

SOUND PREPARATION: ACCENTS IN IELTS LISTENING MATERIALS

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Abstract

At a conservative estimate, the number of ESOL speakers of English worldwide is now double that of native speakers. Because universities recruit academic staff internationally, overseas students at university must cope with understanding a wide variety of accents they may never have heard before, in addition to facing the academic and English language difficulties they have anticipated for years. The challenge must be daunting. This paper reports on research over the past thirty years that has shown repeatedly that exposure to an unfamiliar accent measurably improves comprehension of it. For this reason, I argue that materials preparing English language students for tertiary education should introduce students to the vast range of English accents that they will likely encounter in the immediate future. By incorporating such materials into pre-tertiary classroom teaching, we can guide students in their exposure to a range of accents and better prepare them for their university lectures. More specifically, because New Zealand tertiary institutions widely accept the IELTS test as a valid measure of students' ability to cope with future educational demands, I believe it is particularly imperative that IELTS preparation materials include a broad range of both native and non-native accents in their listening exercises.

Introduction

The range of accents included in published IELTS listening materials is extremely limited. As an American teaching English in New Zealand, I am uncomfortable allowing primarily UK or US accents to train my students' ear, entirely ignoring numerous other legitimate native and non-native English accents. Intuitively I have felt, also, that because of their limited exposure to a sufficient range of accents, my students must have difficulty dealing with the listening demands at the tertiary level. My intuition is now substantiated with research, and I have concluded that tertiary students are at least as likely to be taught by non-native English speakers as native ones and, therefore, IELTS preparation materials in particular should include a range of English accents. Offering a greater range of accents in IELTS listening tasks is necessary for the materials to have academic integrity and reflect the situation for which they are preparing students.

The explosion of English

Before looking specifically at the limited range of accents included in IELTS preparation materials, I would like to justify the need to legitimise a wide range of both native and non-native English accents.

Figure 1 shows how Kachru (1992) and Crystal (2003) visualize the explosion of English in terms of three concentric circles representing the three types of spread. Crystal (2003, p. 60) explains it as follows:

The *inner circle* refers to the traditional bases of English, where it is the primary language: it includes the USA, UK, Ireland, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. The *outer or extended circle* involves the earliest phases of the spread of English in non-native settings, where the language has become part of a country's chief institutions, and plays an important 'second language' role in a multilingual setting: it includes Singapore, India, Malawi and over fifty other territories. The *expanding or extending circle* involves those nations which recognize the importance of English as an international language, though they do not have a history of colonization by members of the inner circle, nor have they given English any special administrative status. It includes China, Japan, Greece, Poland and (as the name of the circle suggests) a steadily increasing number of other states.

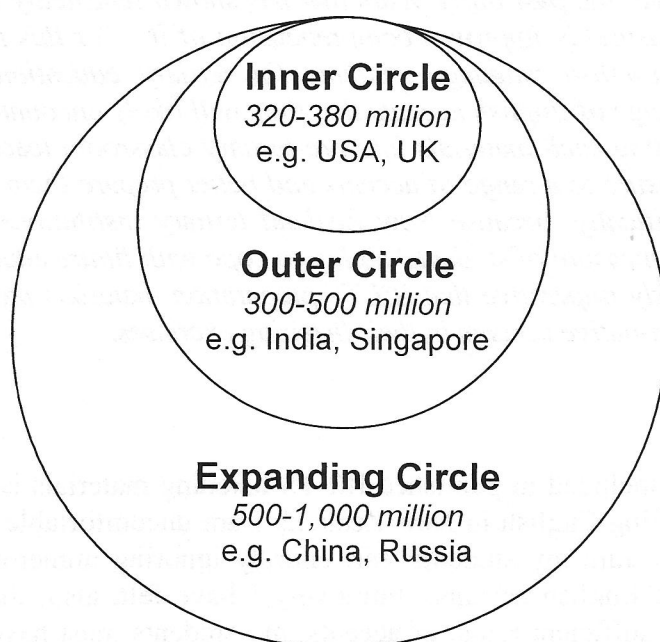


Figure 1: The number of English speakers in the world (Crystal 2003, p. 61)

Included in Figure 1 are the current estimates of the number of English speakers in each category, according to Crystal. Of particular note is that there are likely more English speakers in the outer circle, which includes non-native, often ESL, settings where English has

some official status, than in the inner circle. And perhaps more surprising, there are probably twice as many English speakers in EFL settings, where English has no administrative or official status at all, than in ESL settings.

Table 1 outlines the number of English speakers in particular countries, and quite noticeable, but not surprising perhaps, is the fact that the USA has nearly four times as many mother-tongue speakers of English as any other nation. What is worth mention, however, is that there are nearly as many L2 English speakers in India as L1 speakers in the USA, and the Philippines has nearly as many L2 English speakers as L1 speakers in Canada

and Australia combined. Salman Rushdie claimed in 1991 that the English language ceased to be the sole possession of the English some time ago. If we trust Crystal's figures that show that the largest English-speaking nation, the USA, has only about 20% of the world's English speakers, it is clear that no one, at this point, can claim sole ownership.

Table 1: The number of speakers of English in territories where the language has had special relevance. (Crystal 2003, pp. 62-65)

	Territory	Population in 2001	L1 Estimate Usage	L2 Estimate Usage
Inner Circle	USA	278 million	215 million	26 million
	UK	60 million	58 million	1.5 million
	Canada	32 million	20 million	7 million
	Australia	19 million	15 million	3.5 million
	Ireland	3.85million	3.75 million	100,000
	N. Z.	3.85 million	3.7 million	150,000
	Total	396.7 million	315.5 million	38.3 million
Outer Circle	So. Africa	44 million	3.7 million	11 million
	India	1 billion	350,000	200 million
	Philippines	83 million	20,000	40 million
	Malaysia	22 million	380,000	7 million
	Singapore	4.3 million	350,000	2 million
	Partial total	1.153 billion	4.8 million	260 million

Diversity of academic staff at the tertiary level

The academic staff at the University of Otago is extremely diverse. As an example, in 2002 56% of the academic staff in the School of Business was from overseas, representing the entire 'inner core' as well as 13 additional countries from the outer and expanding circles (K. Rabel, personal communication, October 23, 2002). If you ask yourself whether the diversity of academic staff around the world has caused misunderstanding in the university setting, it does not take long to answer 'yes'. One need only refer to the bibliography of Rubin and Smith's 1990 article to see that colleges and universities all over are struggling with how to best deal with their highly educated non-native speaking teaching staff. Students appear to be struggling also, for at the University of Georgia, Rubin and Smith found that 40% of their subjects had dropped at least one class taught by a non-native speaker. They raise the valid question of who owns the problem, and they conclude that in their particular case it is the North American undergraduates who need to be trained to listen to accented English.

The limited range of accents in IELTS preparation materials

In researching this paper I contacted five publishers to ask about the range of accents they include on their IELTS materials, and their responses are listed in Table 2 below. I was surprised to learn that Insearch Publishers at the University of Technology in Sydney include only UK and Australian accents in their publications *The IELTS Preparation Course* and *The New Prepare for IELTS: Academic Module* (J. Hannan, personal communication, September 7, 2002). NCELTR, another Australian publisher, is only slightly better, including UK, USA and Australian accents in their *IELTS Strategies for Study* and *IELTS Practice Tests*. They have, however, shown an awareness of the issue as *Focusing on IELTS*, a later publication, includes some Asian accents in addition to a range of accents from the 'inner core' countries (M. Ulukan, personal communication, September 6, 2002).

Cambridge recognises the legitimacy of accents from the traditional English bases (K. Greenleaf, personal communication, September 6, 2002) as does Pearson (J. Wong, personal communication, September 6, 2002), but, unfortunately, the accents in their publications *Cambridge IELTS 2*, *Cambridge Practice Tests*, *Insight into IELTS*, *Focus on IELTS*, and *IELTS Practice Tests Plus* do not go beyond the 'inner core'. Leading the field, though still with some way to go, is Oxford University Press who in their text *IELTS Preparation and Practice: Listening and Speaking* offer the most diverse collection of native and non-native accents, including Indian and South American accents. The non-native accents account for approximately 5% of the listening material.

Table 2: Accents included in a variety of IELTS preparation materials

Publisher	Title	Pub. Date	Accents Included
Insearch (Australian)	Prepare for IELTS: The IELTS Preparation Course	1996	UK and Australian
	The New Prepare for IELTS: Academic Module	1996	
NCELTR (Australian)	IELTS Practice Tests	1996	UK, USA, Australian
	IELTS Strategies for Study	1996	
	Focusing on IELTS	2002	Inner Core with some Asian accents
Cambridge	Cambridge Practice Tests for IELTS 1	1995	Inner Core
	Cambridge IELTS 2	2000	
	Insight into IELTS	2001	
Pearson	IELTS Practice Tests Plus IELTS	2001	Inner Core
	Focus on IELTS	2002	
Oxford	IELTS Preparation and Practice, Listening and Speaking	2002	Inner Core with 3 NNS including Indian and South American

I would like to convince publishers of the need to include a broad range of both native and non-native accents in their IELTS materials, so I pursued the issue with each, and two comments are worth note. Firstly, the Insearch representative argued that there was no need for accents outside the UK/Australian range because ‘their’ IELTS assessors all come from those two countries; however, I have used both of their publications in New Zealand, where most assessors naturally have a New Zealand accent, and my students have subsequently been tested by Scottish, American and Thai examiners. The representative has forgotten that the publication may be used in a variety of countries and not considered the full range of possible assessors. Moreover, including accents from only two countries seems incredibly short-sighted since the test itself is simply a means to an end, and the end, as I have explained, is much more linguistically diverse than that.

The second interesting comment was made by the Oxford representative who said that she needed to check whether the accents in *Focusing on IELTS* were authentic or simply put on by actors (A. Castle, personal communication, October 29, 2003). It never occurred to me that any accent on a language tape would not be authentic.

Research on the comprehensibility of accented English

Research related to this topic began in the 1970s when Grange and Crane conducted a study to see how dialect, not accent, affected listening comprehension. Their study compared how Standard English speaking graduates understood Standard English and Black English. While not their main focus, an interesting observation they made from their research was that most students transcribed Black English more accurately at the end of a single session than at the beginning. They felt there was an indication that “as familiarity with the BE dialect and/or the particular speakers increased, comprehension ability also increased” (Granger and Crane 1977, p. 7), though they were hesitant to offer any firm conclusions.

By the early 80s, studies were being conducted on the effect of accent alone. Smith and Bisazza (1982) allowed only variation in phonology when they tested the comprehension of American, Indian and Japanese English. The American listeners, who in their study had the greatest exposure to the different varieties of English, scored the best, with subjects from ESL countries outperforming those from EFL countries. The final paragraph of their article (p. 269) offers the strongest argument for exposure to the English of native and non-native speakers.

It seems clear from this study that one’s English is more comprehensible to those people who have had active exposure to it. In today’s world with English being used frequently by nonnative speakers to communicate with other nonnative speakers, this study gives evidence of a need for students of English to have greater exposure to nonnative varieties of English. The assumption that nonnative students of English will be able to comprehend fluent nonnative speakers if they understand native speakers is clearly not correct. They need exposure to both native and nonnative varieties in order to improve understanding and communication.

Very similar results are reported by Gass and Varonis (1984) and Smith (1987). Gass and Varonis found that if a listener had some familiarity with the type of non-native accent they were to listen to, their understanding would be greater than otherwise. Smith went one step further and broke down understanding to include ‘Intelligibility (word/utterance

recognition) [which] is easier than comprehensibility (word/utterance meaning) or interpretability (meaning behind word/utterance)' (p. 280). Smith found that listeners most familiar with the English of a variety of educated non-native speakers were better able to interpret what they listened to, with interpretability being the highest level of comprehension. In many cases non-native listeners who had been exposed to several different varieties of English performed better overall than native speakers. The key, again, seems to be exposure.

Methods for increasing students' exposure to accented English

Perhaps the simplest exposure to different accents could come from student to student interactions, and there is value in encouraging pair and group work for this reason, but I believe there are two difficulties in relying on this method. Firstly, we in New Zealand, at least, do not have sufficient diversity in our classroom to allow for such exposure. Our language schools cater to a predominantly Asian population, with the majority of students being of Chinese descent. Secondly, intermediate or even upper-intermediate speakers do not provide the Standard English model that many students are looking for, which is why students are sometimes reluctant to value the input from their peers, preferring instead the authority of published materials. By including only Standard English, published materials eliminate the difficulty of compromised grammar and other complications that a student model can provide.

Kobayashi (1990) considers ways of incorporating non-native varieties of English into the classroom, but decides that doing so is too difficult for students; he concludes that accent exposure should occur outside the classroom, at free will. Left to free will, however, exposure often does not exist. Certainly in my classes, as few as 20% of the students choose to live with a host family, the rest opting to live in a flat, most often with friends who have the same language background as they have. Some admit at the end of a year's study that their teachers are the only native speakers they have truly communicated with. For these reasons, I believe it is unrealistic to assume that students' interactions with a variety of English speakers will occur at free will.

Matsuura, Chiba and Fujieda (1999) make two recommendations based on their study of the intelligibility of American and Irish English by Japanese university students. Firstly, they believe that institutions (in this case in Japan) should recruit teachers who speak different varieties of English to increase the students' exposure to English. With a variety of English speakers teaching, we could take this idea one step further and ensure that as many teachers as possible teach each group of students, rather than exposing students to just two or three teachers in a full-time, semester-long course. If such a variety of qualified English teachers were not available, a range of guest speakers could be arranged for the class; alternatively, educated native and non-native speaking tertiary students or adults from the community could be brought in for conversation practice. At times, however, none of these is possible or practical.

Matsuura, Chiba and Fujieda's second recommendation is that 'materials which reflect contemporary use of English from a global point of view' (p. 59) should be developed. It is ironic that this recommendation was made in 1999, and six years later the argument for the same still exists. I maintain, however, that if exposing students to a variety of native and non-native accents is a key to improving both their confidence and their understanding in

multicultural situations, and if we acknowledge that university campuses today are highly multi-cultural, then we must prepare our students for what we know they will face. We can do so by using materials that reflect the international usage of English as they prepare to enter the tertiary sector. If our listening resources included a complete range of both native and non-native accents, we as teacher would be able to guide our students in learning to understand and accept the different features of accented English.

The question is raised in the earliest research (Granger and Crane, 1977) as to whether accent training is cost effective; that is, whether the situation would remedy itself as tertiary students quickly became accustomed (through limited exposure alone) to the speech of their new lecturers, but the time lost, and anxiety caused, to me seems too great. At the University of Otago, there are often several lecturers involved in one paper, and as soon as students' become accustomed to one, another might take over. To lose substantial portions of each would be unfortunate.

I propose introducing new accents to pre-tertiary students by including a range of accents in the listening materials that are appropriate for their course. Should understanding be impeded because of the accent, particular characteristics of that accent could be addressed briefly, but my intention would not be to spend a significant amount of class time on features of pronunciation. As students gain confidence, additional accents could be introduced. My goal in the classroom would be for listening to a variety of accents to become the norm, so that students would have the skills and confidence to understand an accent they perhaps had not heard before.

Conclusion

In order for listening to a variety of English accents to become the norm, I must convince publishers of IELTS preparation materials to produce supplementary cassettes that are truly international and offer a complete range of English accents by Indian, Singaporean, South American, South African and European speakers of English, in addition to those from the 'inner core'. Firstly, they should do so to reflect the situation of English as it stands today. Secondly, a variety of accents is necessary for their materials to be authentic and reflect the range of English speakers among academic staff. And finally, I believe such a project is economically viable since there are many teachers, and even more students, in need of such a resource.

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