

## TEACHING ACCENTS: PROBLEMS AND SOLUTIONS

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**Abstract:** *Standard English has many different accents. Teachers of English in Indonesia might have problems in their classrooms such as intelligibility, negative attitudes towards accents, differences of accents in different materials and between students' needs/expectation and teacher's awareness of variations. This article has addressed some solutions. Some of them are: Teachers should teach the varieties of Standard English they master either American English or British English as a model in order to provide mutual intelligibility; teachers should try changing students' attitudes toward by giving them an explanation about variations; teachers should give students explanation first about differences in dictionaries; teachers should master variations, at least AE and BE. By this recognition of the problems and understanding the solutions, the writer believes that teachers can address/solve the problems.*

**Keywords:** *Accents, standard English, intelligibility*

### Introduction

English is spoken in 105 countries and it is the dominant language in more than 60 countries (Grimes, 2000). The widespread English then has established its position as an international language (Stevens, 1992; Jenkins, 2000; McKay, 2003; Acar, 2007; Ha, 2007; Nunn, 2007; Torghabeh, 2007) or as a lingua franca (Seidlhofer, 2004) or as a global language (Crystal, 1997). It is also a fact that non-native speakers of English (NNS) outnumber native speakers (NN) (Phillipson, 1992; Graddol, 1997; Graddol, 2006). In short, English (Englishes) is being used around the world in hundreds of varieties and with many different accents (Strang 1970; Kachru, 1992; Kachru & Nelson, 1996). Because of a number of varieties and accents, Standard English emerged (Holmes, 2008). This essay will discuss some problems that teachers might have as a teacher of English in Indonesia as a result of a variety of accents and it will then put forward solutions that I might try to solve those problems.

## **Standard English**

The term 'Standard English' is used in sociolinguistic literature (see, for example, Montgomery, 1996; Wardhaugh, 1998; Trudgill, 1999; Holmes 2008). Strevens (1992, p. 2) defines Standard English as "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." Montgomery (1996, p. 69) defines accent as a term "exclusively reserved for the whole patterns of pronunciation typical of a particular region or social group." In Standard English, the world actually has 'chosen' British English (BE) or American English (AE). Which should be considered as a global standard for teaching of English in non-English speaking countries such as Indonesia? This essay will discuss this question in solutions after mentioning problems.

## **Intelligibility**

The first problem that teachers might have concerns intelligibility. Students often want and need good and sufficient models from their teachers in learning accents, so students feel that their accents can be universally accepted and understood, especially if they want to go to English speaking countries. In other words, students need a global standard of intelligibility, as Acar (2006) says now one of the desired goals of learners is intelligibility. Also, Jenkins (1998, p. 120) points out that "the difficulty is resolving the conflict between the practical need to harmonize pronunciation among L2 [second language] varieties of English to sufficiently preserve international intelligibility". The key to this problem of intelligibility is to recognize which standardized form of English is globally acceptable as model or which English should be taught, so students can achieve the goal of international intelligibility (Yano, 2001).

## **Varying attitudes**

The second problem is varying attitudes. Because language is for communication, students tend to have strong attitudes towards accents. Holmes (2008) says that some learners find it easier to understand varieties spoken by people they admire. Learners are more motivated, and consequently more successful in acquiring a second or foreign language when they feel positive towards the people who use it. Therefore, attitudes toward language do have serious implications for students. Holmes (2008, p. 406)

maintains that when “people listen to accents or languages they have never heard before, their assessments are made totally at random.” Moreover, talking about varieties, Holmes (2008) suggests that there is no global consensus about which varieties are the best and which ones are the worst. This may be true. However, some students may still have strong attitudes, unnecessary negative attitudes, about accents which may be influenced by social factors such as race, religion and entertainment models.

### **Materials**

Thirdly, materials can be a problem that teachers may face. For example, differences in dictionaries can make students confused, especially if they do not know in what dictionaries differ. As Taylor argues (1991, p. 429), “the implication of different models for different places is that we need different dictionaries for different places.” Beside dictionaries, textbooks and electronic media such as cassettes and CDs/DVDs also can cause problems. This is because they sometimes have differences in accent, spelling, vocabulary and grammar. These differences can make students confused. As, for example in accents, Wells (1982) says that different accents differ in phonemes, pitch stress, rhythm and intonation patterns which can have different meanings in different varieties.

### **Type of English accents**

Another problem is that students may have their own choices regarding the type of English accents they want to learn and use, and these choices may be not the same as those teachers that want to teach or are able to teach. Also, those choices can even be different from the choices of other students. Some students, for instance, may prefer to learn AE whereas others may prefer to learn BE. Another example is that when teachers feel that their students have ‘better’ accents, teachers may be reluctant to teach or speak English in classroom because they are not confident. As a result, teachers just use the first language and consequently there is no communicative competence in their classrooms because teachers may just implement the Grammar Translation method. There are, of course, other problems that teachers may have in Indonesia. However, these above are regarded as the problems that arise most frequently.

## Solutions

There is a range of solutions that address these problems and can be applied in the Indonesian classroom. One solution is related to the question which English should be taught, in my opinion, teachers should teach the varieties of Standard English they master either AE or BE, as Strevens (1992, p. 40) gives an answer, "First, learn educated/ educational English; second, if you have a choice of an American or a British model, choose the one that will be most useful. Don't waste time organizing over which is better." Regarding the problem of intelligibility including teachers who have students who aim to study in English speaking countries, I think teachers should choose Standard English such as AE or BE, as many experts (Taylor, 1991; Honey, 1989 cited in Wardhaugh, 1998; Acar, 2006) suggest, teachers should choose an acceptable accent such as AE or BE as a model in order to provide mutual intelligibility. Moreover, Jenkins (1998) suggests an approach that can increase intelligibility between NNS. This also promotes students' competence when they interact with NS. There are three elements in this approach: teaching of segmentals, focusing on nuclear stress and using an articulatory setting (Jenkins, 1998).

Another solution in relation to attitudes towards accents is that teachers should try changing students' attitudes toward by giving them an explanation about variations, as Torghabeh (2007) suggests, schools should take responsibility in their curriculum of variations, so that the students never think that AE is better or worse than BE. Another solution is that by giving students meaningful exposure. To help expose students to a wide their variety of accents is by giving them materials and opportunities that they need. An example of this is by using English cassettes and CDs/DVDs in teaching, learning in language laboratories or self access centre (SAC), inviting NS into the classroom, travelling to places where NS spend their holidays, for example, in Bali or Borobudur and going to English speakers' countries (if they have money). The last three examples aim to help students contact with NS to exposure many accents that exist in English. This exposure gives students opportunities to improve their pronunciation and speaking skills. Also, this exposure can help develop positive awareness towards accent variations in English.

A solution which is related to materials, for example differences in dictionaries, teachers should give students explanation first about differences in dictionaries. For example teachers explain that there are, at least, two systems of pronunciation in English dictionaries; the first one is the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) that is used in most British and

international dictionaries, and the second one is the phonics-based variety that used is in most American dictionaries. After they understand those two differences, teacher and students can decide which one is needed or more useful for them. In a specific example of my experience, I have often had teaching the difference between 'can't' in AE and BE. Because this difference has been standardized already in most dictionaries, so, I show students those two different dictionaries and then I explain the differences properly in AE and BE or give them authentic materials such as films. For example, most Hollywood's films use AE. However, some films such as Narnia, Harry Potters, Lord of the Rings use BE etc.

Another solution related to teachers' confidence in teaching accents is that teachers should master variations, at least AE and BE, as Brown (1989) suggest that teachers should have better understanding of BE and AE as major varieties which are often used. However, Brown (1989) also suggests, beside those two, teachers should recognize other important varieties which may be needed by certain students. In addition, Torghabeh (2007, p. 74) gives suggestion, "we should focus on the international norms of these different variations rather than the differences". In addition, a study on intelligibility of NS and NNS by Smith and Rafiqzad (1979) found that the Japanese speaker was understood by NS and NNS of English better than most of the other speakers including the US speakers. These findings may be controversial but important. One interpretation is that NS may not necessarily be the perfect model. In other words, NNS teachers, including myself, should not feel unconfident, as long as teachers aware of many variations (Brown,1989).

## Conclusion

From the explanation above, regarding Standard English has many different accents, teachers of English in Indonesia might have problems in their classrooms such as intelligibility, negative attitudes towards accents, differences of accents in different materials and between students' needs/expectation and teacher's awareness of variations. However, this essay has addressed some solutions. By this recognition of the problems and understanding the solutions, I believe that teachers can address/solve the problems. Finally, further research is certainly needed to explore more solutions on the problems.

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