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Accents in Varieties of English: A Study of the Degree of Preference for and Intelligibility of Varieties of Spoken English among ESL undergraduates at the University of Kelaniya

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Abstract

This study investigates the perceptions of Sri Lankan English as a Second Language (ESL) students regarding the pronunciation of English in various global contexts, based on Kachru's model of concentric circles. Kachru's model categorizes English usage into Inner Circle (native-speaking countries), Outer Circle (where English is a second language) and Expanding Circle (where English is a foreign language) regions. The research aims to gauge how Sri Lankan ESL students assess the pronunciation and accents of English speakers from these circles. The study employed listening tasks where students rated their preferences for accents and assessed their intelligibility. Results revealed that students favored the accent of Inner Circle speakers but found the accent of Outer Circle speakers to be the most intelligible. Semi-structured interviews added depth to these findings. These results highlight the importance of introducing ESL students to different varieties of English. This exposure helps them become aware of linguistic differences among non-native English speakers and facilitates the development of mutual intelligibility. It underscores the necessity for linguistic diversity in education to prepare students for effective communication in the globalized world, where English serves as a lingua franca across diverse regions. Ultimately, the study emphasizes the significance of embracing the diverse English accents and pronunciations that exist worldwide to foster successful international communication.

Keywords: accent, intelligibility, pronunciation, varieties of english

Introduction

The pioneering model of “World Englishes,” proposed by Kachru in the mid-1980s, categorizes English speaking countries into three concentric circles: the Inner Circle, the Outer Circle, and the Expanding Circle. The Inner Circle comprises countries where English is spoken as a native language, such as the USA, the UK, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. The Outer Circle includes countries with historical ties to British colonialism, where English functions as a second language in social and governmental contexts; these countries include Sri Lanka, India, Malaysia, Singapore, Ghana, and Kenya, among others. The Expanding Circle consists of countries where English is introduced as a foreign language in educational institutions, primarily for communication with the Inner and Outer Circles. Examples include Turkey, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Japan, China, and Korea. While this categorization highlights distinct sociolinguistic environments, it has been critiqued for oversimplifying complex linguistic realities. Scholars like Thiru Kandiah (1989) have questioned the self-evident nature of these categories, emphasizing the need to critically engage with such problematization rather than presenting the model as uncontested. However, these varieties of English differ significantly in grammar, vocabulary, accent, and discourse, reflecting unique characteristics in pronunciation, tone, intonation, and spelling shaped by their sociocultural contexts. While English is the first language for only around 25% of the world’s English speakers, its prominence as a global lingua franca is largely driven by non-native speakers who use it to communicate across cultural and linguistic boundaries (Choomthong & Manowong, 2020). As a result, the emergence and diversification of English varieties, both among native speakers and non-native speakers, have become a significant focus in contemporary sociolinguistics,

reflecting how English adapts to different cultural and linguistic contexts (Kortmann & Schneider, 2004). Therefore, English language learners need to identify the differences in language use in various parts of the world.

Statement of the problem

There are certain subdivisions/ dialects of a language which render intercommunication impossible or markedly difficult. Therefore, the question of which varieties should be learned by non-native learners of English has become a widely discussed area among English language teachers (Gnutzmann 2005). In most cases, the English language is a contact language between people who share neither a common native tongue nor a common national culture and for whom English is an additional language. Jenkins (2006) stresses the need for English language learners to be ready for communication with speakers of those diverse varieties of English. In the 21st century, globalization has positioned effective communication in English as a critical skill, equipping individuals to navigate the demands and challenges of contemporary life (McArthur, 2001). Thus, it is important for English language learners to observe the differences in its varieties. The present paper is an attempt to explore the characteristics of some commonly used varieties of the English Language and to study the degree of preference for and intelligibility of various English accents among first-year undergraduates studying at the Faculty of Humanities, University of Kelaniya.

Research questions

The study adapted suggestions from Sung (2015) and Galloway & Rose (2014) to select and prepare listening materials. Concerning the varieties of English provided to the selected ESL undergraduates as

supplementary listening materials, the researcher formulated the following research questions:

- 1) To what degree do ESL undergraduates understand and prefer the speech of different varieties of English?
- 2) What perceptions do ESL undergraduates have toward the pronunciation of different varieties of English?

Research objectives

With the establishment of “World Englishes”, ESL and EFL learners from different parts of the world have to understand the pronunciation of varieties of the English language other than their own. However, it seems that Sri Lankan ESL students are most frequently exposed to native-speakers’ speech, especially when they face listening tests in international examinations. According to Martin (2009), English films, television programs, and pop music also have an impact on many people, especially younger audiences who are likely to prefer either British or American English accents to their own accents. Therefore, the main objective of the current study is to explore students’ perceptions of the pronunciation of different varieties of English. Thus, it is expected that students will develop an awareness of the varieties of English through listening activities focused on different varieties of English.

Review of Literature

English as a Lingua Franca

The term “English as a lingua franca” refers to the situation in which English is used as a contact language among speakers who come from different first language and cultural backgrounds (Jenkins, 2004). According to Jenkins (2012), the English language has functioned as the

means of communication among speakers of different languages for many centuries. Thus, Bieswanger (2007) suggests that 21st-century speakers and learners of English have to be linguistically, socio-linguistically, and pragmatically equipped in order to communicate with native and non-native speakers of English from various regional, social, and cultural backgrounds. Additionally, Kirkpatrick (2011) points out that English is used as a lingua franca in many Asian countries. He suggests possible methods for the English language teaching and learning process, where many different languages are used, calling it the “multilingual model.” According to his study, in Asian communities, native-like competence and pronunciation is no longer the ultimate goal of English language learners. So, there is no need for a multilingual person to sound like a native speaker when using English in a lingua franca context. Similarly, Thiru Kandiah (1999) emphasizes the importance of recognizing the diverse linguistic realities of multilingual speakers, arguing that the emphasis on native-like standards marginalizes the unique communicative strategies of non-native speakers. Both Kandiah and Kirkpatrick advocate for a paradigm shift in English language education, prioritizing intelligibility and functionality over adherence to native-speaker norms.

In the Sri Lankan context, Chandra (2009) has explored how English in Sri Lanka functions as a hybridized variety influenced by local languages and cultural practices. He argues that Sri Lankan English (SLE) reflects a distinct identity that cannot be fully aligned with native-English norms. The use of SLE in both formal and informal settings demonstrates the growing acceptance of non-native varieties of English as valid means of communication. This aligns with Kirkpatrick’s and Kandiah’s views on prioritizing communication and cultural relevance over rigid adherence to

native-speaker standards, advocating for a more inclusive approach to English language teaching in multilingual societies.

Intelligibility

Kachru and Smith (2008) define the ability to understand a language as consisting of three elements: intelligibility, comprehensibility, and interpretability. According to them, intelligibility, which is focused on in the current study, is the ability to identify a word or another sentence-level element of an expression. Furthermore, Kenworthy (1987) perceives intelligibility as the quality of being understood by a listener at a given time in a given situation. In this regard, the process of intelligibility implies that the more words a listener can identify accurately when uttered by a particular speaker, the more intelligible that speaker is.

Varieties of English

According to sociolinguistics, language variety is a general term for any distinctive form of a language or linguistic expression (Nordquist, 2020). Linguists usually consider language variety as a cover term for any of the overlapping subcategories of a language, including dialect, register, jargon, and idiolect. The widespread use of the English language and its increasing role as a Lingua Franca have resulted in a drastic change in the sociolinguistic background of English (Galloway & Rose, 2014). Most importantly, since English is used for communicative purposes across borders, different varieties of English are widely used among speakers who share a different first language.

It is significant, then, to increase awareness among Sri Lankan ESL students about the pronunciation of different varieties of English as they live in a world where English crosses national boundaries. It brings people

together from different language backgrounds and cultures. Thus, it is necessary to identify the roles and functions of the different varieties of English. With reference to the “ownership” of English, Kachru (1992) has stated that English should be treated as a denationalized language in the sense that it belongs internationally. Furthermore, Widdowson (1994) also points out that English no longer belongs to native speakers of the language but to anyone who uses it. So, native speaker norms do not seem to apply to the world today.

Pronunciation of different varieties of English as perceived by Non-Native Speakers of English

Previous research has been conducted on learner attitudes towards varieties of English in non-native English-speaking countries. In some studies, it has been found that participants favour the English language used by native speakers of English who belong to the Inner Circle (IC) in Kachru’s concentric circles model. Kanoksilapatham (2013) analysed 387 Thai university students’ attitudes and aspirations regarding their pronunciation models. It was found that students held more favorable attitudes toward the model of native speakers, which differed from the expectations of the researcher. Additionally, it is suggested in her study that Thai EFL teachers strike a balance between promoting a high standard of English in the classroom and exposing learners to other varieties of English. In another, previous research study conducted in the Malaysian context, Pilus (2013) analysed 34 ESL students’ opinions concerning British, American, and Malaysian English accents and found that these students, for the most part, preferred British English. However, the students rated the Malaysian English accent highly for pleasantness followed by the British and American accents. Malaysian English was also rated the highest

for familiarity compared to both British and American accents. Therefore, the high acknowledgment given to the Malaysian English accent in terms of pleasantness and familiarity is a sign that Malaysian ESL students are comfortable with their native accents.

Moreover, Pollard (2010) surveyed 10 South Korean learners of English to recognize which varieties of English are considered to be appropriate and explored the notion of perceived intelligibility. Even though his study was incomplete due to the relatively small sample size, the participants have mentioned, with a high degree of significance, that they prefer General American English, perceiving it as the most intelligible. Further, South Korean English was reported as intelligible in terms of familiarity because Korean learners of English received large degrees of exposure to Korean English.

Furthermore, Galloway and Rose (2014) conducted a study to raise awareness of ‘world Englishes’ among third-year and fourth-year EFL undergraduates at a Japanese university. The participants were given a list of listening materials and asked to listen to the EFL interactions provided and write a reflective journal about what they had heard. The findings of the study revealed that the participants were interested in listening to and communicating with speakers from different cultural-linguistic backgrounds. Significantly, they preferred American English, which is an inner circle variety, although they were also interested in the varieties of English used in the Outer Circle and Expanding Circle of Kachru’s Concentric Circles of world Englishes. Moreover, it was found that listening journals could be a useful tool in exposing students to ‘Englishes’ and allowing them to distinguish the importance of mutual intelligibility.

Implementing the Pronunciation of Different Varieties of English in the Classroom

In order to familiarise English language learners with new varieties of English, more examples of the accents of non-native speakers can be employed in ESL or EFL classrooms. Sung (2015) brought different varieties of English into the language classroom by using listening tasks spoken by non-native English speakers. He interviewed students in his course titled *Varieties of English*, about the accents of non-native English speakers. As a major finding, he stated that participants seemed to appreciate different varieties of English and developed a deeper understanding of the sociolinguistic reality of English today. In his paper, he presented some advice to introduce Global English (GE) to students within the classroom in order to raise their awareness of it. According to that study, motivating listening materials must be selected by the teachers as the first step. Secondly, using “scripted” ELF conversations, which are recorded by speakers from different L1 backgrounds, alongside “authentic” materials, should be considered. Overall, Sung (2015) suggests that it is important to introduce students to the sociolinguistic backgrounds of English around the world and provide them with some information concerning the varieties of English.

Galloway and Rose (2014) assembled Internet-based resources for their students to observe the use of listening journals in raising awareness of the diversity of English. In their methodology, they prepared digital audio and video recordings of speakers from different L1 backgrounds and countries as alternative resources to increase student exposure to the diversity of English. These ideas can be used by teachers who are planning to introduce different varieties of English in order to increase their students’ exposure to the diversity of English

Significance of the study

The significance of this study lies in its potential to influence the pronunciation habits of ESL undergraduates at the Faculty of Humanities, University of Kelaniya. Since these students have limited exposure to the concept of *World Englishes*, their pronunciation habits are likely to be shaped by a narrow range of English varieties, often favoring either British or American English due to traditional teaching methods and media influence. However, the absence of prior studies examining their preferences for and intelligibility of different English accents means that there is little understanding of how these students perceive and adapt to global variations in English pronunciation.

By investigating their degree of preference for and intelligibility of different English varieties, this research study provides insights into how exposure, or the lack thereof, affects students' pronunciation habits. If students demonstrate a strong preference for certain accents while struggling to comprehend others, this suggests that their pronunciation development is limited by their familiarity with only a few dominant varieties. This drawback, in turn, may hinder their ability to communicate effectively in diverse international contexts, where multiple English accents coexist.

The study contributes toward changing this situation by raising awareness of *World Englishes* and encouraging a more inclusive approach to pronunciation learning. By exposing students to a wider range of English accents, it promotes the idea that intelligibility should be prioritized over strict adherence to a single "standard" accent. As a result, students may develop a more flexible and adaptable pronunciation style, enabling them to communicate more effectively in global settings. Additionally, the study's findings can inform curriculum development,

encouraging educators to integrate diverse varieties of English into pronunciation training and listening exercises. Ultimately, this research serves as a step toward broadening students' perspectives on English pronunciation, fostering greater linguistic acceptance, and equipping them with the skills needed to navigate the arena of globalized English communication.

Methodology

The participants of the study included 45 first-year undergraduates who had enrolled in the course; English for Humanities which is offered by the Department of English Language Teaching, University of Kelaniya. They were all Sri Lankans whose first language is Sinhala. A questionnaire was employed to gather quantitative data adapted from the survey developed by Pollard (2010). Participants were instructed to listen to each speech sample once and subsequently rate their perceptions of the accents, using a scale from 1 (worst) to 5 (best). Additionally, they were asked to evaluate the intelligibility of each speaker, with a scale ranging from 1 (hardest to understand) to 5 (easiest to understand).

The listening materials used for the study were weather forecast segments from news broadcasts in the UK, India, and Russia, representing the Inner Circle (IC), Outer Circle (OC), and Expanding Circle (EC) of Kachru's model, respectively. The content and context of all three segments were similar, as they each focused on weather forecasts, ensuring comparability. The primary distinction among the materials was the accent of the speakers, reflecting the variety of English associated with each of the three concentric circles. The content of the weather forecast segments included general weather updates such as temperature, precipitation, and other meteorological information which are commonly found in news

broadcasts. Regarding the accents, the British accent was similar to a standard Received Pronunciation (RP) accent, while the Indian and Russian accents represented a variety influenced by regional languages and English as spoken in India and Russia. It is important to note that these accents are not homogenous across each country, as there are significant regional variations in the UK, Russia and India. Additionally, the gender identities of the speakers varied, with one male and one female speaker from each country, ensuring a diverse representation of both gender and accent.

Each audio clip lasted 1–2 minutes and was compiled from online resources; in particular, they were unscripted to allow more exposure to real language use. They were played only once because, as Pollard (2010) argues, further exposure to any given sample may increase its perceived intelligibility level. The listening tasks were completed within the classroom once a week for a period of one month.

The participants' written responses to the listening tasks regarding their awareness of varieties of English pronunciation were recorded and to collect more accurate information, they were informed that they could write reflective notes relating to accent perception and perceived intelligibility while listening to each audio sample. Moreover, semi-structured interviews were also used to obtain qualitative data and these were conducted in Sinhala to allow the participants to expand on their ideas and opinions and to provide supportive evidence for the quantitative data.

Descriptive statistics were used to analyse the quantitative data (Likert scale data) for the mean and standard deviation which provided the summary of the findings. Furthermore, thematic analysis was used to analyse the qualitative data drawn from participants' written responses and interviews.

Findings

Findings from the Questionnaires

The results revealed that the variety of English that was perceived by the participants to possess the most favourable accent was the English spoken by the speaker from the IC, which was a British news reading. However, English spoken by the speaker from the OC, which was in the group of countries that the students themselves belonged to, was perceived as the most intelligible.

As indicated in Table 1 below, when participants were asked to rank their preference for each speech, going from the best accent to the worst accent, the British News reading which belongs to IC English was deemed to be the most preferable (M=3.32), followed by OC English which was represented by an Indian News reading (M=2.98) and thereafter, by EC English which was represented by a Russian News reading (M=2.74). The participants rated how easy it was to understand each speaker as they listened to each clip; the results are provided in Table 1 and indicate that OC English, which was represented by the Indian News reading, was thought to be the most understandable (M=2.84), followed by IC (M=2.74) and then EC (M=2.71) English, respectively.

The mean scores used to summarize the data from the Likert scale are interpreted as follows: Excellent was defined as 4.21–5.00, good as 3.4–4.20, middling as 2.6–1.30, poor as 1.8–2.60, and extremely poor as 1.00–1.80. The data from Table 1 below thus demonstrates that the participants preferred and understood different varieties of English used by speakers from the IC, OC, and EC, to a moderate extent.

Table 1: Participants’ Perceptions of Preferences and Intelligibility

Variety	Perceptions	Mean	Std. Deviation	Meaning
IC	Preference	3.32	1.30	Moderate
	Intelligibility	2.74	1.18	moderate
OC	Preference	2.98	1.30	Moderate
	Intelligibility	2.84	1.31	moderate
EC	Preference	2.74	1.17	Moderate
	Intelligibility	2.71	1.16	moderate

Findings from the Reflective Notes and the Interviews

The reflective notes and responses to the interviews were used to answer the second research question regarding the participants’ perception of the varieties of English spoken by the three speakers from the IC, OC, and EC of Kachru’s concentric model of world Englishes.

Accordingly, the data obtained from the participants’ reflective notes revealed that they tended to prefer English spoken by the speaker from the IC, which is regarded as the prominent model among them. For instance, participant A had this to say: “Perfect. Though I can understand a bit, I like this accent....” and Participant B stated that “It is pleasant to hear and it sounds like a melody”.

In addition to favouring the native English accent, most of the participants did not have any trouble understanding the variety of English from the OC. Some of them reported the following: : Participant C – “Indian English is similar to Sri Lankan English and I find it easy to understand”, Participant D - “She speaks quite well and her talk is easy for me to understand and Participant E – “English with Indian accent is very clear for me and I can understand the NEWS very well”.

According to the aforementioned comments, participants' perceptions of the variety of English were influenced by their acquaintance with certain dialects. However, the Russian News reading, which represented a reading from an EC country, was seen as containing unfavourable accents and being difficult to understand by most of the participants. Many of them had negative opinions on this variety of English. For example, Participant F – “I don't understand the Russian lady's words”, Participant G – “It's hard to catch the meaning from such pronunciation”, and Participant H – “It sounds like Greek which I understood nothing”. This may be because Sri Lankan students were unfamiliar with other varieties of English, especially Russian English.

In addition, some respondents referred to the rate or speed of speaking when describing their difficulty in understanding the other varieties of English. Many of them spoke about how the speed of each News reading affected its intelligibility. Since the speakers of the other varieties of English spoke at a rapid pace, several participants found the clips particularly difficult to understand. They expressed their frustration in much the same manner as Participant C- “The Russian News reader speaks like a rapper. I don't understand her at all and I dislike this accent” and Participant E- “I don't understand much of British News because he speaks too fast”. The News readings used in the study were unscripted and played back at regular speed. So, the rate of speech has accounted for the participants' unfavourable feedback about some varieties of English.

Furthermore, all participants of the study were invited to an interview in order to cross-check their attitudes and perspectives as well as their views on the intelligibility of different varieties of English, along with their written responses. Out of 45 participants, only 6 volunteered to take part in the interviews. Significantly, the data from the interviews correlate

with the conclusions drawn from the descriptive statistics. Thus, this data offer a potentially interesting and complementary perspective to the quantitative findings.

The participants in the interviews appeared to gain an awareness of English Language variations after completing the given listening tasks. According to them, no matter what the variety of English is, as long as verbal communication takes place, even when English is spoken in a range of accents, the communication is successful. Additionally, the majority of participants valued the listening materials of the non-native English speakers and urged the teacher to include additional non-native English speakers' audio clips to help them develop their listening skills. The inclusion of listening materials from three different varieties of English has made the participants aware that English is not just spoken by native speakers, and have realised that in order to communicate effectively, they need to have exposure to different varieties of the English language. The participants also expressed a greater sense of comfort with their Sri Lankan accent, as they perceived it to be less unfavourable compared to other accents within different varieties of English.

However, a "native-like" English accent, which refers to the variety of English spoken in nations like Britain and the United States, was the most preferred accent among the participants. They believed that speaking with a native-like accent, such as a British or American one, was prestigious and demonstrated a high level of education. One participant mentioned that "having native-like pronunciation can show that I am well-educated." On the other hand, the majority of participants associated the fact that they could understand the News reading of the Indian speaker and could not grasp the British and Russian News readings with the fact that

they were more exposed to Indian English, which is somewhat similar to Sri Lankan English, rather than to British English or Russian English.

Pedagogical Implications

In terms of the preference for English pronunciation, the findings of these studies: Pollard (2010), Kanoksilapatham (2013), Pilus (2013), Galloway and Rose (2014), and Manusya (2020) are consistent with the findings of the current study. In other words, it became apparent that many participants preferred the variety of English used in the inner circle of Kachru's concentric model of 'World Englishes'. Further, according to Nelson (2006), becoming comprehensible is made easier by prolonged exposure to a particular accent. Similarly, the participants of the present study also stated that mastering its English pronunciation is needed in order to comprehend a particular variety of English.

According to the results of the interviews, several participants seemed to value the listening materials provided by non-native English speakers since they stated that it would help them feel comfortable with other varieties of English, in addition to the variety they often use. Thus, the inclusion of non-native listening materials in an English lesson can help learners feel more comfortable with different varieties of the English language. Also, it is crucial for English language teachers to teach their students how to speak English well in order to ensure mutual intelligibility. As a result, non-native English teachers should be encouraged to teach in English classes or to offer extracurricular activities using modern technology like the Internet to give students opportunities to interact with speakers of English around the world.

This research further revealed that the participants were more accustomed to the listening recording of the British speaker, likely due to

their greater exposure to British English through social media, education, and global communication. As a result, the British accent was more familiar and easier for the participants to understand, contributing to their comfort with the recording. Therefore, it is quite understandable why many participants preferred to listen to native English speakers. Hence, it may be difficult for other varieties of English to gain ground if Sri Lankan youngsters are exposed often to American and British popular culture.

The findings of numerous studies, such as those by Pollard (2010), Kanoksilapatham (2013), Pilus (2013), Galloway and Rose (2014), Manusya (2020), and the current study, show that students have more positive attitudes towards native speakers' English pronunciation, a finding which mismatches with the expectations of teachers and academics. According to Kirkpatrick (2011), there is no need for a multilingual person who is using English in lingua franca contexts to sound like a native speaker of English. However, it could take some time and effort on the part of English language teachers to influence their students' perceptions of different varieties of the English language and inspire them to value all of them.

Ultimately, this study underscores the need for a balanced approach to pronunciation teaching—one that acknowledges students' existing preferences while gradually exposing them to the linguistic reality of World Englishes. While native-like pronunciation remains an aspiration for many learners, fostering a mindset that values intelligibility over conformity to native norms can better prepare students for global communication. This shift in perspective will not only empower learners to navigate diverse linguistic settings but also contribute to a more inclusive understanding of English as a truly international language.

Limitations

A notable limitation of this study is its heavy reliance on a small sample of listening materials, restricted to weather forecast segments from only three countries representing the Inner, Outer, and Expanding Circles of Kachru's model. This limited scope may not fully capture the diversity and complexity of the varieties of English within each circle. Furthermore, the study focuses solely on accents without considering other factors, such as speech rate, intonation, or cultural context, which could also influence participants' perceptions and comprehension. Additionally, while gender diversity was included among the speakers, the study did not explore whether participants' reactions were influenced by gender-specific perceptions. Finally, the participants' familiarity with British English through prior exposure may have biased their evaluations, limiting the generalizability of the findings to contexts where exposure to British English is less prevalent. Future research could address these limitations by including a broader range of speech samples, exploring additional linguistic features, and diversifying participant demographics.

Conclusion

This study examined the perception and intelligibility of varieties of English by Sri Lankan ESL students through News readings of speakers from Kachru's IC, OC, and EC countries. The results revealed that English spoken by the speaker from the OC was perceived as the most intelligible. However, the variety of English that was perceived to have the most favourable accent was English spoken by the speaker from the IC, which corresponds to the finding of Nazari (2014). Though this is a small-scale research study, its findings indicate that it is important for English teachers to introduce their students to varieties of English in order to make them

aware of linguistic differences in the way English is used by non-native English speakers, to help them develop a degree of mutual intelligibility as well as have them realize the broader roles and functions of English in today's society as a medium of global communication in multilingual contexts.

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