Teaching English Pronunciation for Global Communication

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Introduction

English as an international language now plays an important role in the lives of millions of speakers in the world who are not very proficient in the language. They communicate with other non-proficient users in a wide range of different fields such as business, science, and official negotiations. Some sociolinguists call this trend 'linguistic imperialism,' and many of them try to address the problem that a privileged few enjoy the benefits of globalization. On the other hand, there are defenders of 'Standard English' who insist on protecting their sole property, Anglo-American language and culture. In this complex situation, what should we, as ELT practitioners, do? The teaching of English pronunciation is especially problematic because verbal communication is the main topic of the above argument.

In this article, I would like to reappraise the model for the teaching of English pronunciation from the perspective of a non-native instructor of the English language. Firstly, we will see the degree to which the English language has spread all over the world. Secondly, the pros and cons of choosing a model for the pronunciation of English will be examined, and the question of whether a model is still necessary or useful will be asked. Then finally, I would like to state my own proposal regarding this issue.

1. The spread of English — Has English swept away all else before it?

According to Crystal (1997), about 2,090,000,000 people (well over a third of the world's population) are, as he puts it 'routinely exposed to English.' As he points out, what is impressive about this staggering figure is 'not so much the grand total but the speed with which expansion has taken place since the 1950s (ibid. 61).' In 1950, making the case for English being a world language would have hardly been possible. Within a little more than a generation, the case is entirely plausible. So what happened to the language? Kachru has dealt with this issue in many of his writings.[i] He has classified and visualized the spread of English around the world as three concentric

circles. They represent different ways in which the language has been acquired and is currently used.
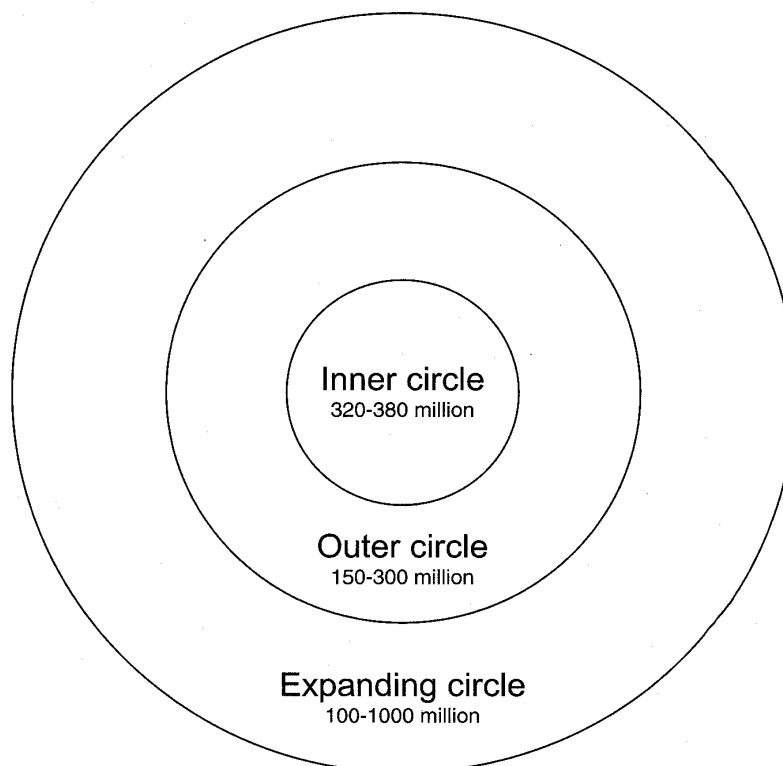

Figure 1. Kachru's model

The inner circle covers the historical bases of English in the area where it is the first language: the USA, UK, Ireland, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand.

The outer circle comprises regions, colonized mainly by Britain, where English is used as a second language in non-native settings and has become part of the country's chief institutions: India, Singapore, and numerous other territories mainly in Africa, South-east Asia and the South Pacific.

The expanding circle refers to the nations where English is recognized as an international language but which have never been colonized[ii] by the inner circle countries, and in which English does not have special status in their language policies. English is taught as a foreign language in these areas: China, Russia, Japan, Greece, Poland and other countries.

Estimates for the total number of each category vary enormously, especially in the expanding circle: as low as 100 million and as high as 1 billion. This gap exists because the criterion for defining English use differs. If we demand that people in the expanding circle have 'near-native fluency,' the lowest total would be chosen. The same can be applied to the case of the outer circle. A reasonable command of English would expand the grand total, though the grand total is, in fact, less accurate because estimates are not available for many countries in this category.

Not all the countries would fit in Kachru's model, but it is widely recognized as a useful classification. The expansion of English indicated above in the concentric circles is inarguably the result of the movement of English around the world. It started with the pioneer voyages to America and Asia, and continued with the colonization of Africa and the South Pacific in the nineteenth century. There were wars or movements of independence in those colonized countries in the mid-twentieth century where English naturally achieved the status of being a second language.

In this section, I will not focus on the historical background of the spread of the language, but examine instead how much it has expanded all over the world. As Crystal (1997) says, the present-day world status of English is primarily the result of two factors: the expansion of British colonial power and the emergence of the United Stats as the leading economic power of the twentieth century. If we consider the diffusion of the language as a form of a genealogical-tree-like list, it can be indicated as follows. Countries listed are from the inner circle or the outer circle. The names of the countries are from an atlas published in Japan.[iii]

English	British	(Europe)	UK Ireland Malta	
		(Africa)	(West Africa)	Cameroon Nigeria Ghana Sierra Leone
			(East Africa)	Kenya Uganda Tanzania Rwanda
			(South Africa)	Namibia Botswana Zimbabwe Zambia Malawi Seychelles
		(Asia)	(South Asia)	India Pakistan Sri Lanka Bangladesh Grenada
			(Southeast Asia)	Singapore Malaysia Brunei
			(East Asia)	Hong Kong

English	British	(Oceania)	Australia New Zealand Papua New Guinea
		(Pacific Islands)	Solomon Islands Tonga Micronesia Marshall Islands Fiji
	American	(North America)	USA Canada
		(Central America)	Puerto Rico
		(Asia)	Philippines
		(Africa)	Liberia
		(Oceania)	American Samoa

The list above refers only to English as L1 and L2, and we should notice the dramatic increase of speakers of English in the twentieth century has been recognized as coming from the expanding circle. A geographical and historical survey will help us to understand the spread of English in the past, but questions more important to us are related to the expanding circle. We can predict various fields in which English is a significant medium, for instance, international organizations, the worldwide computing network (i.e. the Internet), business transactions, scientific periodicals, motion pictures, popular music and so forth. Here I will focus on two major fields: international organizations and the Internet, because they both play an important role in modern society.

International Organizations

The United Nations has six official languages: English, French, Spanish, Chinese, Russian and Arabic. This organization is overwhelmingly larger than other international gatherings. It consists of over fifty organizations, programs, agencies and as many as other regional commissions. Official languages are, of course, used in their proceedings or documents, but not all of them are regularly adopted. If you access the website of the UN, you will find that quite a large number of the related sites are available only in English.

As for other organizations, wherever they may be based, English is the main or chief auxiliary language.[iv] For example, in the Association of South-East Asian Nations, English is the working language, though there is no member whose first language is English. This trend is reflected even in Europe, where other languages such as French or German are more likely to be predicted as being more dominant. Yet English is the official language of the European Central Bank, even though the bank is

in Frankfurt, and neither Britain nor any other English-speaking country is a member of the European Monetary Fund.[v]

The Internet

The USSR launched Sputnik, the first artificial earth satellite, in 1957. In response, the United States formed the Advanced Research Projects Agency (ARPA) within the Department of Defense to establish the US lead in science and technology applicable to the military. In 1968, the agency devised a military research network called the ARPANET, the aim of which was to link important academic and government institutions so they would survive local damage in the event of a nuclear strike. Its language was accordingly English, and when it was opened to people and organizations overseas in the 1980s, the language was chiefly used in forming links to the network. In the meantime, English continues to be the dominant language of the Internet.

It is hard to estimate the number of web pages and how many of them are written in English, yet I still remember a Japanese newspaper article in 1995 saying that 80 percent of web pages were in English. The proportion is going to become much smaller today, as more people in the world are going on line and using their own languages. For example, there were approximately 10,000,000 web pages written in Japanese in April 2001.[vi] Yet this figure is still minor compared to the total number of the web pages; even in 1998, there were around 320,000,000 pages on the net.[vii] We Japanese know that our language is a minor presence on line and it is quite common for us to attach an English version when we make a web page, but the reverse hardly ever happens.

In this section, we have seen how much English has spread all over the world, and we may conclude that the language has reached a status that no other language could compete with. Yet I am rather doubtful that this status will last forever. There are over 7,000 languages in the world now,[viii] so how can we be so confident about the eternal dominance of one language? No one can deny the possibility that a non-English-speaking country will overwhelm the globe in a few centuries. Then the situation will change and English would not be able to maintain its status as a world language.

So we, as instructors of English, should maintain our perspective in regard to the language. Adding to that, if we adopt the phrase 'lingua franca' to English, we should notice that English is no longer the sole property of people of the inner circle. Conceptual and practical changes are needed for the teaching of English language. This will be related to the topic of the next section.

2. Pros and cons of choosing a model for English pronunciation

2-1. The conservatives

The British people are well known for being sensitive about how they and others speak English. Accent differences seem to receive more attention in that country than anywhere in the world. Thus, if we define English as a genuinely global language in which usage and accents are not restricted, it is natural that such people should feel uncomfortable. It is also understandable that people feel their language is abused when other people use it at their own discretion, and in the end they announce to them that it is no longer their own language. We may agree that we have a preference for the usage or accent of our own language, yet it is going too far to accept the comment by a radical defender of 'Standard English' such as John Honey (1997), who says that if only people would speak 'Standard English,' then rich vistas of intellectual development would open up before them. For Honey, some sociolinguists are viewed as 'enemies' of Standard English and he sees a conspiracy among them to keep non-standard English speaking people in their deprived state by persuading them that there is no need to learn Standard English. Of course there are many other more sensible linguists like Peter Trudgill who explains his own ideas about Standard English as follows: "the social and educational role of Standard English in modern society should be dealt with, and the benefits of mastery of Standard English stressed."[ix]

So which variety of English will be chosen among the moderate conservatives as the model of English? If learners of the language are in the USA, General American (GA) will be widely accepted, and if in Britain, Standard British English (SBE) will be preferred. Received Pronunciation (RP) was once held up as the most desirable model of English for teaching purposes because it was based on the educated pronunciation of London and the Home Countries. Nowadays, however, there is general agreement that this form of English was an ideological and increasingly redundant model of language and that it is not a realistic model to pursue. The emphasis was then placed on SBE, a less artificial but still regional and class-based (Southern, middle class) English. There is a view that this model is also becoming outdated and that British English is changing again towards what is known as Estuary English.[x] In reality, however, most schools or institutions of higher education at present seem to stay with SBE for teaching purposes to avoid a wide-ranging sociolinguistic debate.

2-2. The radicals or reformers

When *Linguistic Imperialism* by Robert Phillipson was released in 1992, it elicited a great variety of opinions. While some felt inspired by the book, believing that it was a necessary blow to those who had been teaching English but were unaware of

their political role in the spread of the language and the cultures it represents, others reacted against the claims that those in the teaching profession were emissaries of the hegemonic power of the United States and Great Britain over the developing countries. Phillipson's view was rather pessimistic and deterministic. He adopted a suspicious attitude toward the subject of global English, repeating that "Global English is a myth." His purpose was not to discourage the teaching of English as a foreign language, but to help instructors achieve an awareness of the potentially harmful effects of their undertakings. He believes that educators need to understand that English is not culturally neutral but carries with it assumptions that serve to promote the interests of the rich and powerful. The language is too closely connected to the workings of late capitalism and the needs of multinational corporations, as well as to the voices of authority from the United Nations.

Societies that have adopted the idea that English is a necessary skill have automatically experienced inequalities and emotional distress, Phillipson says. At the lowest level, students throughout Asia are familiar with the trauma of failure. English speaking academics and critics dominate the world of academic publishing. Phillipson notes that "International scholars are disadvantaged when forced to write in English." He also says that the postulation of native speaker superiority, sometimes known as 'linguicism' is grounded in the belief systems left behind by colonial imperialists.

Pennycook (1994), an acute linguist like Phillipson, however, criticizes Phillipson for not adequately considering how English can be used in diverse contexts.

Pennycook discusses the spread of English in terms of the concept of 'center' and 'periphery.' He points out how English media from developed countries have penetrated the media of developing nations. This one-way flow of information erodes the national sovereignty, cultural identity, and political independence of developing nations. Institutions on the periphery tend to become distributors of knowledge from the center, but Pennycook emphasizes that the actual situation is often more complex. Many institutions in the third world are more than passive information receivers. He also disputes the assumptions that the way English spreading is natural, neutral or beneficial. A theme of his book is the nature of education. Instead of viewing schools as neutral sites where a curricular body of information is passed on to students, he urges readers to regard them as cultural and political arenas in which different values are in struggle.

His work is thought-provoking, but he doesn't offer any prescription for teaching methodology. He just expresses the negative vision of his personal philosophy toward the language. Other people, like Samuel Ahulu, are more realistic. Ahulu (1997) suggests that the concept of Standard English should be redefined. According to his view, English is now a global language and it has developed and continues to develop

forms or features divergent from British or American English. He claims that it is unrealistic to treat any divergence as errors. Standard English should accommodate to the developments of new Englishes. The validity of those new Englishes should be seen as styles of speech or expression that make up a part of the speakers' repertoire. They should not be thought of errors. English lacks standard codification that would reflect its international character adequately. Thus, one of the major problems with new Englishes appears to be the issue of codification (Ahulu 1997: 17-19).

Jenkins (2000) claims that Non-Bilingual English Speakers (NBES) now outnumber native speakers of English and that their needs must be considered when the nature of English as an International Language (EIL) is defined. It is no longer acceptable to establish the structure of EIL from the perspective of the regions or nations of traditional native speaker populations. Jenkins suggests that we need to evaluate which parts of English pronunciation are essential for interaction between NBESs and which can be regarded as peripheral. She proposes that we need to develop a Lingua Franca Core (LFC) for English, choosing the phonological features that are necessary for communication, and that in the future English language teaching should be based on the LFC. She even tries to exclude the non-core features from the model pronunciation. The problem here is that the selection of features that constitute the LFC is highly controversial. For example, dental fricatives /θ/ and /ð/ will be eliminated from LFC because these are rather rare in languages around the world and hard to pronounce for non-native speakers. However, if the dental fricatives are to be replaced in the pronunciation core, which sounds should be the alternatives? I have been teaching English pronunciation to Japanese students for years and found that most of them use /s/ for /θ/ and /z/ for /ð/, so if we encourage the replacement of the dental fricatives with alveolar fricatives, what will happen in communication with other NBES? Some other NBES who use alveolar plosives /t/ and /d/ for /θ/ and /ð/, will actually be less understandable when they communicate with Japanese learners who are taught alveolar fricatives for dental fricatives. If it is too difficult or almost impossible to pronounce dental fricatives, the alternatives should be accepted. However, with a little correction, Japanese learners' pronunciation of dental fricatives is easily corrected. Actually, the difficulty of /θ/ and /ð/ lies not so much in their articulation, which most learners can perform in isolation, as in their combination with other fricatives such as /s/ and /z/. So if they practice with drills containing such combinations involving rapid tongue glides, for example, /s/+/θ/ as in "this thing," or /s/+/ð/ as in "pass the salt," they can gradually pronounce /θ/ and /ð/ accurately without much difficulty.

What is more controversial about Jenkins's claim is that word stress and intonation, apart from the placement of nuclear stress, do not cause problems of misunderstanding

between NBESs and so should be taken off from the LFC. It might be wrong in the interaction between NBESs whose first languages are different. I myself sometimes have difficulty understanding what French people are saying when they speak in English because their stress of words is affected by the French language. Therefore, the reverse must also be true.

Jenkins' attitude towards NBES is very generous and she also thinks highly of non-native teachers of English because they have undergone the painful process and stress of learning English, and, in consequence, they are more attuned to the needs of their learners than native speakers. She also suggests that native speakers of English are now largely irrelevant, and non-native speakers should actually provide the new model for EIL. She also proposes that native speakers need to undergo retraining so that they use the modified pronunciation of the LEC. Her suggestions must be highly unpopular among teachers of English all over the world, yet her books are worth reading because of the fact that her arguments are based on substantial empirical findings.

3. My proposal

If you like to play the piano, you may start lessons with a traditional acoustic piano or a digital keyboard. Whichever keyboard you may choose, the arrangement of keys is invariable all over the world. First of all, musical scales are universal. Thus, a pianist from China and a pianist from South Africa can play the notes of a piece of music identically, though the interpretation of the emotional language of the piece may differ. If you turn out to be a very talented player, you may have a chance to join a world-famous competition such as Chopin's International Piano Contest in Warsaw without any interpreter on the stage. Music is universal because the scales are the same all over the world.

It may not be appropriate to compare language learning to piano lesson because language learning is linked to more serious fields: politics, economics, or the history of human beings. Languages can be more related to the origins of conflict than music. When I think of a model of English pronunciation, however, I always imagine a simple piano lesson. Some linguists are overly conceptual or emotional when it comes to arguments about the English language. The spread of English is no longer in the hands of the educators or ideologues. It is already out there. Information technology is introducing a new way to approach the language outside the classroom. In my opinion, if English as an international language is simply a communicative tool, we should teach basic English pronunciation just as scales in music so that learners make themselves intelligible in English; at the same time, we should allow them to retain

their phonological characteristics to the greatest degree possible. A model for pronunciation is all the more needed for better intelligibility in a global situation, but it is not a goal for learners.

As for choosing a model pronunciation of English, I would rather stay in a neutral position. I cannot be a strong supporter of Standard English because Daniel Jones' good old days are gone and the definition of 'standard' is hardly tenable today, as we have seen in former sections, though I personally prefer a British accent. I can hardly accept the notion of 'core-based English' suggested by Jenkins because it will surely cause additional communication problems, even among non-native speakers of English. It is not a good idea to restrict usage, vocabulary, and pronunciation of a language intentionally. A language changes in its own way. If we face up to reality, we will find that numerous people want to learn a 'prestigious' variety of English which some sociolinguists hate. There are many language schools in Britain which provide Standard British English as a model of English, and those schools are popular among people from Europe, Arab countries, Africa and Asia. I wonder why a number of sociolinguists ignore the majority opinion. I cannot agree with them on this point, but it is true, as they say, that it is impossible to learn a foreign language without being influenced ideologically, politically and culturally, so the spread of English can potentially wreak havoc on a number of languages and cultures.

Let us turn now to the implications for the classroom. In my case, I teach English pronunciation basically according to one of the major varieties of English, General American, because American English is dominant and popular in Japan and there are two major language proficiency tests (TOEFL and TOEIC) which are made by the English Testing Service, a semi-governmental company in the USA. However, I have never forced my students to pronounce the sounds 'correctly.' I just show them how to pronounce the target sounds, make them practice, and advise them individually. Some of the students make great progress in a short period, others not. For the students with a thick accent, I reassure them of the legitimacy of their varieties, since not doing so will perpetuate the idea that to 'correctly' use English they must turn their English into whatever concept they have of American English. Such a belief frustrates students because in most instances their performance never equals their mental model of what an ideal English should sound like. Since pronunciation correction is an optional task in a listening class, I don't grade their pronunciation. I sometimes show them videos to expose them to other major varieties of British or Australian English, or Asian varieties such as Indian or Singaporean English. I think it is of paramount importance to make them familiar with a wide range of varieties of spoken English.

We now find ourselves faced with serious challenges. Some people may criticize of my proposal toward teaching English pronunciation for being inconsistent and yielding,

and, indeed, it is a compromise plan. In this fast changing world, however, isn't it rather realistic? Above all, we should think of the learners' benefit first. We should support them in their efforts to participate on the global stage and, at the same time, preserve their unique identities. To a great extent, success or failure depends on us, ELT practitioners, though as I mentioned before, English has spread outside the classroom. In view of the great varieties of pronunciation that teachers and learners will be expected to deal with, we will have to be even more phonetically aware than we are now. I am not suggesting that we should insist on accuracy or check our students' production against some imaginary model of perfection, but we should know more about varieties of English.

Superficiality is hardly avoidable when attempting to cover such a topic within approximately 10 pages, and we all know there is no perfect remedy to the issue of a model of teaching English pronunciation. However, I hope this article will be thought-provoking enough to raise the reader's awareness of this important topic.

Notes

i   Braj B. Kachru is currently a Professor of Linguistics at University of Illinois. He has written a large number of publications about English as an International language, starting from the early 1980s (See references).

ii   In the strict sense of the word, Japan was under US-led occupation after World War II (1945-52).

iii 「旅に出たくなる地図　世界編」　2001年　帝国書院　東京

iv   The Union of International Associations' Yearbook (2000-2001).

v   Cited from the website written by Barbara Wallraff. (http://www.theatlantic.com).

vi   「Markov連鎖を用いたウェッブナビゲーション過程の評価」山本哲也他　筑波大学第 3 学郡社会工学類 (http://www.staff.aist.go.jp)

vii World Wide Web User Statistics.(http://www.why-not.com)

viii Michael Ashby referred to this issue in his lecture at University College London during a summer course on English Linguistics and Phonetics held in August 2001.

ix   http://www.phon.ucl.ac.uk

x   This variety of English is spoken in the East of London on both sides of the Thames River.

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