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## ‘DO YOU WANT TO SOUND LIKE A NATIVE SPEAKER OF ENGLISH?’: ANALYSIS OF SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS’ ATTITUDES TOWARDS NATIVE AND NON-NATIVE VARIETIES OF ENGLISH

The paper concerns the concept of English as a lingua franca (ELF) and its potential implications for ELT practices. The paper aims to present findings of the study conducted among secondary school students, who were asked to express and justify their desires concerning the model of English they wish to follow. The author of the study wants to gather information about students’ preferences concerning varieties of English they want to adopt as models. Are students’ opinions grounded in full awareness of the paradigm shift that has taken place in current ELT methodologies? Or do they simply reflect the status quo of the language classroom that is still permeated by conservative tenets upheld in the Polish educational system? A questionnaire with six open-ended questions was administered to 120 students from four senior high schools. Attitude patterns that emerge from the responses indicate that standard language ideology is prevalent among the participants. They feel commitment to native-speaker norms and hold conventional beliefs about the English language.

### **1. English as a lingua franca and ELF-oriented attitudinal studies**

Over the last two decades, applied linguistics and language pedagogy have witnessed a shift in orientation from native-speakerism (Widdowson 1994) to a growing acceptance of non-native standards. It is widely acknowledged that English as a lingua franca (hereafter ELF) users constitute the world’s largest group of English speakers. As descriptive work on ELF has gathered considerable momentum, recommendations have been made for teachers and learners to eschew their efforts to replicate native-speaker behaviour and embrace a more egalitarian ELF perspective. An accumulating body of research points to the need for a reconsideration of the subject ‘English as a Foreign Language’

on the school curriculum (e.g. Jenkins 2006). The unprecedented spread of English has effectively divested native speakers of their exclusive ownership of the language. The estimates indicate that approximately 80 per cent of verbal exchanges in which English is used as a second or foreign language does not involve native speakers of English (Gnutzmann 2000: 357). In essence, it is no longer axiomatic for researchers that native-speaker competence should be the long-term goal and benchmark of achievement. It seems pertinent to ask, however, if recommendations advanced by ELF scholars to move beyond the native-speaker model are reflected in learners' preferences.

As Mollin (2006: 52) observes, there is a broad consensus that learners' needs and preferences should not be presupposed by linguists. Conversely, learners should be allowed to express their wish as to which English they want to be taught. ELF-oriented attitudinal studies have flourished in recent years. They examine awareness of and attitudes towards ELF held by various groups of native and non-native speakers. Such studies have been conducted in the Inner Circle, the Outer Circle and the Expanding Circle contexts (Kachru 1985). In the Expanding Circle context (i.e. in the countries where English is learnt as a foreign language), these studies have been conducted among:

Table 1. ELF-oriented attitudinal studies in the three Kachruvian circles

|  |   |
|--|---|
| learners of English  | e.g. Hakala 2007; Matsuda 2003; Ranta 2004, 2010; Timmis 2002   |
| English philology students, i.e. prospective teachers of English                                       | e.g. Dalton-Puffer <i>et al.</i> 1995; Dziubalska-Kolaczyk <i>et al.</i> 2006; Jenkins 2009; Margić <i>et al.</i> 2009; Ozturk <i>et al.</i> 2009; Waniek-Klimczak <i>et al.</i> 2005 |
| teachers of English  | e.g. Decke-Cornill 2003; Hakala 2007; Jenkins 2007; Ranta 2004, 2010; Seidlhofer <i>et al.</i> 2003; Timmis 2002  |
| informants who regularly use ELF as a means of communication but have not received philology education | e.g. Ehrenreich 2010; Hynninen 2010; Kankaanranta <i>et al.</i> 2010; Smit 2010   |

A vast majority of ELF-related attitudinal studies concentrate on the last three groups of respondents, leaving learners of English as an under-researched group. This state of affairs is connected with a host of factors. Firstly, schoolchildren, especially in the initial stages of education, are a hugely variegated group of learners and so are their opinions and preferences. Secondly, it is almost impossible to evaluate their future language needs. Lastly, it is assumed that schoolchildren's learning environment is shaped by the syllabus and the teacher's decisions and preferences.

A number of studies into schoolchildren's opinions and preferences have yielded interesting results. Timmis (2002) collected and analysed responses from 400 learners of English from 14 countries of both Expanding and Outer Circles. The study indicated that a vast majority (67%) of the respondents declared a preference for a NS accent, whereas 32% pointed to 'accented international intelligibility' as their desired learning aim. However, the author of the study makes it clear that the figures need to be approached with circumspection as some of the responses reveal that a number of students opted for international intelligibility out of realism rather than preference.

Interpreting the findings of the study, Timmis (2002: 248) concludes that there is still considerable desire among students to appropriate NS norms, regardless of whether students anticipate using English primarily with native speakers or not. Native-like accent is still widely recognised as a prestige variety of English and a status symbol. Importantly, Timmis (2002:249) assumes that at least some of the views expressed by the respondents are ill-informed and points to a potential dilemma that teachers of English are confronted with, i.e. to what extent teachers are responsible for ideological re-education of their students. This is a vital question in light of the fact that schoolchildren are likely to consider the teacher's opinion as unchallengeable in the issue where there is no one right answer.

A number of studies (e.g. Dalton-Puffer *et al.* 1997, Spichtinger 2001, Timmis 2002) indicate that most learners of English desire to obtain native-like proficiency of the language, which also includes close approximation of NS accent. However, it needs to be stated that this aspiration stems from the rich tradition of classroom teaching that has proclaimed the superiority of native varieties of English over non-native ones. This tradition has always been readily observed in Poland, where a native-like accent has been perceived as the most desirable endpoint of language classes. Cook goes straight to the heart of the problem when he says in reference to learners whose professed desire is to acquire NS accent:

Their attitudes are the product of the many pressures on them to regard L2 users as failed natives. Bilinguals have accepted the role assigned to them in a society that is dominated by monolinguals and where bilingualism is a problem but monolingualism is not ... But this acceptance of the native speaker model does not mean these attitudes are right (Cook 1999: 196).

In essence, learners perceive native-speaker competence as a benchmark of achievement because they have been instructed to do so. The lack of exposure to any other alternative viewpoint have left them in belief that their success is gauged by the extent to which they approximate native-speaker norms. This attitude has been foisted on learners by traditional classroom practices, which promote monolithicity and value-laden approaches to language use.

Seidlhofer (2009: 1999) points to potential dangers connected with learners' desire to appropriate native-speaker language patterns. Traditional language classroom encourages students to emulate native-speaker idiomatic behaviours. Seidlhofer (*ibid.*) argues, however, that the more distinctively native-like the language learners try to imitate, the greater the likelihood of ridicule if they fail to deliver it appropriately in native-speaker contexts. According to Seidlhofer (*ibid.*), learners' attempt to appropriate such idiomatic language can be construed as 'an attempted territorial encroachment, an invalid claim to community membership, with its failure revealing the speaker as an impostor'.

Also of note, ELF researchers recognise the fact that some students wish to acquire native-like English because of their aspiration to blend in with a particular group of native speakers. In a similar vein, some students may perceive Anglo-American linguaculture as superior to their own. For those students it is EFL rather than ELF that appears to be a more appropriate learning target. As observed by Jenkins (2009: 203), provided that students' choice is an informed one, it is of no concern to ELF practitioners. As argued by Jenkins (1998: 125), 'we should all guard against political correctness, in the sense of telling our learners what their goals should be'. This means that students who wish to follow the EFL rather than ELF route of learning need to be provided with a chance to do so.

## **2. The Study**

### **2.1. Participants**

The participants of this study were 120 senior high school students (71 female; 49 male) from four senior high schools (in Sosnowiec, Katowice and Tychy) who were asked to respond to six open-ended questions. The participants were in the last, i.e. the third grade of the high school and so were about to take their school-leaving examinations (Matura). The students' proficiency level in English was intermediate and upper-intermediate. All of the students represented classes with English as a leading subject. This decision was motivated by the author's belief that students who have chosen English as their leading subject will tend to have more decided and firmer opinions about English than their peers from other groups. The questions included in the questionnaire were in Polish and students were asked to give answers in Polish to ensure that the opinions are not limited by their linguistic resources.

### **2.2. Procedure**

The instrument employed in this study was a questionnaire. The students were asked to respond to six open-ended questions. The questions were written in Polish and the students were asked to give answers in Polish. The first three questions required students to listen to recordings and then respond to them. The

aim of the questionnaire was to gather information concerning students' attitudes towards native and non-native varieties of English. To ensure that the students understand the questions they were first read out loud and discussed. The notions of 'native' and 'non-native-speaker' were explained to the students.

### 2.3. Results

The first three questions were accompanied by a recording to which students were asked to respond. The first recording presented an Englishman reading an excerpt from 'Lord of the Rings. The Fellowship of the Ring' by J.R.R. Tolkien. The students were asked to pay attention to the accent of the speaker and think of adjectives to describe it in terms of intelligibility and attractiveness. Out of 94 responses that were collected regarding intelligibility of the accent 49 respondents rendered the accent as definitively 'intelligible' and 30 respondents as definitely 'difficult to understand'. As far as attractiveness is concerned, out of 87 responses collected 53 were definitely positive and 29 were definitely negative.

The positive responses included adjectives, such as: *przyjemny dla ucha* ('pleasant to the ear'), *miły dla ucha* ('pleasing to the ear'), *ładny* ('pretty'), *szkowny* ('stylish'), *dystygowany* ('dignified'), *czysty* ('clear'), *wyraźny* ('distinct'), *majestatyczny* ('majestic'), *poetycki* ('poetical'), *subtelny* ('subtle').

Some of the negative responses included words: *sztuczny* ('artificial'), *przesadny* ('exaggerated'), *dziwny* ('bizarre'), *nudny* ('boring'), *pompatyczny* ('pompous'), *szywny* ('stiff'), *flegmatyczny* ('phlegmatic').

The second question was similar to the previous one. This time, the respondents were to listen to and comment upon the accent of a Polish speaker reading the same excerpt also in English. The students were asked to use adjectives to comment on both intelligibility and attractiveness of the accent they hear. It has to be noted here that the speaker's English is quite strongly influenced by his native Polish.

Out of 107 responses collected from the respondents 90 students considered the accent intelligible. Only 11 informants rendered the accent as definitely difficult to understand. As far as attractiveness is concerned, out of 105 responses as many as 80 students regarded the accent as definitely unattractive. No student indicated that the accent is regarded as definitely attractive.

The negative responses concerning the Polish accent were: *brzydki* ('ugly'), *niepoprawny* ('incorrect'), *śmieszny* ('funny'), *nieprzyjemny dla ucha* ('unpleasant to the ear'), *nieatrakcyjny* ('unattractive'), *nienaturalny* ('unnatural'), *szorstki* ('harsh'), *bez wyrazu* ('insipid'), *nijaki* ('bland'), *uproszczony* ('simplified'), *kanciasty* ('clumsy'), *toporny* ('graceless').

In the third question the informants were exposed to a recording, in which a Chinese speaker reads the same fragment of 'Lord of the Rings'. Out of 115 responses collected 68 students acknowledged that the speaker's accent is easy to understand. The accent was recognised as difficult by 11 of the respondents.

Taking attractiveness into consideration, out of 118 answers collected as many as 94 students perceived the speaker's Chinese English as definitely unattractive. None of the respondents regarded the accent as definitely attractive.

The negative comments regarding the Chinese accent: *śmieszny* ('funny'), *niepoprawny* ('incorrect'), *nienaturalny* ('unnatural'), *brzydki* ('ugly'), *dziwny* ('bizarre'), *dziwaczny* ('weird').

Another question that the respondents answered was: 'Do you predict that in the course of your life you'll use English primarily with native or non-native speakers?' To ensure that the senior high school students understand this question, the terms 'native' and 'non-native speaker' were first explained to them. Out of 104 responses collected 50 students expressed their conviction that they'll use English in communication with primarily non-native speakers. Some of them pointed to the fact that this is what they have already experienced in their school or private life. Only 16 students were of the opinion that they'll use English primarily with native speakers of this language. These students explained their prediction by the fact that their family members live in English-speaking countries and they visit them on a regular basis or intend to live with them in the future.

The next question of the questionnaire concerned students' preferences regarding their own accent. The respondents were asked whether they wish to obtain a native-like accent in English. They were also required to explain or justify their preferences. 108 answers were collected and analysed. Of these, 62 students answered positively. 35 answered the question negatively. It has to be noted, however, that a number of students who gave negative answers misunderstood the question. In the comments to the question some of the students stated that they don't want to have a native-speaker accent because they know this is impossible.

The students who expressed their willingness to acquire a native-speaker accent claimed that one or more of the following factors influence their decision (quotations included have been selected to represent strands of opinion rather than individual voices):

- Native-speaker English = correct English:
- (1) *chcę posługiwać się poprawnym językiem* ('I want to speak correct language')
- Native-speaker English = the most common variety of English:
- (2) *chcę mówić z brytyjskim akcentem ponieważ uważam że jest to najbardziej rozpowszechniony akcent na świecie* ('I want to speak with the British accent because I think this is the most common accent in the world')
- Mastery of the native-speaker accent = successful FL learning:
- (3) *uczę się angielskiego od przedszkola i chcę go umieć w 100%* ('I have been learning English since kindergarten and I want to know it in 100%')
- Using the native accent as a way of covering up one's identity:
- (4) *nie chcę by sposób mówienia zdradzał moją narodowość* ('I don't want my way of speaking to reveal my nationality')
- Perceiving the native-accent as attractive in itself:

- (5) *prawdziwy angielski używany przez Anglików brzmi po prostu pięknie* ('the real English used by the English sounds beautiful')
- Having family members in English-speaking countries:
- (6) *mój tata pracuje w Anglii i może kiedyś przeniesiemy się do niego całą rodziną* ('my dad works in England and my family may move there one day')

The students who expressed their unwillingness to acquire a native-speaker accent presented the following reasons for their decision:

- Pride in one's own nationality:
- (7) *jestem Polakiem i mam prawo mówić z polskim akcentem* ('I'm Polish and it's my right to speak with a Polish accent')
- Perceiving the acquisition of the native-like accent as an unnecessary burden:
- (8) *ważne jest żeby się porozumieć* ('the most important thing is to get the message across')
- Perceiving the acquisition of the native-like accent as impossible to achieve:
- (9) *tylko małe dzieci tak mogą* ('only little children can do this')
- (10) *to jest praktycznie niemożliwe* ('this is practically impossible')

The final question that the informants responded to was: 'Do you think that teachers of English in primary and secondary schools in Poland need to sound like native speakers? Justify your opinion'. Out of 109 responses collected as many as 87 students claimed that it is necessary and important for teachers to have native or near-native accent in English. Only 11 students answered negatively to this question.

The reasons the students listed for their opinions were:

- The importance of exposure to 'real' or 'correct' language:
- (11) *nasza nauczycielka powinna mówić jak native speaker, żebyśmy mieli kontakt z prawdziwym, faktycznym angielskim* ('our teacher should speak like a native speaker so that we have contact with real English')
- Native-like pronunciation is considered an important part of teachers' linguistic competence: (12) *nauczyciel angielskiego po prostu musi mieć dobrą wymowę* ('a teacher of English simply must have good pronunciation').

### 3. Discussion

The results of this study clearly indicate that a vast majority of the respondents consider their own accent as unattractive or even 'a source of embarrassment'. These same respondents express their unwillingness for their English to reveal their nationality:

- (13) *nie chcę żeby Anglik wiedział, że jestem z Polski już po kilku zdaniach* ('I don't want an Englishman to know I'm from Poland after just a few sentences').

These two facts are highly disquieting and indicate a problem of deeper nature. The reluctance of young Poles to sound Polish can be juxtaposed with anecdotal pride of the French, who relish in speaking English while preserving their own French accent. Whereas it is evident that the willingness of the Poles to hide their nationality in a foreign accent is a major social issue, it can also be stated that a language philosophy that espouses a monomodel in the classroom does nothing to alleviate this situation. The learners are exposed to BANA (British-Australian-North American) varieties of English, which makes them think that these are the only variants of the language used outside of the classroom. My contention here is that at least some schoolchildren lack the awareness of the existence of a multiplicity of accents and varieties of English, the awareness that would possibly free them from feeling bad, guilty or ashamed of their own accent that supposedly deviates from 'the standard'. Teaching English creates a unique opportunity for teachers to raise learners' awareness of how variegated and multicoloured the world of English is. English as the pre-eminent global means of communication is a language that belongs to a multitude of nations and cultures. Learners need to be taught how to cherish and celebrate this diversity. This way they could be instructed to accept their Polish accent and be proud of it.

Regrettably, the present study reveals that a vast majority of the respondents associate non-native varieties of English with incorrectness. Polish teenagers are not prepared to cherish the diversity of English; instead, they label any non-standard forms of language as incorrect or 'unreal'. This way of thinking is very dangerous because it may lead to a situation when students faced with ELF – the most extensive use of English worldwide – reject their interlocutors as inferior speakers of English. Such attitudes hardly improve international communication. Paradoxically though, most of the respondents of the present study predict to use English primarily in communication with other non-native speakers in the future. This prediction is likely to be correct although their prediction to get engaged in EFL (and not ELF) is not.

Another interesting observation that the study reveals is that a considerable number of the informants claim that they want to speak British or American English because these are the most widespread and the most common varieties in the world. This belief is a misconception that is perpetuated by many teaching manuals written from a native-speaker orientation. In fact, it is ELF that is the most extensive contemporary use of English worldwide (Seidlhofer 2001:133). Despite the fact that the concept of ELF is currently heavily researched upon, surprisingly little has changed as far as pedagogical materials and practices are concerned. Respondents of this study hold a strong belief that British and/or American varieties of English are the ones most readily used on the international scene. It seems paradoxical that within the four walls of a classroom in an Expanding Circle country it is still the endonormative philosophy of native-speakerism that is so willingly espoused.

One may notice here a certain trap that a firm majority of teachers tend to fall into, i.e. by expecting their students to replicate native speaker norms they make it seem natural that a language teacher is successful only to an extent to which he/she achieves native-like proficiency. This warped view of a successful teacher is clearly reflected in responses given by the students in the present study to the last question of the questionnaire – ‘Do you think that teachers of English in primary and secondary schools in Poland need to sound like native speakers? The respondents take it for granted that their teacher of English should speak and sound like a native speaker of English. Such high expectations may impinge on teachers’ self-esteem when they feel that their language skills are far from native-like. The paradox here is that learners’ views result from their lack of awareness of the changes that have taken place in language ideology in all the Three Circles of English. Too much is taken for granted in the language classroom because teachers refuse to make their learners aware of most important concepts, like ‘ELF’ or ‘World Englishes’ (Kachru 1985) and their implications. Taking Poland as a case in point one may notice, regrettably, that pedagogical practices still revolve around staunchly native speaker ideology.

#### 4. Conclusion

Answering the question posed in the title of this paper one may conclude that learners of English wish to obtain native-like accent and proficiency in English. However, it has to be emphasised that their responses reveal lack of awareness of the paradigm shift that has become so noticeable in current ELT methodology. Polish teenagers that have taken part in this study display idealised, conventional views of English that strongly reflect norm-bound assumptions upheld in the Polish educational system. This standard language ideology has detrimental effect on learners’ self-esteem – they perceive their own accent as unattractive or inferior. The contention of this paper is that primary and secondary school students need to be familiarised with the concepts of ELF and World Englishes to prepare them for functioning in the world of global English.

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## Appendix

### Kwestionariusz:

1. Posłuchaj nagrania, w którym brytyjski lektor czyta fragment książki po angielsku. Zwróć uwagę na jego akcent. Czy jest on dla Ciebie atrakcyjny? Czy jest zrozumiały? Jakimi przymiotnikami mógłbyś go określić?
2. Posłuchaj nagrania, w którym polski lektor czyta fragment książki po angielsku. Zwróć uwagę na jego akcent. Czy jest on dla Ciebie atrakcyjny? Czy jest zrozumiały? Jakimi przymiotnikami mógłbyś go określić?
3. Posłuchaj nagrania, w którym chiński lektor czyta fragment książki po angielsku. Zwróć uwagę na jej akcent. Czy jest on dla Ciebie atrakcyjny? Czy jest zrozumiały? Jakimi przymiotnikami mógłbyś go określić?
4. Czy myślisz, że w ciągu swojego życia będziesz częściej porozumiewał się po angielsku z native czy non-native speakerami? Dlaczego tak myślisz?
5. Czy chciałbyś mieć akcent jak native speaker? Dlaczego/dlaczego nie?
6. Czy uważasz, że nauczyciele języka angielskiego w szkołach podstawowych i średnich powinni mieć akcent jak native speakerzy? Uzasadnij swoją opinię.

### Questionnaire:

1. Listen to the recording, in which a British speaker reads an excerpt from a book. Pay attention to his accent. Is it attractive to you? Is it intelligible? Which adjectives would you use to describe it?
2. Listen to the recording, in which a Polish speaker reads an excerpt from a book in English. Pay attention to his accent. Is it attractive to you? Is it intelligible? Which adjectives would you use to describe it?
3. Listen to the recording, in which a Chinese speaker reads an excerpt from a book in English. Pay attention to her accent. Is it attractive to you? Is it intelligible? Which adjectives would you use to describe it?
4. Do you predict that in the course of your life you will use English more often with native or non-native speakers of English? Why do you think so?

5. Would you like to have accent like a native-speaker of English? Why/why not?
6. Do you think that teachers of English in primary and secondary schools should have accent like native speakers of English? Please, justify your opinion.

