

DOES IT MAKE SENSE TO TORTURE OUR LEARNERS WITH STANDARD ENGLISH PRONUNCIATION? - TEACHING IMPLICATIONS OF POLISH STUDENTS' ATTITUDES TO RP AND GA

Abstract

In view of the learners' attitudes to various accents the need to teach Standard English accents as norm in the foreign language classroom should be reconsidered. In this paper I present the results of a big-scale survey of the Polish learners attitudes to RP (Received Pronunciation) and GA (General American). The results of the survey confirm that RP and GA still have a high status as the accents preferred by the students, though there is a need to introduce non-standard accents in the FL classroom as the students want to understand them. The reasons for which students either identify with a particular accent or resist it are discussed in detail. The prior reason for selecting RP as a pronunciation model is an economic-political situation in Poland; the students wish to emigrate to Great Britain to work or study over there. As to GA, the main reason for which the students want to speak it is that GA is the most common accent in the world due to the US strong political position. The paper also provides some pedagogical implications for teachers who might feel uncertain about the necessity of teaching Standard English accents. Since the students express a need for understanding non-standard accents, teachers should introduce a variety of accented materials in the classroom.

Introduction

Learning English pronunciation often involves a tortuous game of trial and error. It reminds me of poor Elizabeth Doolittle from 'My Fair Lady' trying helplessly to learn Standard English accent and professor Higgins who delivers a speech about deterioration of the English language 'Use proper English, you're regarded as a freak. Oh, why can't the English - why can't the English learn to speak?' Professor Higgins would be even more dissatisfied knowing that most foreign language teachers have doubts as to whether they should teach standard English accent at all. English considered the language of Mark Twain and Shakespeare acts nowadays as a lingua franca especially in areas such as science and technology, business and education. In order to communicate productively in all these areas the Polish students of English should possess a wide range of standard and non-standard English accents.

Many learners try to produce as near-native pronunciation as possible and it has been proved that native speakers respond more positively to lightly or unnoticeably accented speech (Dalton-Puffer, et.al.,1997). For most learners the mastery of English pronunciation at a native-like level is impossible. Thus, as Dalton and Puffer (1997:3) claim, the feasibility and the need to achieve this level should be reevaluated. Many non-native speakers of English do not want to imitate Standard English pronunciation and they have begun to mark English as their own. What one may observe nowadays is the emergence of a new divergent English accents called 'Euro-English' or 'European English'. These non-standard varieties are not the result of a pidgin but education and exposure. They appear when different nationalities want to communicate in English. 'Euro-English' exhibits some features from the first languages of the speakers (interference) which are regarded by native speakers as errors. There may be also a cultural explanation of 'Euro-English' origin. Its speakers wish to emphasize that they belong to a particular nation and that they do not identify with a native group. It is hard to say whether learners prefer standard or non-standard accents such as 'Euro-English' as the results of various studies are inconsistent. In one study the students were presented with different English accents and they evaluated positively 'Amsterdam English' (Kettelman and Wieden, 1993). Received Pronunciation was not very popular among students. However, another study conducted by Dalton and Puffer, et.al., in 1997 showed that university students of English preferred GA and RP over non-standard versions. It turned out that a personal contact with the accent and experience with a language had an influence on the students' preferences. The students preferred this accent to which they were exposed at school or during study. The amount of exposure to native speakers in their native environment made students go beyond stereotyped thinking about English and its accents.

What is Standard English?

A problem facing most of the English Language Teaching world today refers to what kind of English should be taught. One has to admit that English refers not just to one entity as it was in the past. Nowadays it is used around the world with a myriad of accents. The majority of educational staff and educators are of the opinion that Standard English should be taught since it is accepted everywhere throughout the English using world. Standard English has been defined by Trudhill and Hannah (1994:1) as the variety of the English language which is normally employed in writing and spoken by educated speakers of the language. They also note that Standard English refers to grammar and lexis but not pronunciation or accent. However, it seems impossible to speak English without an accent. Thus, unaccented English does not exist. Strevens (1992:2) agrees on the point saying that Standard English is 'a particular dialect of English, being the only non-localised dialect, of global currency without significant variation, universally accepted as the appropriate educational target in teaching English; which may be spoken with an unrestricted choice of accent.' He also says that Standard

English has just one set of grammatical patterns and core vocabulary accepted everywhere in the world and it has no ‘twinned’ accent – that is, it may be spoken with any accent. Finally, he says that Standard English is educated English. It is difficult to accept the above definition provided by Stevens. First, one cannot say there is a single standard when two standard varieties are in use: North American English and British English. Grammatical and lexical differences between are obvious. British people need sometimes subtitles when they watch American movies and texts in the books designed for English learning students are created in both American and British versions. Although both varieties tolerate each other, each would prefer to exist alone and be accepted everywhere in the world. It should be noted that these two major varieties of Standard English reflect two different cultures, literatures and histories. There will be always a struggle between these two varieties. Thus they are often taught as different subjects at universities.

What is Standard English accent?

Stevenson says clearly that standard English ‘may be spoken with an unrestricted choice of accent’. This is something unacceptable for to the majority of teachers who think that in order to teach Standard English they must use some Standard English accent. One may conclude that the Standard English accent is one heard through the media. Wardhaugh (1998:43) claims that British Standard RP (Received Pronunciation), or BBC English have ‘a certain eminence’ and US standard GA (General American) is the most generalized accent in North America. It should be noted that a standard accent is regarded as a standard not because of any intrinsic qualities it may possess, but because of an arbitrary attitude adopted towards it by society. Since attitudes may change, RP and GP may be changed by the attitudes. As to ‘standard RP’, Abercrombie (1951:14) claims that it is rather ‘a bad thing’ because it is undemocratic. He also adds that RP forms an “accent bar” which artificially divides the English into social classes. Finally, he notices that RP is not necessarily the accent of the educated since many educated people in Great Britain do not speak RP. Similar observations are made by Crystal (1985) in reference to GA who says that the world has many more non-native speakers of English than native speakers and one cannot expect that peoples of the world would use only GA or RP.

The Research Questions

Crystal’s reference to RP and GA may make the ELT teachers confused about the necessity of teaching one standard pronunciation. However, before abandoning the idea of teaching RP or GA one should see what are students’ accent preferences and what are their attitudes towards various accents. Hence, the purpose of the research was finding the answers to the following questions:

The following research questions were posed:

1. Do Polish students of English prefer to speak Standard English accent to non-standard? What non-standard accents do they desire to speak?
2. Which of the two standard accents do they prefer? Is there any relationship between age and a variety of English accent selected by students?
3. What are the reasons for which the students want to speak with GA or RP accent?
4. What are the reasons for which the students do not want to speak with RP or GA accent?
5. Do you feel the need to understand other English accents?

Survey of Students' Attitudes to Various Englishes

Participants

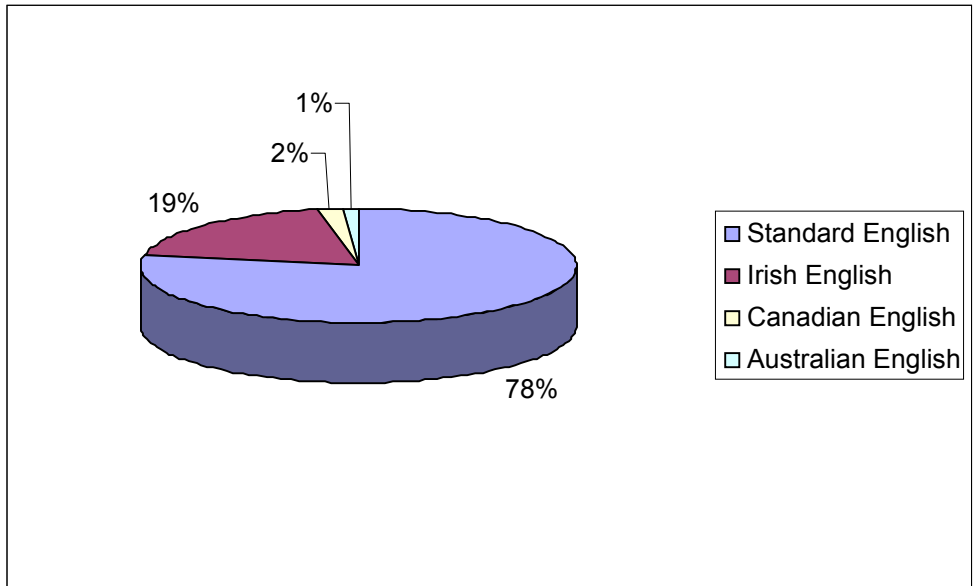
The survey was distributed among 148 Polish learners (92 females, 56 males) representing various age groups. 74 of them were high school students, others university graduates and adult learners who studied in a private language school.

Procedure

The subjects were informed about the purpose of the research. The survey was given at the end of a regularly scheduled class. The subjects were asked to answer the questions anonymously. The questions in the survey were in English and in Polish since some learners were at the beginner's level. The students had to put a tick against a box they chose. For questions three and four the procedure was different. They were provided with a five point scale (1 means not important, 5 means very important) and had to mark the boxes in the chart that refer to their individual reasons for selecting a given accent.

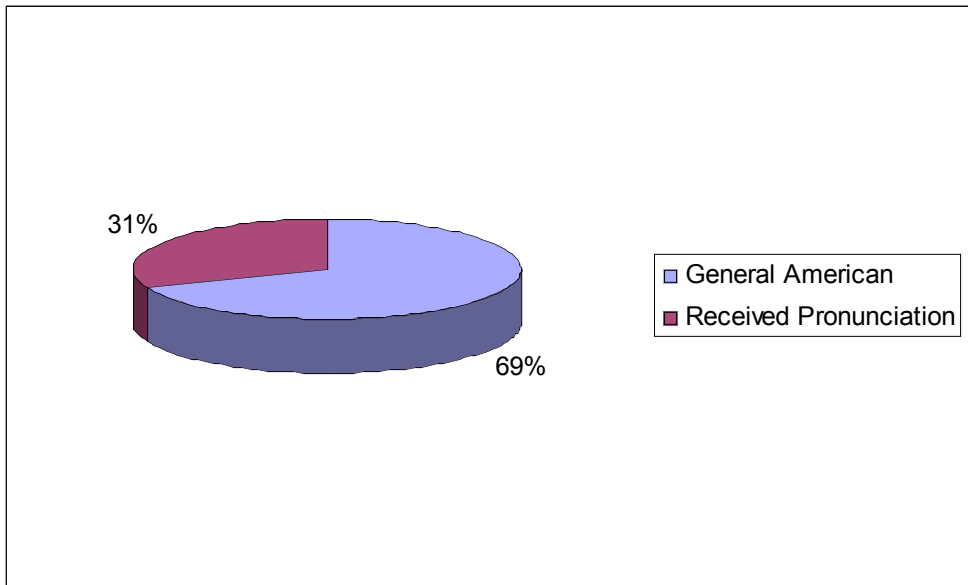
Survey Results

- 1) Do Polish students of English prefer to speak Standard English accent to non-standard? What non-standard accents do they desire to speak?



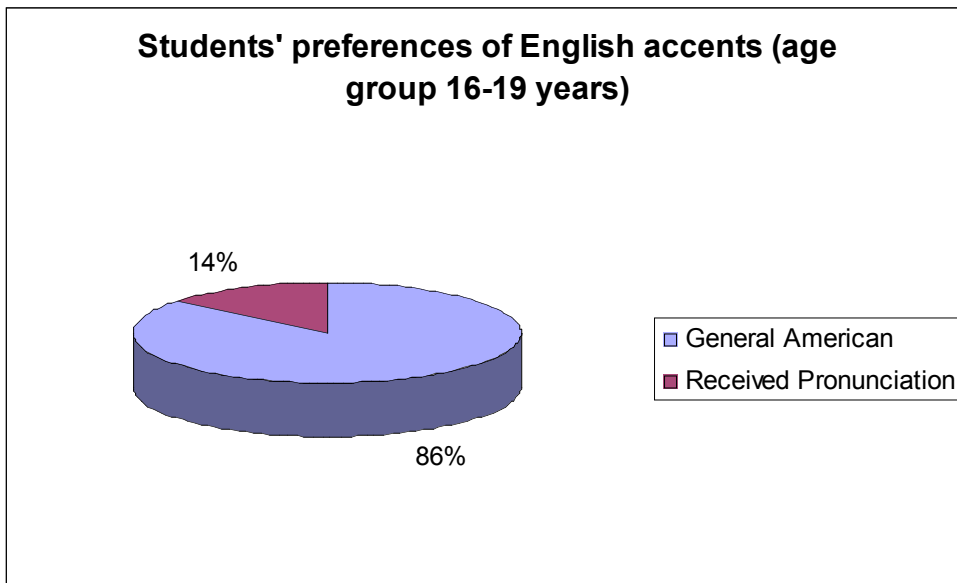
The results of the survey show that there is a positive answer to that question. 78% of the subjects showed a preference for Standard English accent, 19% for Irish English, 2% for Canadian English, 1% for Australian English.

2) Which of the two standard accents do they prefer?

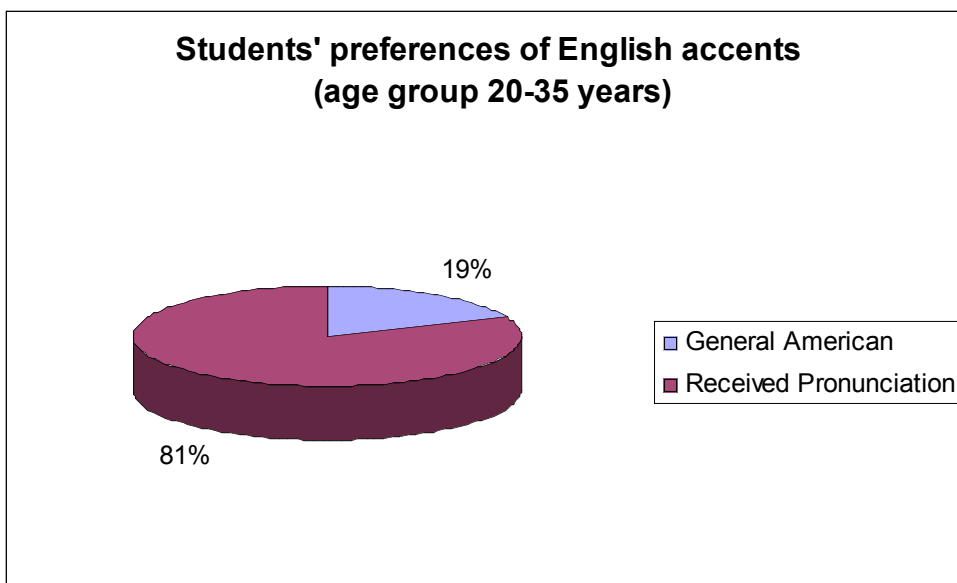


69% prefer General American accent while 31% Received Pronunciation.

Is there any relationship between age and a variety of English accent selected by students?



The majority of students in the age group 16-19 years selected General American accent (86%) which they found more fashionable, more practical and more widespread than Received Pronunciation. In the age group 20-35 years students showed a preference for Received Pronunciation (81%).



3) What are the reasons for which the students want to speak with GA or RP accent?

The answers are arranged in order of priority.

	Reasons for GA	Mean rating
1.	It is the most common accent in the world.	4.48
2.	GA is used almost everywhere around the world.	4.46
3.	USA is a leading country in the world.	4.21
4.	GA is fashionable and sounds cool.	3.98
5.	GA is the first I had contact with.	3.76
6.	GA is the easiest to understand for Poles.	3.45
7.	I would like to study/work in the US.	3.42
8.	GA is the easiest in terms of articulating sounds.	2.53
9.	Poland is a member of North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), it is related to the USA.	2.43
10.	GA is standard English accent and using GA listeners will feel I speak better English.	1.23

This data generally shows that Polish students find GA most common in the world and associate it with the political strength of the USA. However, they did not indicate any strong relations between Poland and the USA. The facts such as physical distance between the two countries or a requirement for Polish citizens to travel to the USA with an obligatory visa do not motivate the learners to choose GA. Thus, their chances to work or study in the USA are smaller than in Great Britain.

	Reasons for RP	Mean rating
1.	I would like to emigrate to Great Britain.	4.53
2.	Poland is a member of European Union (EU), it is related to Great Britain.	4.36
3.	I would like to study/work in Great Britain.	4.37
4.	RP is the easiest to understand for Poles.	3.76
5.	England is a home of English.	3.76
6.	RP is the first I had contact with.	3.72
7.	RP is a prestigious accent in Europe and in the rest of the world.	3.43
8.	RP is used almost everywhere around the world	2.85
9.	RP is the easiest in terms of articulating sounds.	2.67
10.	It is the most common accent in the world.	2.33
11.	RP is standard English accent and using RP listeners will feel I speak better English.	1.02

An interesting observation may be made when we analyse the reasons for which students want to

speak RP. The first three reasons reflect the economic and political situation in Poland. When Poland became a member of EU in 2004 many young people decided to emigrate either temporarily or permanently to Great Britain. It is reported by the media that two million of Poles left Poland after 2004. Among them there are no many manual workers but mainly well qualified high school and university graduates. We may also deduce from the data that prestige that has always been assigned to RP is not as important for Polish students as other reasons. Polish learners seem to be very pragmatic when it comes to their reasons for choosing RP – it is the accent they found the easiest to understand for the Poles and communicating in it gives them a chance to function as a member of native speakers' community.

It is worth noticing that students did not associate using any standard English accents with better abilities to speak English or better perception of their English by listeners.

4) What are the reasons for which the students do not want to speak with RP or GA accent?

	Reasons for rejecting GA	Mean rating
1.	It sounds too informal.	4.83
2.	It requires an effort to articulate sounds.	4.43
3.	It is not prestigious.	2.53

	Reasons for rejecting RP	Mean rating
1.	It sounds stiff and unnatural.	4.43
2.	It does not carry any prestige now.	4.41
3.	You can hardly communicate using RP outside Great Britain.	4.30
4.	Many educated people in Great Britain speak Estuary English (southern accent) and RP.	3.19
5.	It requires an effort to articulate sounds.	2.32

5) Do you feel the need to understand other English accents?

The majority of students (93%) perceive the need to understand the speakers with other accents than RP or GA. Even if they declared that they desired to speak Standard English accents they admitted that understanding non standard accents was important and they wanted to be exposed to those accents without having any fear that this exposure may influence negatively on their standard English accent.

Teaching Implications

The question that I posed in the title of the paper was whether teachers should ‘torture’ students with Standard English Pronunciation or not. The data shows that Polish students desire to learn Standard English accents, both RP and GA, but at the same time they want to understand non-standard accents. This means that the teachers in Poland should introduce in a classroom various accented materials and not just to stick to practicing one Standard English accent. This can be done by teaching students to differentiate and understand a variety of accents in order to improve their understanding and communication. Teachers should know that in real life situations their students will be exposed to both standard and non-standard accents.

Teachers should understand that they have to put up with students’ negative attitudes towards RP or GA which are not necessarily the best accents for everyone. There are some solutions put forth by scholars that may be implemented in a classroom where students are not keen on practicing one Standard English accent. For example, teachers may introduce a set of practical criteria for an English pronunciation model. It may be implemented in their own language situations. Brown (1989:195-219) suggests the following criteria: 1)intelligibility, 2)identity (teaching the pronunciation which the students identify most), 3)ease of learning (teaching what students acquire easily), 4)understanding of major varieties (teaching BE and AE and students should understand both BE and AE accent), 5) facilitation of spelling (Brown suggests that rhotic R may be a better indicator of spelling words which contain ‘r’ than BE), 6)attitudes of administration and 7)availability of materials.

The reasons of learning particular accents by students should also be considered by the teacher. As we can see from research results such data as emigration destination, work, travel or overseas study are of prior importance in deciding what English accent to teach.

Some further implications that are not drawn from the gathered data but more from my own experience is that the teacher should teach that accent which she/he uses herself/himself and should not try at any price to change his natural or learned accent as the effect may be disastrous. The teacher cannot be also too idealistic believing that one student’s preferences regarding the type of English he would like to learn will necessarily coincide with these of other students or with these of the teacher. It may occur that students’ expectations as to the accent used in a classroom will be beyond the teacher’s abilities. However, with a little of motivation enhanced by the teacher, students may find attractive exploring other English accents that they did not desire to learn.

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