

Non-Native English Teachers and Varieties of English: Ready, or Not?

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Abstract

Language is dynamic. Thus, for English as an international language, it keeps on changing and developing over time. Now there are more non-native English speakers compared to native speakers around the world. Thus, intelligibility becomes fundamental in the world of Englishes. Besides teaching in the English accent (i.e. American or British English) as part of the educational policy given by schools, respectively, non-native English teachers must also be prepared to inform their non-native students of the Englishes around the world. Moreover, research in identifying the varieties of English spoken in different areas around the world are rapidly progressing. Therefore, In this paper we would like to highlight the field of acoustic phonetics, in which the paper here assists researchers and teachers to identify vowel distinctions among different group of English speakers and the extent of the first language (L1) influence. Specifically, the analysis in phonological variations can help teachers deal with variation in varieties of English. Finally, we would like to highlight that understanding the varieties of English that exist today and having mutual intelligibility can improve communication with different people from different countries around the world.

Keywords: non-native English teachers, varieties of English

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Introduction

English today is a worldwide language, with speakers of about 1.5 billion and 2 billion people around the world (Xue & Zuo, 2013). From these numbers, only about 400,000 people are native English speakers (Crystal, 2011). Meanwhile, in other non-native English speaking countries, it holds the status of being the official language or the second language in some multilingual countries. This status depends on the geographical area of the speakers, together with their social, cultural and language aspects that play important roles in shaping the form of the English they speak. This situation further develops these “Englishes” (Crystal, 2003) into different varieties used around the world. The varieties can be found at its grammatical, lexical, and phonological levels (McKay, 2002). When these varieties get in contact in the oral form, the speakers can usually communicate and understand each other with some gaps in understanding. Meanwhile, in the written form, gaps are found in the spelling variations that are present between Englishes used in the

U.S.A (i.e. American English) and Britain (i.e. British English). These dialects or accents are usually the aspects that enable us to distinguish the various types of English used around the world.

The establishment of a role for English in any country is part of that country's educational policy (Abbott, 1984). For example, in Malaysia and India, since they were once colonized by the British, the English is spoken in these countries, respectively, shares many of the features of British English. And thus, English textbooks in schools typically use British English. Meanwhile, in South Korea, the country prefers the American accent over others because of its historical and cultural ties with the United States. The preference has made them more familiar and accessible to American English in schools, where American-style textbooks and English education are coupled with a majority of Canadian and American teachers. As for Indonesia, the preference in its educational policy is still unclear, but a study by Mardijono (2003) reveals that Indonesian students are more familiar with the American accent compared to other English accents within the inner circle.

Nevertheless, the "varieties of English" situation has brought about challenges to non-native English teachers in teaching English to their students. The major issue is in pronunciation. As for the case in Indonesia, in which English is treated as a foreign language, many teachers are confused with which pronunciation to teach. Because now, it is more than just the English used by the inner-circle countries: British English, American, Australian, and New Zealand English spoken out there. The closest examples to depict is the Malaysian English, Singaporean English and Bruneian English spoken by our neighboring countries. They are frequently in contact with Indonesian speakers from the tourism, educational and business sectors. The media also exposes other varieties of English that are also commonly heard by Indonesians, such as the Indian English as shown in many Bollywood movies aired in Indonesian television channels. There are also Thai and Philippines English from the soap operas, Korean English from K-Pop music, and Arabic English and others from international news broadcasts. This is not to mention other English accents that we hear out there from the Internet, such as from various YouTube videos that are easily accessible to users from young to old.

For EFL (English as a Foreign Language) teachers in Indonesia, a great number of teachers are not native speakers of English. To begin with, English is taught in public schools from grade 7, where learners are about the age of 12-13 years old when they are first formally introduced to English in the classroom setting. Some of these teachers may have also learned English as children in private schools, but a majority can be said to have learned it formally in school starting from their teenage years. The English exposed to them in the past could be assumed to be mostly American or British English, but this is not to say that every non-native speaker in Indonesia produces their own "accent" due to influences from their first or second languages. In Indonesia, the variation of English can be found between different regions, and across the social strata. This also affects the way they teach pronunciation in EFL classrooms.

Therefore in this paper, we would like to highlight the two important aspects. First we would like highlight what are the real problems of a teacher of English when they have to face varieties of English in terms of teaching pronunciation, where they have to deal with the variations of phonological aspects which become part of the field of acoustic phonetics. The second thing that we would like to highlight is how acoustic phonetics studies can help teachers to study the physical features and characteristics of the sound produced by their learners

Discussion

Dealing with varieties of English Non Native faced by English Teachers in the EFL Context

In school, non-native English teachers who study at the universities in Indonesia are trained to speak or to sound, like native speakers, be it the American or British English. This emphasis sets “incorrect” pronunciation other than these two accents as inferior. Sometimes, this condition in the classroom leads students to be unmotivated and “lethargic” to learn this language because the teachers constantly correct their pronunciation while they try to speak English. However, when we steer this situation to people across the world who speak English in different accents, English today does not belong to those born in the English-speaking countries anymore, but it now also belongs to anyone willing to learn and speak it. Therefore, English teachers in Indonesia should start realizing that our multilingual and multicultural learners are individuals who live, grow and learn with their own cultural, social and historical background and experiences. Teachers must be aware of their social and cultural backgrounds as foreign language speakers. It is impracticable to keep “pushing” them to speak and sound like either the British or the Americans. This is as voiced by Martin (2016), who believes that this practice reduces the students' social and cultural identity and entity as foreign-language speakers, and especially as Indonesians. She continues that many non-native speakers recognize native speakers' different pronunciations as acceptable variations, but when it comes to our English pronunciation, it is instantaneously recognized as incorrect. This situation underestimates the many years of effort that us non-native speakers take to practice and learn English (Martin, 2016).

Despite some studies say that pronunciation can be a measure of the success of teaching and learning a language (Fraser 2000; Tsukada 2008). Jenkins (2005) argues that English's role as a lingua franca has implications for teaching pronunciation. It is commonly believed that pronunciation plays a key role in intelligibility between the non-native and the native speakers of English, but again, according to her, the goal is not to sound like a native speaker, but more importantly, it is to communicate effectively in a global context. Jenkins (2005) suggests the model of “lingua-franca core” for pronunciation teaching. This means that non-native teachers still preserve their particular English variety as part of their culture and identity while teaching English to their non-native learners.

Therefore, with this in mind, Jenkins (2005) believes that learners should focus more on aspects of pronunciation which aid understanding. This means to make a distinction between some features of pronunciation to make conversations clearer to the listener. For examples, a clear difference between the /r/ and /l/ sounds. This distinction is sometimes not met by Japanese speakers. Then there are the /v/ and /w/ sounds, where some German speakers cannot distinguish these two sounds. Then there is /b/ and /v/, wherein Spanish, these two sounds are allophones or variants of the same sound. But it is not so in English. Another feature that teachers may want to focus on is the long and short vowels of the English language, in which some non-native speakers cannot contrast them (as cited in Pillai, Manuelli, & Dumanig, 2010). My observation of the Acehnese speakers while speaking English is their difficulty in making a difference between the /t/ and /θ/ in some English words. And thus, English teachers, whether native or non-native, need to help their learners to notice such features when teaching the target language.

Then again, when it comes to speaking, facing these varieties of English around the world seems to be very logical when speakers adopt and adapt English to express their

identity and culture. But let us go back to reality when students have to face exams and tests that are mostly presented in the American and or British accents, such as TOEFL and IELTS. These tests are important not only to students who would like to study abroad but also to students to graduate from some universities. For example, Universitas Syiah Kuala in Banda Aceh, Indonesia, requires every student to achieve a minimum of 477 TOEFL score to graduate. There are listening sections in which speakers in the tapes or recordings speak in one of these accents. This is where the collision starts, and non-native teachers go "panic" to improve their pronunciation to the said "standard" English and further teach students in the "standard" pronunciation so that they do not get confused, for example, in the listening tests. What should teachers do, then, to further understand the differences in pronunciation between groups of English speakers so that they can find better ways to teach pronunciation in the classrooms?

How acoustic phonetics studies can help teachers to study the physical features and characteristics of the sound produced by their learners

For EFL learners, phonetics and phonology are essential parts of studying English. Phonetics is the study of physical properties of speech sounds, including their physiological production, acoustic properties, and auditory perception. Meanwhile, phonology is the study of sounds, especially different patterns of sounds in different languages. Moreover, the knowledge of phonetics and phonology are important to understand the principles regulating the use of sounds in spoken English. Languages like Indonesian and Arabic are consistent in their spelling and pronunciation, this is to say that each letter represents a single sound which rarely varies with other sounds. However, this is not the case for English because of the irregular relationship between the spelling and sound across the language. This language has many letters with two or more sounds and many letters that are silent.

Phonetics has three main branches, they are articulatory phonetics (how the organs of articulation are used to produce speech sounds), acoustic phonetics (studying the physical properties of speech sounds) and auditory phonetics (how people perceive speech sounds) (Roach, 2000). In the meantime, acoustic phonetics studies the physical transmission of speech sounds from the speaker to the listener (Ohala, 2005). This involves the physical properties of sounds through the airwave frequencies that consist of sounds. The frequency of vibrations is measured in hertz and the volume of sound is measured in decibels. The instrument utilized to measure and record speech sounds is the sound spectrograph. It produces readouts called sound spectrograms. By associating articulatory phonetics and using spectrographs, researchers can identify exact point values and acoustic characteristics of different vowel and consonant productions (Ball & Rahilly, 2014). Among the software to conduct acoustic research are Wavesurfer and Praat.

For ELT teachers, they must understand the purpose of knowing and implementing phonetics and phonology in teaching foreign languages. These branches of linguistics allow teachers to examine the similarities and differences between the sounds produced by a diverse group of speakers and explain these differences to learners. This can enable learners to better understand and speak the language they are learning.

Furthermore, acoustic phonetics studies can help teachers to study the physical features and characteristics of the sound produced by their learners. Various studies have been published about acoustic phonetics related to English vowels. In the scope of the Middle East, there are studies on Iranian English (Pillai & Delavari, 2012), Omani English (Hubais & Pillai, 2010), and others. Meanwhile, in the scope of Southeast Asia, among

these studies are Malaysian English (Pillai, et al., 2010; Pillai, 2014), Singaporean English (Deterding, 2000, 2005), Bruneian English (Sharbawi, 2006), Thai English (Pillai & Salamae, 2013; Tsukada, 2008), Taiwanese English (Li, 2004), Philippine English (Pillai, Manuli & Dumanig, 2010), Indonesian English (Fata, Ikhwan, Fitriani, Ikhwan, Aulia, & Yusuf, 2017; Widagsa, 2015), and others.

Let us take Malaysian English as an example. The distinctive features in pronunciation found in the variety of Malaysian English are the realization of the front vowels /ɪ/ and /i/, and /ɛ/ and /æ/ that are difficult for the Malay speakers to distinguish (Pillai, et. al., 2010; Yap, Wong & Yasran, 2010). Malaysian English vowels also occupy a smaller vowel space than those of British English (Pillai, et. al., 2010). Below are some findings from previous research on the English monophthong vowels produced ESL and EFL learners. The vowels are plotted in the vowel space of the speakers, respectively.

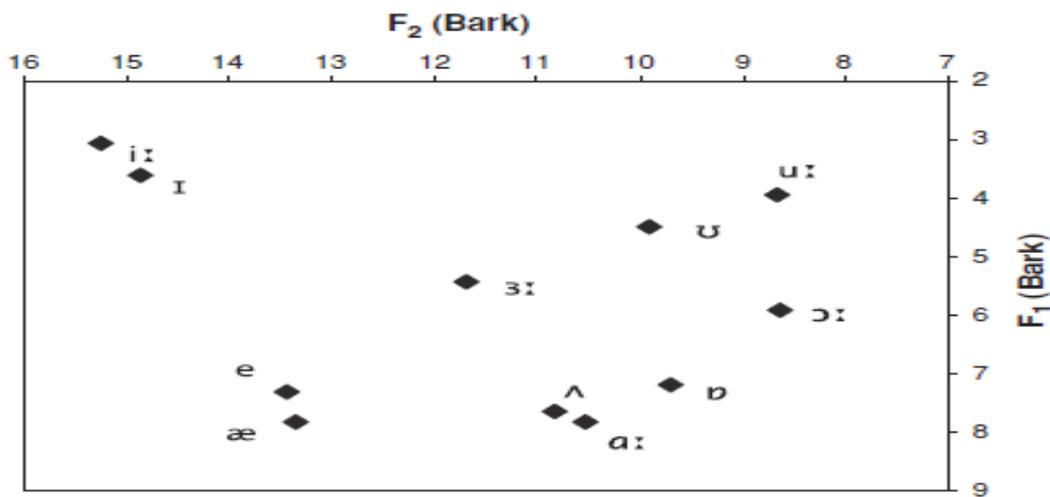


Figure 1. Malaysian English vowels (reproduced from Pillai, et. al., 2010, p. 165).

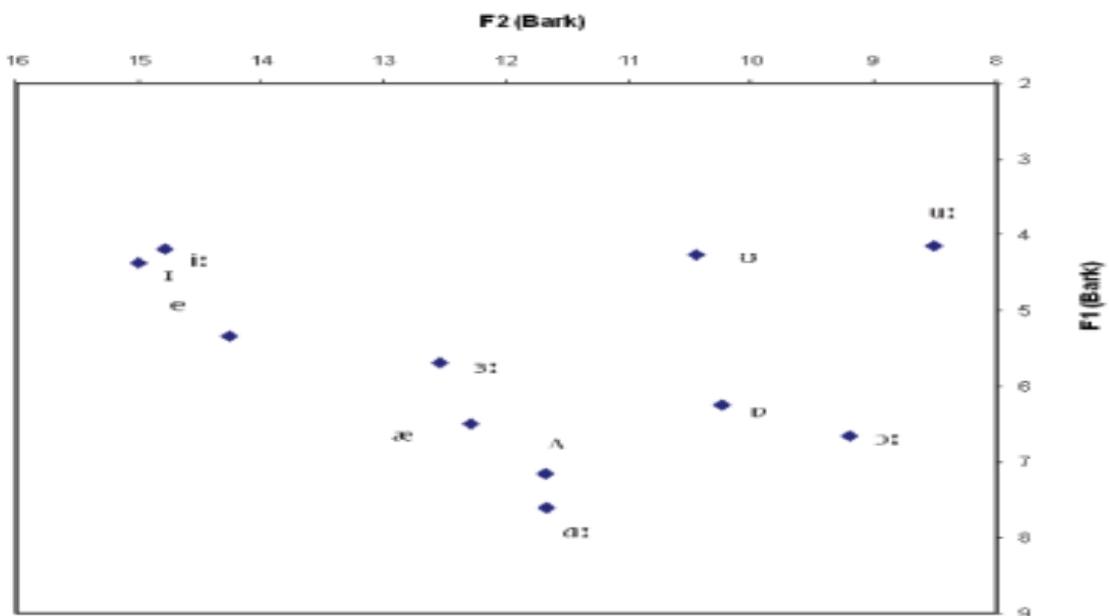


Figure 2. Thai English vowels (reproduced from Pillai & Salamae, 2013, p. 1151).

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