

## ***Pronounced Ambivalence: R. P. and Native Speaker Norms in the ESL Classroom***

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### **ABSTRACT**

In spite of numerous studies that have detailed the necessity of dispensing with native speaker norms when teaching pronunciation, the temptation to persist with Received Pronunciation (henceforth R.P.) and native speaker norms seems irresistibly hard to resist. This has an inevitable consequence—that of instilling “... in the minds of students the idea that other varieties are less valued, and ‘embedding’ into the ELT activity, systems of exclusion which marginalize speakers of other varieties” (Modiano, 2001, p.1). This not only creates an unequal playing field where establishing the superiority of one variety of English over other equally legitimate varieties is uncritically endorsed, but it is also passed off as the only way to speak or use language. This has negative consequences for learners who might not only end up internalizing such arbitrarily determined norms as normal, but also develop a sense of inadequacy and failure in being unable to attain such exacting standards. The whole exercise of teaching language for communication stands defeated; moreover learners play straight into the hands of agencies that have a vested interest in keeping the notion of linguistic *purity* alive.

This study, which was conducted to investigate teacher and student views about teaching RP and native speaker norms, belied some of the claims about the necessity of teaching RP and native speaker norms, as also the belief that learners are passive recipients of knowledge. Data from the study revealed that learners have a mind of their own and are not keen to imitate an accent just because it is considered *standard*. Teachers are also beginning to realize that there are varieties of English that have come into their own and any talk of norms and standards is merely a facile attempt to market a product that is past its sell by date.

Key words: R.P., non-native pronunciation, native speaker norms, ESL classroom

## **INTRODUCTION**

“We cannot write like the English. We should not. We can write only as Indians. Our method of expression . . . has to be a dialect which will someday prove to be as distinctive and colourful as the Irish and the American. Time alone will justify it.”

“One has to convey in a language that is not one’s own the spirit that is one’s own. . . .”

(Raja Rao, 2008, Foreword to Kanthapura, p. iv )

It was a visit by a delegation of professors from various engineering institutes across the country to NIT Warangal for an inspection, which first fed the germ of an idea for an investigation into current ELT practices and subsequently for this paper. One of the professors who was visiting the English language lab where I teach asked me in heavily accented English why students had a “flawed” pronunciation. His English sounded unintelligible and hard to make out at the first instance. In fact, his pronunciation of the term “pronunciation” sounded like “*pronoun-se-son*”, and all I could reply at the time was a weak promise to help where I could to “neutralize” the mother tongue influence (MTI) of learners. I felt as if the Indian English pronunciation or accent inherited from the learners’ country of origin was an enemy at the gates, waiting to be tackled by a robust surgical strike from R.P. every now and then, to use a politically loaded and incorrect term!

I was ably aided and assisted by my colleagues, who rushed to explain why accent neutralization was such a valiant linguistic labour of love worth the effort and time, thereby accentuating my helplessness and desperation to sound politically correct. I could only sadly recollect Canagarajah’s (1999) apposite observations about the dangers of unquestioned conformity to norms. According to him, teachers of English experience a state of “schizophrenia” insofar as teaching practices go, with most of them “torn between Center norms and Periphery practice; Center expectations and Periphery classroom conditions; Center expectations and Periphery realities” (Canagarajah, 1999, p. 86).

Yet another reason for the investigation was the cartloads of Ph.D. dissertations on linguistics and phonetics that come to my department for adjudication. All of them invariably focus on the tone, tonality and tonicity of Indian users of English, ranging from school students to college students, with a monotony of theme that is both frustrating and enraging. The recommendations of these dissertations invariably point to the necessity of teaching stress, rhythm and intonation to students to make them “fluent” speakers of English.

Canagarajah, Phillipson, Skuttnabb-Kangas, Pennycook, Cook, Jenkins, and Modiano are among the most consistently active researchers, who have repeatedly questioned the wisdom of persisting with teaching materials and methods that militate against learner needs and preferences in countries that have imported everything from the Centre.

Cook (1999) raises perfectly valid and sensible points when she questions the ideology behind the “native speaker” and “non-native speaker” labels:

Apart from a few die-hard writers of letters to the newspapers, nobody would claim that speakers of Brummy and Glaswegian fail to acquire native speaker language because they were born in Birmingham or Glasgow. Consciously or unconsciously, people proclaim their membership in particular groups through the language they use. However, L2 learners are not supposed to reveal which part of the world they come from; they are considered failures if they have foreign accents, as much research into age differences in language learning assumes (Cook, 1986). Why should English-speaking people who sound as if they come from Houston be accepted as L1 successes when Polish people speaking English are deemed L2 failures for sounding as if they come from Warsaw? (p. 195)

Also many native speakers of English have themselves spoken in favour of jettisoning certain models of pronunciation hatched under laboratory conditions and passed off as best practices with universal validity. This has provided the impetus for revisiting RP and native speaker norms in the ESL lab.

### **THE STUDY**

To seek the opinion of students and teachers about how they perceived the teaching of phonetics from across the globe, a study was conducted that used questionnaires. Two National Institutes of Technology- NIT Warangal and VNIT Nagpur - were chosen for data collection. This was to compare and contrast the situation in NITs.

There were two reasons for choosing NITs. Firstly, at the NIT's, English is taught as a compulsory course to students of first year, who come from across the globe. English is taught as a second language as the students doing the course belong to 55 nationalities, with English in these countries and continents often functioning as a second language to a first or foreign language. For example, there are students from the USA and Canada where English is the first language; from the Middle East where English is a foreign language, and from parts of Asia such as India, Bangladesh, and the Philippines, where English is a second language.

The views elicited from these students therefore represent a fair cross section of the globe and provide insights into what should go into teaching phonetics.

Second, English is taught as an ESP course at NITs, and therefore not all aspects of phonetics that students of other courses learn as part of English curriculum (in B.A. or M.A., for example,) need to be taught to students of engineering.

### **METHOD**

Data for this study was collected from 119 students and 4 teachers across two NITs—NIT Warangal and VNIT, Nagpur. There was a student questionnaire and a teacher questionnaire. The questionnaires were administered during English lab sessions to the teachers as well as the students after assuring them that the information would be used purely for purposes of research.

### **QUESTIONNAIRE FOR STUDENTS**

Data was collected from first year students of engineering for whom English is a compulsory course. The student questionnaire had **one** question, which sought their view(s) on what they wished to be taught. The question was adapted from the norms prescribed by Timmis (2002) and modified. The students were able to express themselves freely as they had the privacy to voice their thoughts and anonymity was guaranteed. The questionnaire carried one question asking the students their preferred model when learning to speak English and the reason(s) behind their choice. The model was presented in the form of two students, A and B, each with their preference for a particular end result with regard to their spoken English. (See appendix for details)

Videos were played showing various accents, following which the students were asked which accent they preferred. They had already been taught segmentals and supra segmental features. For example, students were shown two models, both endorsing native speaker norms. One was Bill Gates' commencement speech at Harvard to show to the learners a sample of General American (Thang Nguyen, 2012), and the other included scenes from the movie *My Fair Lady* (Shanmugamlakshmanam, 2008) to show them RP norms. These included scenes from the movie, such as "*Why Can't the English*" and the famous song "*The Rain in Spain*" , where Professor Higgins makes a case for teaching RP.

As mentioned earlier , data were collected from two NITs with 119 students from both NITs participating in the study. Out of the 119 students, 99 students chose to be student B. The reasons provided were fascinating and ranged from patriotism to resistance to "fake" accent. The students who were patriotic claimed that they would never settle for a foreign accent as it was not needed, and that

their *Indianness* needed to come through in the English they spoke. In fact, in both NITs, the choice was overwhelmingly in favour of student B. A total of 28 students from NIT Warangal and 71 students from **VNIT Nagpur** favoured student B, thereby showing their aversion to speaking English like a “native speaker”.

One student said: “I want to learn the language but not the accent. That accent sounds a little fake & [sic] I don’t want people talking to me [sic] feel awkward because of my accent. I want them to connect to me.”

Yet another student said: “I prefer student B to student A, because I want people to understand my English not my accent. It’s enough if the message I want [sic] to tell them is conveyed, whatever may be the accent.” A third one said : “I would like to be student B, as after all English is a language., [sic] and while speaking any other language, you should not forget where you belong from [sic]. Understanding a language is the foremost criterion, & [sic] if that is fulfilled there is no need of adopting any accent.”

Yet another had this to say: “ I would like to be student B because, though we speak English, having an accent of our country will make [sic] us our own identity. Student A has learned to speak English in [a] native accent but he has lost the identity of his country. While student B can interact in English and also preserved his own identity.

This student had something interesting to say: “ I would prefer to be student B because I would like to have a mark of my own nation or to [sic] the area which I belong. Like the other nations of the world like [sic] American, British, Russian, French and German [sic] have their own mark of accent, [sic], similarly I would also like to have accent of my own soil. As everyone has their accent moulded in their mother tongue, I would also love to have one.”

Those who remonstrated against fake accent explained that there were several accents and British, Australian, New Zealand and American accents were acceptable, there should not be any controversy or unhappiness over the acceptance of other accents. They added that other accents such as Asian or African accents were equally legitimate in their own right.

Many students reacted negatively to the idea of cultivating a British accent because they saw it as alienating and unrelated to their needs. Some rightly averred that meaning was context dependent and did not need stress or intonation.

Those who chose student A were not very clear about their choice. In most cases, they related a native speaker accent with good English and command

over language. One student, who wanted to be like student A, had something interesting to say:

“I would prefer to be like student A. I want to develop an American accent. It looks clear and attractive. In future, when I speak to my clients from America, they need to understand my accent. American accent is also attractive to me. People subconsciously take your words seriously if you have a decent accent, not a funny one.”

This view clearly belongs to someone whose motive is to integrate into the American system or culture and so is perfectly understandable. However what this student was perhaps not very familiar with was that General American, much like RP, is an idealized norm. There are as many accents in the U.S. as there are speakers of English, ranging from the Harlem accent of the African Americans to the Texan accent, and the New York accent of the Whites to the accents of Hispanics, Latinos and other immigrants.

Another student had something equally interesting to say about being like student A. According to him: “ I would definitely prefer being A. In today’s world, English is [a] very important language. At an international level, it is the only way one can express themselves effectively. Many a time the accent of an individual becomes a barrier in his/her communication leading to a communication gap. Also an improper accent can lead to a bad first impression among colleagues or schoolmates. Also at the top level of a company, i.e. board of directors & [sic] panellists, an employee needs to be presentable not only through his grammar but also through his diction and accent. Lastly I would conclude that there is nothing wrong in having an accent of one’s country but one needs to be perfect at what one learns and accent is an essential part of the language hence it [sic] study and and [sic] use in language is very essential.”

In the case of this student, what merits attention is the inherent belief that one variety/accnt is possibly better than others, and that is what perhaps led him to believe in the existence of one superior variety. Perfection for him connotes mastering RP or general American, a belief that was introduced at the time of colonialism and which continues to have its supporters. Somehow fluency in English seemed synonymous with acquiring an accent, preferably the “standard” variety.

### **QUESTIONNAIRE FOR TEACHERS**

Data were collected from 4 teachers, two each from NIT Warangal and VNIT Nagpur. All of whom had doctorates in ELT and had teaching experiences ranging

from two years to several years.

The teacher questionnaire featured two questions that sought the view of the teachers on what kind of models (native speaker models or intelligible Indian English model or any model that aimed at English that is intelligible to the listener) they aspired to emulate and why. The questions were adapted from Middleton (2017) and Timmis (2002) and modified to suit the needs of the study. The first question asked the teacher about the native speaker model the teachers could aim for (if they so wished) and the second pertaining to the model they would recommend to their students when teaching phonetics (see appendix for details).

Out of four teachers, three said they were happy to sound like a non-native speakers and what was more important was how they reached out to their students intelligibly, for which RP was neither necessary nor desirable. They also agreed that the most important parameter to judge speech was “comfortable intelligibility” (Abercrombie, 1991), and it really did not matter which accent the students were exposed to as long as their English was intelligible.

Jenkins (1998) acknowledges as much: “rigid stress-timing is no more than a convenient fiction for classroom practice” and that English may be moving “towards the syllable-timed end of the stress/syllable-timing continuum, under the influence of other world languages in general and of rap music in particular.” (p. 123)

In the words of one teacher: “I feel comfortable in teaching my students English retaining the accent of my state. Moreover, students from any state will not have any problem understanding my English if I speak it clearly.”

Yet another teacher said : “In Indian context, it is important for the students to be exposed to any and all types of accent as they have to comprehend and respond to a variety of input. The whole point of communication is to express, and not to impress. As long as the message is received, interpreted and conveyed correctly, any accent will suffice.”

Teachers were also in agreement that “English is no longer a language of native speakers alone. It is important to accept and acknowledge the non-native [*sic*] speakers as well.”

One teacher said that though he was comfortable with his Indian accent, he would nevertheless teach RP because that was the recommended model. He added that left to himself, he would be happy with any model that promised intelligibility. The demands of the syllabus meant that he had to teach RP and supra-segmental

features. At both NITs, the choice was loud and clear: clear and intelligible English was the preferred model and the aim, teachers opined, was to use/speak English such that the message was unambiguously transmitted.

All teachers rightly said that it would be unwise to push RP or any other external norm down the throats of learners when it was wholly redundant.

### **CONCLUSIONS**

This study carries important implications for teachers of English.

1. It is essential that students acquire thorough knowledge of the speech sounds of a language because this is important when using words where mispronunciation can lead to miscommunication. However this knowledge needs to be imparted minus value judgements about superiority or inferiority of dialects or models.
2. Teaching the 44 sounds of English language is necessary since learners would know how many speech sounds there are in English and how these differ from the sounds of their own language. Besides, the sounds would allow learners to exercise their choice in arriving at a pronunciation model they are comfortable with. Treating RP and/or General American as a model would be useful since models offer guidance. However, viewing RP/General American as the norm is undesirable as the norm is seen as “invariable and has to be imitated independently of any considerations of language use” (Jenkins, 1998, p. 124).
3. It is essential to teach only what is necessary and leave out what may cause difficulty in learning and possibly push students off the learning curve. Arabic speakers of English in my class, for example, would always substitute /p/ for /b/ since Arabic does not have the /p/ sound! It was always *beoble* (people), *bresent* (*present*) and *bebsi* (*pepsi*) as far as these speakers were concerned, and it was easy to see why. Likewise, Bengali and Oriya speakers of English would inevitably substitute /b/ in place of /v/ so much so that *have* would sound like *habe* and *welcome* like *belcome*. According to a thought provoking article by David Lavelle, this is a problem that every non-native speaker of a second/foreign language faces as it takes some time to get used to a foreign/unfamiliar pronunciation

Getting students to actively participate in group discussions and debates is more important than correcting their pronunciation every time they speak as overt correction causes inhibition and is damaging to their sense of self-



worth. Speaking is surely the most significant activity that learners need to hone in order to overcome diffidence and that can only happen if the insecurity that learners experience with respect to their accent is brought down. A very illuminating example can be found in Halliday (1968), as cited in Cook (1999):

A speaker who is made ashamed of his own language habits suffers a basic injury as a human being: to make anyone, especially a child, feel so ashamed is as indefensible as to make him feel ashamed of the color of his skin. (p. 195)

4. Teaching students suprasegmental features is an exercise in futility. Students use RP only when compelled, in the English lab, or under compulsion. Once out of class, it is their local accent that takes over. Also, one cannot hope to correct the pronunciation acquired over two decades in one semester. To cite Jenkins (1998), it is common knowledge that rules of word stress are:

... highly complex, containing manifold differences among L1 varieties and according to syntactic context. Some words, e.g. ‘controversy’, ‘ice cream’, even have optional stress patterns within Received Pronunciation (RP), the standard British pronunciation. Reliable rules therefore cannot be easily formulated, let alone learnt. (p. 123)

In the MITs, phonetics is taught to students of engineering who have little use for the rules or nuances of English stress, rhythm and intonation, especially considering that they learn it for just one semester. Hence, no useful purpose is served by teaching suprasegmental features, a point that has been seconded by Rajadurai (2001) in her investigation of Malaysian learners of English. Her study showed that “while supra-segmental features helped them understand native speaker accents, students did not particularly find these features useful for their own pronunciation” (p.17).

Not to stress too fine the point about rhythm and intonation, and extrapolating the prescient views of the late Raja Rao, it will not be out of place to emphasize that, we cannot and should not speak English like the English. We can only speak it like Indians. Acknowledging the legitimacy of non-native varieties of English is the first but very significant step towards ensuring respectability for English spoken in different parts of the globe, each with its distinctive features.

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**APPENDIX**

**(A) Student questionnaire**

Student A: “I want to learn to speak English like a native speaker now. I am proud to speak like one.”

Student B: “I can pronounce English clearly now. People understand my English wherever I go, but I still have the accent of my country/state/of my first language.”

Please underline one answer.

Would you prefer to be like Student A or Student B? Explain why in brief.

**(B) Teacher questionnaire**

**I: Which teacher would you prefer to be like?**

(Teacher A) I want to sound like a native speaker to both native speaker and non-native speaker students.

(Teacher B): I can speak English clearly, but I retain a clear accent of my state/country.

Please explain the reasons for your answer.

**II. Choose the statement you most agree with:**

(A) Students should only be exposed to a native-speaker accent of English in the classroom and should learn that accent.

(B) It is enough if students are exposed to a non-native local accent that is comprehensible.

(C) It doesn't matter which accent the students are exposed to as long as their English is intelligible.

Please explain the reasons for your answer.

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