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ESL Learners' Attitudes toward Pronunciation Instruction and Varieties of English

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There is an increasing need for a comprehensive understanding of accent on the part of both instructors and learners. However, researchers in Applied Linguistics have paid little attention to learners' perceptions of pronunciation instruction in L2 contexts. The current study identified adult ESL learners' perspectives of pronunciation studies in the inner circle countries. It reported on students' expectations of their pronunciation lessons and their attitudes toward instructors' accent varieties in the environment of speaking English in New Zealand (NZ) and North America (US). Two hundred thirty eight ESL students participated in interviews and questionnaire surveys. The results of the investigation showed that students in NZ, compared to those in the US, were more dissatisfied with their current curriculum of learning pronunciation due to misunderstanding of various models and accents of pronunciation made available to them. These results suggest that students' perceived needs should be better synchronized in ESL contexts. The implications of this study regarding the relations among pronunciation training, learner perceptions, and accent variety extend beyond the immediate setting in NZ and US higher education, and in fact pertain to the teaching of World Englishes in every nation.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Recently, the role of English as an international language (EIL) has introduced different perspectives to the field of TESOL. The terminology "English as..." refers to proposals that have evolved to describe the increasing amount of communication among speakers that have English as a second language (L2) (Erling, 2005). Modiano (2001), for example, calls EIL an "alternative to standard English", providing a space where speakers can be "culturally, politically, and socially neutral" (p.170). Undoubtedly, Kachru's (1992) model of the spread of English is one of the most influential proposals for the use of English in the world. Kachru divides World Englishes into three concentric circles, the Inner Circle, the Outer Circle, and the Expanding Circle. These three circles represent the types of spread, the patterns of acquisition, and the functional allocation of English in diverse cultural contexts (Jenkins, 2003). The Inner Circle comprises countries where English is historically the first language to be spoken such as the United Kingdom (UK), America, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. The Outer Circle comprises ESL countries where English has a long history of "institutionalized functions standing as a language of wide and important roles" such as India, South Africa, and Nigeria (Kachru & Nelson, 2001, p. 13). Finally, the English spoken in the Expanding Circle is called English as a foreign language. In this context, English has various roles and is widely studied but

for more specific purposes than in the outer circle, including reading knowledge for scientific and technical purpose. Examples of such countries include China, Korean, Iran, Nepal, and Japan.

In light of the internalization of English, the goal of global intelligibility has been emphasized over mastery of a particular native accent (Crystal, 2003; Jenkins, 2000, 2006). In terms of pronunciation teaching, an international version of English, called the ‘lingua franca core,’ has been suggested as a more realistic model. Jenkins (2000, 2002) has argued that learners of English as an international language should not adapt to native speaker (NS) norms but should adjust their speech to suit an audience of primarily nonnative speakers (NNSs). There is also quite wide acceptance that ownership of English no longer belongs just with the inner-circle countries (Kirkpatrick, 2008), given that there are more second language (L2) speakers of English than native speakers (Crystal, 2003; Modiano, 2001; Yano, 2001). In fact, adult L2 learners rarely achieve native-like speech patterns (Moyer, 2004; Scovel, 2000), and native-like pronunciation among those who acquire an L2 after early childhood is difficult to achieve in typical ESL classrooms. Accordingly, scholars such as Derwing and Munro (2005) or Goodwin (2001) argue that teachers should help ESL learners to set realistic goals for pronunciation instruction because if we target native-like accents we may even set our students up for failure.

Among ESL learners, however, there still seems to be a tendency to set inner-circle standards for their own speech. In a study of 100 adult ESL learners in Canada, Derwing (2003) found that the overwhelming majority considered speaking with perfectly native pronunciation to be a desirable goal. Timmis (2002) surveyed around 400 learners among 45 countries and reported that learners preferred to strive for inner-circle norms in their pronunciation. Scales, Wennerstrom, Richard, and Wu’s (2006) study revealed that more than half (62%) of the learners wanted to sound like a native English speaker, even though only 29% were able to correctly identify the American accent.

At the same time, studies have suggested that many learners even prefer to model certain inner circle standards such as Received Pronunciation (RP) or General American (GA). Bayard, Gallois, Ray, Weatherall, & Sullivan (2002) found that students from Europe or Southeast Asia particularly preferred GA. In addition, Bayard’s several other attitudinal studies (1990, 1995, 2001) showed that students rated New Zealand English least favorably, compared to other inner-circle models such as Australian English, GA, and RP. Dalton-Puffer, Kaltenboeck, and Smit’s (1997) study showed that EFL learners performed better and rated RP most highly when they listened to speech samples of both NS and NNS of RP and GA.

Given these trends, questions arise regarding learners’ perspective toward English varieties in inner-circle countries themselves. Which varieties of English should serve as instructional models for pronunciation? Are learners’ reactions still positive if they are exposed to a different variety of inner-circle models? The effects of accent on people’s attitude have been studied for several decades (e.g., Bradac, 1990; Derwing, 2003; Kang & Rubin, 2009; Lippi-Green, 1997; Ryan & Carranza, 1975). These studies have often focused on native speakers’ (NS) biases with

nonnative speakers' (NNS) accented speech. Their findings reported that listeners tended to assess NNS accent more negatively than speech that was perceived to be standard. However, researchers in Applied Linguistics have paid little attention to learners' perceptions of pronunciation instruction in ESL contexts in general. A comprehensive understanding of accent varieties on the part of learners is warranted.

This current study reported on adult ESL learners' expectations of their pronunciation lessons and their attitudes toward instructors' accent varieties in the environment of speaking English in New Zealand (NZ) and North America (US). It further identified students' overall perspectives of pronunciation instruction and acquisition in the inner-circle countries. The study started with a broad question: What are the perceptions of ESL learners in studying pronunciation in inner-circle countries? Then, it was guided by two research questions:

- (1) Is there any difference between ESL learners' expectations of their pronunciation lessons in New Zealand and those in North America?
- (2) Is there any difference between ESL learners' attitudes toward instructors' English accents in New Zealand and those in North America?

METHOD

Participants

The participants were 238 adult ESL students from language institutes in two inner-circle countries. One hundred fifteen were studying in ESL programs in Auckland, NZ and 123 in Arizona and in Georgia, in the US. They came from 14 different language backgrounds; the largest first language groups were Mandarin (n=64), Korean (n=58), Japanese (42). All had at least a high school education, and were placed into language classes according to ESL proficiency tests developed by the language institutes. In the NZ setting, there were 84 females and 31 males aged from 19 to 40. Twenty-five of them volunteered to be interviewed after filling out the open-ended/scalar-response surveys. Twenty-two percent were placed in beginners' level; 53 percent in intermediate, 25 percent in high-intermediate and advanced. In the US setting, there were 77 females and 46 males aged from 17 to 32. Twelve of them participated in both the interviews and the surveys. Twenty-four percent were in beginner's level; 45 percent in intermediate; and 31 percent were high-intermediate and advanced.

Procedures

A survey instrument was designed by adopting an idea in Derwing's (2003) accent questionnaire. Items were also developed on the basis of findings drawn from oral interviews with ESL students as a pilot study. Participants were asked to make scalar judgments on a six-point scale (1=strongly disagree, 6=strongly agree, and NA=not applicable). There was also an open-ended prompt in which the respondents were asked for expectations of their pronunciation lessons and

their attitudes toward ESL instructors in NZ or in the US. The whole survey had 20 questions (10=Likert scale statements and 10=open-ended prompts), a subset of which is reported here (see Appendix). Responses were collected either online or in person. That is, two-thirds of the responses (about 30 responses) in each country were collected online. The interviews were conducted in such a way so as to gain further insights into participants' rationales for providing responses to open-ended questions in the survey. They were recorded either by the researcher or by volunteer participants who also took notes when necessary.

Analysis

The data were examined for difference of ESL learners' expectations and attitudes toward pronunciation instruction and accent varieties between NZ and US settings. The Mann-Whitney U-test was computed to compare the mean of two groups for scalar judgment scores. Interview responses were coded for corresponding open-ended prompts.

RESULTS

In order to answer the research questions, the scalar judgments of respondents were compared through the Mann-Whitney U-test. Initial results revealed that both ESL learners in NZ and the US agreed upon the importance of pronunciation improvement. An overwhelming 93% percent and above reported that pronunciation is important for communication, they are concerned about it, and therefore they want to improve the way they sound very much. [In calculating these results, the study collapsed responses from 1-3 to get a 'disagree' score and 4-6 for the 'agree' score.] In addition, there was no significant difference in participants' scalar judgments on their current pronunciation. ESL students both in NZ and the US reported that good pronunciation made them confident in English, but they themselves believed that they did not have such skills. Over 80 percent of the respondents both in NZ and the US thought that they could recognize the difference between native-like and accented pronunciation in English.

Table 1. Students' Attitudes Towards Pronunciation Studies in NZ and the US (N=238)

Item descriptor	Group	N	Mean	Sd.	Z	p
Pronunciation is important for communication.	NZ	115	5.10	0.87	-1.78	.100
	US	123	5.36	1.06		
I am concerned about my pronunciation.	NZ	115	5.36	1.06	-1.56	.118
	US	123	5.12	1.08		
I want to improve the way I sound very much	NZ	115	5.23	0.92	-1.31	.191
	US	123	5.34	1.05		
I really want to sound like a native speaker.	NZ	115	4.43	1.48	-3.67	.000
	US	123	5.25	1.14		
Occasionally, I deliberately avoid sounding like a native speaker.	NZ	115	3.48	0.20	-2.34	.019
	US	123	3.02	1.29		
If I have good pronunciation, I will be more confident in English.	NZ	115	5.20	0.91	-1.50	.133
	US	123	5.32	1.04		
I feel that I currently have excellent pronunciation skills.	NZ	115	3.20	0.86	-1.97	.098
	US	123	2.98	1.29		
I believe that my teacher's production provides me with an excellent model of English pronunciation.	NZ	115	3.77	0.19	-7.99	.000
	US	123	5.15	1.03		
It is very confusing to study pronunciation in NZ/US because there are many accents	NZ	115	4.77	1.20	-4.02	.000
	US	123	3.98	1.38		
I can accurately recognize the difference between native-like and nonnative ("accented") pronunciation in English	NZ	115	4.43	0.89	-1.29	.198
	US	123	4.05	1.50		

1=Strongly disagree 2= Disagree 3=Somewhat disagree 4= somewhat agree 5= Agree 6=Strongly agree
NA=Not applicable

However, in response to the first research question, "is there any difference between ESL learners' expectations of their pronunciation lessons in New Zealand and those in North America?", there were significant differences found among learners' responses between in NZ and in U.S. regarding the following questionnaire statements:

(Item, #4) I really want to sound like a native speaker ($z = -3.67, p < 000$)

(Item, #5) Occasionally, I deliberately avoid sounding like a native speaker ($z = -2.34, p < 05$).

Almost 37 percent of respondents did not think it was desirable to sound like a native speaker in NZ whereas only 5 percent disagreed in North America. In addition, 26 percent of the students in NZ indicated that they even occasionally avoided sounding like a native speaker of the target language in contrast with 8 percent of agreement from respondents in the US. Seventeen percent of NZ respondents and 21 percent of US students rejected the idea entirely and marked 'NA (not applicable)' for this question. One Korean female respondent from the interview stated that if she spoke with NZ accent after she went back to Korea, people might laugh at her. A male Thai student who studied English in Auckland for 3 months commented as follows:

(1) I am afraid of having NZ accents... if I stay here long. They don't really sound stupid but very not clear. My friends don't like it anyway.

The answer to the second question concerning the difference between ESL learners' attitudes toward instructors' English accents in New Zealand and those in North America is positive. ESL students in NZ and the US judged the following questionnaire items significantly differently.

(Item, #8) I believe that my teacher's production provides me with an excellent model of English pronunciation ($z = -7.99, p < .000$)

(Item, #9) It is very confusing to study pronunciation in NZ/US because there are many accents ($z = -4.02, p < .000$)

Forty percent of ESL learners studying English in NZ disagreed that their teachers' production provided them with an excellent model of English pronunciation while 5 percent of respondents in the US disagreed. By the same token, a majority of respondents (87 percent) in NZ agreed that studying pronunciation in NZ was very confusing because there were too many accents. Therefore, they had difficulties studying English in NZ. On the other hand, 13 percent of respondents in the US agreed with this statement. In the opening quotation from the interview, participants in NZ provided support for their responses. Consider the following comments, one from a Taiwanese female student who had studied English in Auckland, NZ for 18 months and the other from a Saudi Arabian female student studying in NZ for 6 months. The third one was from two Korean students who studied English in Auckland for about 4 months.

(2) There are too **many accents** in school. Well ... teachers are from America, England, Australia, India, Asia and, of course here Kiwi. I don't know which sound I have to follow ... once I studied with my American teacher, and then ... with NZ teacher. My Kiwi teacher don't like American accent, I think. ... Sometimes I speak American accent...um... she correct me. I don't know...

(3) Many accents make me confused and even make my English bad.

(4) My teacher said 'vase [va:z]' for 'vase [vez]'. So I said, teacher, it's a 'vase [vez]'. Then, the teacher said no it's [va:z]. So I got silent.

The following comment in (5) was made by a Turkish student who studied English in the US for 3 months. The comment in (6) was made by a Chinese student who studied English in the US for 6 months.

(5) My teacher is from Russia, I think. I like to speak like her. She has some Russian accent, but it's okay.

(6) I've never thought about my teacher's English. She is American. She has an American accent. It's good and clear. I'm used to her accent, you know.

Evidently, participants in NZ (63 percent) were more dissatisfied with their pronunciation instruction than those in the US (27 percent) when they were asked about their pronunciation lessons (Question 3 in the open-ended questionnaire). Examples of students' responses to this question included 'teacher's confusing models' or 'no specific instruction'. ESL students were further asked an open-ended question: "If you study pronunciation only, the best place would be...". Figure 1 shows that 30 percent of respondents in NZ expressed that they would prefer to go back to their home country if they solely focused on studying pronunciation. America was ranked second with 26.3 percent, England next, and NZ last. On the other hand, 3 percent of ESL students in the US chose their home country, and a majority of them (65 percent) chose U.S.

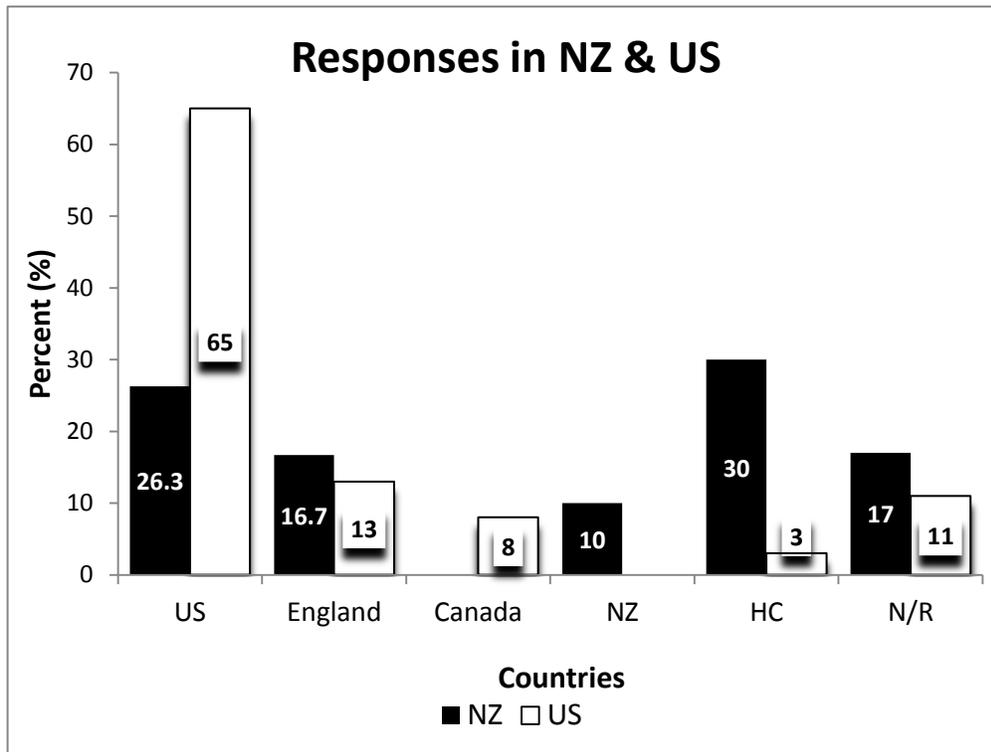


Figure 1. If I just study pronunciation only, the best place would be... (Note. HC=home country; N/R=no response)

Interview comments from a Thai female student in (7) and (8) provide an example of these student attitudes.

(7) My teacher doesn't teach me pronunciation....I have a 'ch' sound problem so badly... but my teachers don't care... I think... just to improve English pronunciation, studying in Thailand would be better than studying in Auckland....

(8) The teacher in my home country understands my pronunciation problems. So they know my difficulty.

DISCUSSION

The study surveyed adult ESL learners who studied English in two inner-circle countries, New Zealand and the United States to examine their expectations of and attitudes toward pronunciation lessons and instructors' accent varieties. Findings revealed that there was no significant difference among learners in the two countries with regard to the need and desire for pronunciation improvement. However, students in NZ were more dissatisfied with their current curriculum of learning pronunciation due to misunderstanding of various models and accents of pronunciation made available to them.

The findings of this study concur with a previous report that ESL learners prefer to model inner-circle standards (Bayard et al, 2002; Timmis, 2002). Literature has often declared that NNSs feel some kind of obligation to acquire 'near-native' English accents in order to be seen – and to see themselves – as successful English speakers, despite the fact that NNSs no longer learn English to communicate primarily with its NSs (Jenkins, 2007, 2009). Not surprisingly, the results of the current research indicated that learners' attachment to inner-circle native speaker models primarily was stronger for North American English. The positive feedback of such US-based students on their current pronunciation models might be formed by students' stereotype of and familiarity with American English (Dalton-Puffer, Kaltenboeck, & Smit, 1997). On the other hand, more than one third (37 percent) of L2 learners in NZ had little desire to sound like native speakers. In addition, one fourth (26 percent) of them even deliberately attempted to avoid sounding like a NZ speaker. Approximately 5-8 percent of students in the US responded in such a manner. Even though these results can be interpreted from a viewpoint of Morley's (1991) learner identity – L2 learners' avoiding a native model to retain their own accent as an indicator of identity – they suggest that learners' preference and attitude toward inner-circle accents vary among the types of models.

From the perspective of World Englishes, mutual intelligibility is a key issue for both listeners and speakers. Nevertheless, learners often have an idealized notion of native-speaker spoken norms, which are particularly related to GA or RP (Timmis, 2002). In this respect, if the inner-circle standards did not meet learners' expectations, L2 learners tended to experience frustration while studying English in a given environment. Forty-percent of L2 learners in NZ reported that teachers did not provide an excellent pronunciation model. Moreover, 87 percent of respondents

in NZ said that different varieties of accents confused their study of pronunciation. These NZ results are significantly different from those in U.S. where the native speakers' accent was the preferred model of English for L2 learners. As seen from Taiwanese and Korean student's comment in Excerpts (2) and (4), some ESL teachers might regard their own accent as the most appropriate and consider other varieties incorrect. Perhaps learners' confusion might be caused not by the fact that many varieties of accents were available, but by the fact that there was no comprehensive instruction from pronunciation teachers regarding accent varieties around the world. Consequently, learners built up a negative perspective on poly-models.

In reviewing students' comments in this study, teachers in NZ appeared to have more diverse L1 backgrounds than those in the US (see Excerpt 2). Interestingly, the L1 backgrounds of teachers whose students were surveyed in the US were almost all North American English except for one Russian. Nevertheless, note that students' concern and confusion about their pronunciation models might be also exacerbated by teachers' treatment of accent variation (Excerpts 2 and 4). The general lack of teacher's awareness of World Englishes and accent varieties may be an additional cause of students' pronunciation attitudes. The need for ESL teachers' pronunciation training has been particularly emphasized (Breitkreutz, Derwing, & Rossiter, 2002; Burgess & Spencer, 2000; MacDonald, 2002; Wang & Munro, 2004). Subsequently, teachers' training in current trends in EIL is called for to a great extent.

Students' concern for various models in ESL settings affected their decision on places to study pronunciation. As seen in Figure 1, roughly one third of L2 learners in NZ, as compared to 3 percent of learners in the US, chose their home country for the best place to study English pronunciation. Learners seemed to value teachers whose L1 was the same as theirs [Excerpts (7) and (8)]. This result was surprising because a common belief is that ESL students would improve their target language when they are in an environment where the target language is spoken. According to Excerpts (2) and (4), students seemed to be more confused with inner-circle accent variation than expanding-circle accents. That is, when an inner-circle native speaker, whose accent did not belong to one of the standard models such as GA or RP, taught pronunciation, ESL students appeared to feel much more perplexed. Conversely, learners' attitudes were quite receptive when fluent, non-native English teachers taught pronunciation. [Note that no participant in the US raised the question of dialect in American English in this study.] Overall, the results of the research suggest that students' perceived needs and their expectations require better synchronization in the inner-circle contexts.

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

In listening to students' voices through this study, we saw the urgent need for students and teachers to comprehend accent varieties. The review of students' beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions strongly hints that the social relationships between students and teachers are more complex than they may appear in the classroom. Moreover, students' comments imply that ESL teachers' English models have an extremely important effect on the ways in which the learners

relate to learning pronunciation. In other words, teachers' attitudes toward varieties of accents can play a critical role in shaping learners' perspectives and expectations of language learning particularly in pronunciation. Therefore, the role and significance of the teacher's accent need to be further explored.

Furthermore, the current study neither investigated learners' opinions in the setting of speaking RP English, nor examined students' perception of instructor's English accent in the situation of the Outer Circle. It would be very interesting to see how students react to different accent varieties in such environments. Finally, the study only interviewed 25 out of 238 participants. In order to better understand learners' insight into accent varieties, a wide range of in-depth interview would be recommended.

The study started with questions raised regarding (1) which varieties of English to choose for instructional models for pronunciation and (2) whether or not learners' reactions changed if they were exposed to a different variety of inner circle models. The answer to the first question is not to choose a single model for learners considering learners' preferences, but to encourage both teachers and learners to develop a comprehensive understanding of accent varieties in World Englishes. In terms of the issues related to the second question, the findings of this study demonstrated that L2 learners reacted differently as to the inner-circle English models, and that learners' expectations and attitudes toward inner-circle models were very complex and should be carefully taken into consideration in ESL contexts.

The implications of this study concerning the relations among pronunciation training, learner perceptions, and speech variety extend beyond the immediate setting in NZ and US higher education, and in fact pertain to the teaching of World Englishes.

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Appendix: Examples of Survey Questions

Scalar judgment (1 =Strongly disagree 2= Disagree 3= Somewhat disagree 4= somewhat agree 5= Agree 6= Strongly agree NA=Not applicable)

1. Pronunciation is important for communication.	1	2	3	4	5	6	N/A
2. I am concerned about my pronunciation.	1	2	3	4	5	6	N/A
3. I want to improve the way I sound very much.	1	2	3	4	5	6	N/A
4. I really want to sound like a native speaker	1	2	3	4	5	6	N/A
5 Occasionally, I deliberately avoid sounding like a native speaker.	1	2	3	4	5	6	N/A
6. If I have good pronunciation, I will be more confident in English.	1	2	3	4	5	6	N/A
7. I feel that I currently have excellent pronunciation skills.	1	2	3	4	5	6	N/A
8. I believe that my teacher’s production provides me with an excellent model of English pronunciation.	1	2	3	4	5	6	N/A
9. It is very confusing to study pronunciation in America because there are many accents.	1	2	3	4	5	6	N/A
10. I can accurately recognize the difference between native-like and non-native (“accented”) pronunciation in English.	1	2	3	4	5	6	N/A

Open-ended questions

1. If I just study pronunciation only, the best place would be (America, my home country and others: * please specify the place)
2. In order to improve my pronunciation, I want to
 - i. imitate English native speakers or
 - ii. develop my own clear accent .
 * Please specify the reason.
3. My pronunciation lessons in school are (satisfactory/ unsatisfactory).
* Please specify the reason.
4. I came to America to study English because.....
5. The English I prefer is (American, British, Australian, and New Zealand).