools in Hong Kong. The investigation considered various factors affecting students' attitudes to language including their affective feelings, cultural identity, awareness of language variations, experience of language use, perceived intelligibility of English accents and, more importantly, situational language choices. Consistent with previous studies, the findings suggest that the female learners were more positively oriented towards native speaker (NS) pronunciation and tended to adopt it as their teaching model and learning target; they also had greater confidence than males in their ability to understand British English pronunciation. However, their greater sensitivity to NS standards was found to be limited to high-stakes English-speaking contexts. In contrast, male learners had greater tolerance or acceptance of local pronunciation. This paper concludes by discussing the implications of L2 learners' gender differences in attitudes for English language education and the design of English language teaching materials and assessments.

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## 1. Introduction

Since the global spread of English, the choice of an appropriate English learning target for second language (L2) learners has been controversial in English language education due to the changing nature of English worldwide. For much of the history of English language teaching (ELT), an exonormative native speaker (NS) model, based on certain inner-circle varieties (Kachru, 1985) (e.g., received pronunciation (RP) and general American (GA)), has been regarded as L2 learners' ultimate goal (see Kachru & Nelson, 2006). However, over the last few decades, this learning target has been widely criticised for its inappropriateness and unattainability in most English-speaking situations, where L2 speakers (or non-native speakers, NNSs) are the overwhelming majority (Canagarajah, 2013; Kirkpatrick, 2007). English is no longer a language owned by a limited number of NSs; rather, it is used by speakers from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds with different functions and patterns of language use (Seidlhofer, 2011). In many outer-circle countries (e.g., Singapore, Nigeria) (Kachru, 1985), for instance, new English varieties have been widely described by World Englishes (WE) scholars because of the extensive use of English in key domains such as government, law, education and other social contexts (Kachru & Nelson, 2006). More recently, English as a lingua franca (ELF) research has described how English is used among L2 speakers of different backgrounds, particularly in business and academic discourses in international settings such as continental Europe (Seidlhofer, 2011) and

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ASEAN countries (Kirkpatrick, 2010). In her discussion of the development of ELF research, Jenkins (2015, p.77) argues that English should be positioned 'within a framework of multilingualism', with ELF defined by its 'variability', 'complexity' and 'emergent nature' (see also Galloway & Rose, 2015 for research into WE, ELF and Global Englishes).

Owing to the tremendous language variation in real-life English communication, a general consensus in the literature is the adoption of ELT targets relevant to both local and global language use contexts (Kirkpatrick, 2007, 2014; Murphy, 2014). For instance, Dewey (2012, p.116) proposes the adoption of a postnormative orientation to language learning, which can enable practitioners to 'generate location-specific, classroom-oriented innovative language models'. Kirkpatrick (2014, p.29) argues that local multilinguals, 'who are proficient in English' and 'who come from the same or similar linguistic background to their students', should serve as 'good role models' and 'the most appropriate linguistic models' for their students; they can provide the 'linguistic target' for their students. Furthermore, scholars in the areas of WE and ELF have highlighted the need to promote learners' communicative proficiency and to raise their awareness of language variation by exposing them to a wide range of accents (e.g., Bowles & Cogo, 2015; Galloway & Rose, 2015; Jenkins, 2009a; Kachru & Nelson, 2006; Kirkpatrick, 2010; Walker, 2010).

Despite these seemingly sound scholarly proposals, contemporary English proficiency tests (e.g., TOFEL, IELTS) and teaching materials (e.g., Headway, Soars & Soars, 2007) are still mainly oriented towards an NS standard (Hamp-Lyons & Davies, 2008; Jenkins, 2012; Kopperoinen, 2011). One fundamental reason for this lack of progress in ELT is L2 learners' Anglophone-centric attitude towards the NS standard. In their recent publication, Galloway and Rose (2015) suggest five potential barriers to innovation in ELT, namely, lack of materials, language assessment, teacher education, attachment to 'standard' English and teacher recruitment practices (see Galloway, 2017 for a similar discussion). They argue that the deeply ingrained ideology of 'standard' English is possibly the 'largest barrier to bridging the gap between theory and practice in the fields of Global Englishes and ELT' (p.219). From this perspective, previous studies of attitudes towards English varieties have generally produced two major findings: (1) many English learners aspire to inner-circle varieties and regard them as learning targets due to their perceived status, and hence, higher educational, economic and pragmatic values in the globalised world (e.g., Bernaisch, 2012; Bolton & Kwok, 1990; Chan, 2013; Li, 2009a; McKenzie, 2008; McKenzie & Gilmore, 2017; Sasayama, 2013; Sung, 2016; Wang, 2015); and (2) some learners associate their own English variety with their local cultural identity (e.g., Cavallaro & Ng, 2009; Chan, 2013; Edwards, 2015; McKenzie, 2008; McKenzie & Gilmore, 2017; Sasayama, 2013; Sung, 2016). Nevertheless, as existing research mostly focuses on L2 learners' overall attitudes towards varieties of English, there is a need to further investigate the influence of different variables on attitudes towards English varieties and their implications for English language education (Chan, 2013; Galloway, 2013). This study investigates an important but less examined issue in the literature and in Hong Kong, namely, gender differences in L2 learners' attitudes towards local and NS English varieties with reference to existing ELT practices. Specifically, male and female students' attitudes towards NS and NNS English varieties may affect their confidence in and motivation for achieving these targets and hence their learning outcomes in English language education (see Kirkpatrick, 2007). Given the use of English as an international language in Hong Kong, the findings derived from this study can shed light on the choice of language standard and the design of instructional materials and assessments in teaching English as a global language.

## 2. Literature review

Research into language attitudes dates back to studies in sociopsychology of the 1960s, particularly the pioneering work of Lambert and his associates (1960), which investigated people's attitudes towards speakers with particular styles of speaking using the matched-guise technique (see Giles & Billings, 2004). Research in this field overlaps with sociolinguistic studies focusing on how language attitudes are associated with specific linguistic features and people's beliefs about language use (see Jenkins, 2007 for a detailed discussion). Based on second language acquisition theories, Garrett (2010) further underscores the close relationship between language attitudes and language learning. He suggests that one's language attitude is 'considered to be a major determinant of level of success in the acquisition of the L2' and is influenced by an array of social variables such as the learners' socio-economic level, age, gender and ethnic background (p.26). Given the focus of the present study on gender differences in attitudes towards English varieties, this section first reviews the factors that affect people's attitudes towards English varieties and then considers the important social factor of gender in language attitudes in an educational setting.

### 2.1. Factors affecting attitudes towards English varieties

As discussed previously, a critical issue determining the choice of ELT targets in a particular sociolinguistic setting is people's attitudes towards the traditional NS standard (based on inner circle varieties) as compared to the local and/or other L2 varieties such as in the outer and expanding circle. In this regard, a major theme in the literature has been an ambivalent attitude between status and solidarity (Bamgbose, 1998; Jenkins, 2007). In her significant study investigating English teachers' attitudes and identities using questionnaire survey ( $n = 326$ ) and interviews ( $n = 17$ ), Jenkins (2007) reports that L2 English teachers in different countries wished to acquire a near-NS accent as it is deemed to be an indicator of successful English speaking, but they also expressed the desire to project their own local identity using their own English variety. This NS-orientation among L2 speakers was found to be consistent in a wide range of attitudinal studies worldwide in the outer (Bernaisch, 2012; Cavallaro & Ng, 2009) and expanding circle (He & Li, 2009; McKenzie, 2008; Sifakis & Sougari, 2005).

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