

## VARIETIES OF ENGLISH AND THE EFL CLASSROOM: A NEW ZEALAND STUDY

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### INTRODUCTION

English is now well-established as an international language of communication. It is, furthermore, the language most used by non-English speaking countries to communicate with both other non-English speaking countries and native English speaking countries. Attitudes towards the varieties of English spoken by native and non-native speakers, therefore, is a complex issue and one about which there is no clear consensus (Kachru 1976, 1985). Non-native speaker attitudes towards English varieties depend on a variety of factors. Language attitudes are influenced by present and past conditions such as colonisation, prestige, economics and other factors often associated with the development of a standard variety of English (Milroy & Milroy 1985).

There are a number of different options available to students of English as a Foreign Language (EFL)<sup>1</sup> studying in an English speaking country. They may prefer the variety of English spoken in the country of residence or a variety spoken outside the country of residence. Furthermore, because learners of English as a Foreign Language have more than one language in their linguistic repertoire, they very often have more than one linguistic identity. They may, therefore, wish to express an identity different from the identity represented in a native variety of English. One means of achieving this is the development of an *ethnolect* (Appel and Muysken 1987); that is, the development of a speaker's own "non-native" variety of the language. This allows the speaker to express their own particular identity in a separate code through the emphasis of certain linguistic features such as pronunciation or vocabulary.

The study described here investigates the language attitudes of a group of Japanese students living and studying abroad in an English speaking country. More specifically, it investigates whether the students would favour "their own non-native variety of English" or a native variety of English as a learning goal and, if the latter, which native variety they would choose for use in an international context. The results are then contrasted with a similar study carried out in Japan which explored tertiary level students' preferred model/s of English.

### ATTITUDES AND MOTIVATION TOWARDS LEARNING ENGLISH

A number of studies have been carried out which aim to investigate students' attitudes towards, and motivation to learn, particular varieties of English (eg. Kachru 1976, Shaw 1983, Benson 1991). Kachru (1976) investigated the preferences of students in Indian universities. Shaw (1983) questioned Indian, Singaporean and Thai students, while Benson (1991) examined the preferences of university students in Japan.

These studies provide differing results. The Indian students questioned in Kachru's study preferred British English (67.6%) followed by their own non-native variety of English (22.72%). Shaw questioned Indian, Singaporean and Thai students. The Indian students in Shaw's study preferred their own non-native variety of English (47.4%) over British English (28.5%). The Singaporean

students preferred British English (38.3%) and Singaporean English (38.9%) almost equally whereas the Thai students in his study preferred British English (47.1%) followed by American English (31.6%). The students in Benson's study, the only study carried out, so far, of Japanese students' attitudes towards learning English, preferred American English (47.3%) followed by "English with a Japanese accent" (24.1%). Benson's respondents, furthermore, were the only ones in all three studies to show a strong preference for American English. Benson describes these results as "a reflection of Japan's historical relationship with the US", coupled with "a growing feeling of national confidence" (Benson 1991: 44). British English, in his study, was not a preferred learning goal (12.2%). The overall reasons for learning English in his study, however, showed no distinctive pattern.

These studies highlight the fact that different learner groups have different language learner goals in terms of target varieties of English. Despite the different preferences, according to Shaw's study, the reasons for studying English were overwhelmingly those which are "normally labelled instrumental" (Shaw 1983: 33). That is, all the students questioned were learning English because it would be useful for certain academic or professional purposes rather than in order to participate more fully in any particular English-speaking community.

#### **BACKGROUND: ENGLISH IN JAPAN**

Japanese attitudes towards English are, in general, highly favourable as is reflected by the number of English loan words that have been and are continuing to be incorporated into Japanese (Morrow 1987). However, in order to understand the attitudes Japanese students have towards varieties of English, it is necessary to understand something of the history of English in Japan.

The variety of English spoken in Japan after World War Two is predominantly American English (Stanlaw 1987). This is the variety of English taught in schools and the variety spoken by most foreign English language teachers in Japan (Suzuki 1990). However, before World War Two, British English was taught in schools in Japan (Stanlaw 1987). These two major international varieties of English have, therefore, had a major influence in the Japanese language learning context. There is, however, no accepted Japanese model of English (Yukawa 1989). English, furthermore, is rather restricted in its use in Japan (Morrow 1987). Its use by Japanese speakers is primarily for the purposes of international communication (Strevens 1982); that is, for communication outside of Japan, with both native and non-native speakers of English. There has been little influence on the use of English by Japanese from other varieties of English such as New Zealand English.

#### **BACKGROUND: ENGLISH IN NEW ZEALAND**

Although the variety of English spoken by New Zealanders has been recognised by linguists as a major international variety (Trudgill and Hannah 1985), there is still some resistance towards accepting varieties such as New Zealand English as a model for the EFL classroom (Kachru 1985). Furthermore, native speaker attitudes, including those of New Zealanders, towards New Zealand English is not entirely favourable (Holmes and Bell 1990). Indeed, certain studies carried out with New Zealanders have shown that many respondents prefer Received Pronunciation (RP), that is, the prestige variety of British standard English, over New Zealand English.

In many multilingual settings, a variety of English is often used in a diglossic context in which English

is viewed as the high language, and used in schools, government and in business and the local language is used for all other communication purposes. New Zealand, however, although a multi-lingual setting in many ways, does not fit into this context as English is still the language of communication at most levels within the greater community and in most communication contexts. It, thus, provides a testing ground for a language attitudes study such as the one described here.

### **STUDENT SAMPLE**

The study described here was undertaken in a tertiary level College in New Zealand, situated in a semi-rural city with a population of approximately 70,000. During the period of the survey, 172 Japanese students were enrolled in a two-year programme at the College. 105 of the students were registered in the first year of the programme and 67 students in the second year. The students were predominantly male (76%) and aged between 18 and 21.

During the first year of their studies at the College, students focus on increasing their competence in English. In the second year of the program, students choose one particular field of study from Environmental Studies, International Business, English as an International Language and International Relations.

The students involved in the study had similar language learning backgrounds. All had learned English as a Foreign Language in Japan and most had studied English for six years at High School or Junior College in Japan before coming to New Zealand for further study. The students' English language teachers in Japan had been primarily non-native speakers of English whose first language was Japanese.

### **DESIGN OF THE QUESTIONNAIRE**

A questionnaire was designed to examine a number of background details which may impact on the students' attitudes towards English. The following factors were considered: if anyone in the immediate family spoke English and where they had learned it; if the student had travelled previously to another English speaking country; and if the students had had any exposure to English speakers in Japan before coming to New Zealand. The study also took into account the sex of the learner, the amount of time the students had spent in New Zealand, as well as their reasons for their choice of language variety. This paper will cover the part of the study which relates to contact with native speakers and native varieties of English, learner goals and reasons for choosing particular varieties of English as a learning goal.

### **ADMINISTRATION OF THE QUESTIONNAIRE**

As the questionnaire was written and administered in English, first year students with elementary language skills were asked to complete the questionnaire with the help of their language instructors in their English language classes. The language instructors explained the questionnaire, helped the students with their English, collected the questionnaires and returned them to the researchers. Students absent from class were mailed a copy of the questionnaire. A total of 73 questionnaires were collected from first year students resulting in a response rate of 70 percent.

Second year students majoring in English language were asked to complete the questionnaire in one



of their English language classes. Students majoring in Business Studies, Environmental Studies and International Relations were sent the questionnaires in the mail. The questionnaires were numbered and those not responding to the initial questionnaire were sent a follow-up request. 33 questionnaires were received from the second year students resulting in a 50 percent response rate from the second year students. Thus, a total of 106 questionnaires were returned, resulting in an overall response rate of 60%. Of these, 83 (78%) were from male respondents, 23 (22%) were from female respondents. There was, therefore, no significant difference between the population and the sample in terms of the sex of the respondents.

## RESULTS

The results of the individual scores show the students in the study to have had little contact with native speakers of English before coming to New Zealand. Table 1 shows that 51 of the students (48%) had had no prior contact with native speakers of English. Of these, two students (2%) had had indirect contact with English through family members who had studied English abroad but had had no direct contact themselves. The greatest contact with native speakers of English were contacts in Japan. This represented 22% of the total responses. This was followed by people who had met native speakers while travelling abroad (15%) or through a combination of travel and local contacts (15%).

**Table 1** Individual contact with native varieties of English

Type of contact	N	Percentage
No contact	51	48
Contact in Japan	23	22
Contact through travel	16	15
Combination of contact in Japan and through travel	16	15
Total	106	100

Of those students who had had contact with native English speakers before coming to New Zealand, many of them had had multiple contacts. Table 2 shows that 65% of all contact with native speakers was with speakers of American English. Contact with other varieties of English was minimal. Only 13% of the total contacts was with British English. This was followed closely by Australian English (9%), New Zealand English (7%) and Canadian English (6%).

**Table 2** Contact with native speakers before coming to New Zealand

Type of contact	USA	UK	Australia	NZ	Canada	Total
Travel	24	4	6	4	1	39
Other contacts	34	6	2	4	4	50
Family	14	4	2	0	2	22
Total	72	14	10	8	7	111
Percentage	65	13	9	7	6	100

Table 3 shows the learners' preferred varieties of English. Due to the nature of the question, the respondents could choose as many varieties as they wished. The results were split between one variety (39%) and a combination of varieties (47%). The remainder of the sample chose the "no preference" category (14%).

The results in Table 3 show that the preferred learner goal was a combination of American and British English (25%). This is surprising given the learners' relatively infrequent previous contact with British speakers (see Table 2). The second most popular choice was American English (20%). British English was third (14%). The "no preference" category was equally ranked (14%) alongside British English. New Zealand English was not viewed as a favourable learner goal on its own. It was, however, favoured as part of a combination with other varieties of English (14%). The other native varieties of English were not viewed highly either as individual learner goals (1% each) or in combination with other varieties (less than 6%). Unlike Benson's students, the students in this study showed no interest in learning "Japanese English" as an individual learner goal (0%) or in combination with other varieties (2%). In fact, as can be seen in Table 3, three speakers (3%) gave an "all but Japanese variety" response to this question.

**Table 3** Learner goals: preferred varieties of English

Variety of English	N	Percentage	Variety of English	N	Percentage
American	21	20	American/ British	27	25
British	15	14	New Zealand/ American	8	8
New Zealand	3	3	New Zealand/ British	1	1
Australian	1	1	New Zealand/ American/ Australian	2	2
Canadian	1	1	New Zealand/ American/ British	4	4
Japanese	0	0	American/Australian/ Japanese	1	1
			British/Australian	1	1
			British/Australian/ New Zealand	1	1
			American/British/ Canadian/Australian	1	1
			American/British/J Japanese	1	1
			All but Japanese English	3	3
No Preference	15	14			

Table 3 also shows that 63 respondents, that is, 59% of the students sampled, chose either American English, British English or a combination of American and British English as their preferred learning goal. Although the number of instances is well-below the level needed to test for significance, the responses do suggest the learners do have different attitudes towards the different varieties.

Table 4 is a summary of the reasons learners gave for their choices. The main reasons for choosing the American/British combination as a learning goal were due to their perceived status as major varieties of English (26%) and due to their usefulness (19%). Major variety (29%) was also a popular reason for choosing American English as well as the fact that it is widely spoken (29%). However, unlike the American/British combination, the usefulness of American English was, surprisingly, not viewed as a major reason for learning this variety. In the case of British English, historical factors connected with the origin of the language (27%) and prestige (20%) figured prominently. These reasons were not chosen in the British /American combination. The reasons for choosing British English were, thus, clearly different from those given for the British/American combination.

**Table 4** Reasons for learners' choices

	American/ British English	%	American English	%	British English	%
Widely spoken	2	7	6	29	0	0
Major variety	7	26	6	29	0	0
Prestige	0	0	1	5	3	20
Origin of the language	0	0	0	0	4	27
Usefulness	5	19	1	5	2	7
Power	0	0	2	9	0	0
Personal	3	11	9	43	5	33
No reason given	2	7	2	9	1	7
Response unintelligible	2	7				
Total	27	100	21	100	15	100

## CONCLUSIONS

The study shows that the learners in this particular situation have definite attitudes concerning their preferred learning goal in terms of variety of English. Although the study was conducted in New Zealand, American and British varieties were strongly favoured, thereby showing the impact of the two major varieties on the learners' choices. At the same time, the choice of New Zealand English, as compared to, say, Australian and Canadian English, showed location to have minimal effect on learner goals. New Zealand English was, however, viewed as a favourable learner goal in combination with either American and/or British English. The results of the study contrast with Benson's study where a Japanese variety of English was a preferred learner goal among students living in Japan. The students living outside Japan showed no such preference.

The learner group under investigation was a homogeneous one, all with the same national and language background. A useful investigation would be a study, similar to the one described here, with a heterogeneous learner group in the same learning context. The study does, however, suggest that teachers of English as a Foreign Language in New Zealand should be sure to include materials in their programmes which focus on both American and British English, *as well as* New Zealand English, as their learners may in their future lives wish or need to use these varieties of English.

All language learning classrooms need to reflect the kind and nature of English interactions the learners will inevitably find themselves in. This will clearly vary from situation to situation, depending on factors such as the learners' reasons for learning English and whether they are learning English for use as a second or foreign language; that is, whether they will remain in the English-speaking country or whether their future language use will be in international contexts with other non-native speakers or native speakers of other varieties of English. Studies such as the one described here go some way to establishing learners' goals in terms of preferred varieties of English. It is the role of classroom teacher to see that classroom content and materials reflect these goals.

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## NOTE

- <sup>1</sup> In this paper, English as a Foreign Language is used to refer to a learning context in which students' future use of English will be, largely, overseas in a non-English speaking environment.



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