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info.eltireland@gmail.com   @ELTIreland

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Do Pronunciation Models Matter? Reflections from Irish and Scottish Classrooms

By Gemma Archer (University of Strathclyde, Glasgow)

Since the introduction of communicative language teaching in the 1970s, pronunciation instruction has become a neglected part of English language teaching. Though this has begun to change in recent years, as can be seen from the increased number of pronunciation specific resource books being published and pronunciation focused conferences and events being held, for many teachers, it remains a topic with which they have limited experience, knowledge, and, understandably, confidence (MacDonald 2002). However, an additional issue has come to light of late which also seems to have had a significant negative impact on motivation to teach pronunciation; that of accent mismatch between teacher voices and the models in our most reached for teaching resources.

The role of the course book in prestige model dominance

To this day, the majority of published textbooks within the ELT industry (not to mention teacher training courses and reference materials) teach a prestige native speaker model for pronunciation practice, normally Received Pronunciation (RP, also known as Standard British English or BBC English), or General American; these voices are prevalent in audio resources for listening practice too. These models persist despite the increasing globalisation of our industry, vast use of English as a lingua franca between non-native speakers worldwide, and the fact that the majority of English language teachers and users simply don't speak in such a way. Immediately we may feel the urge to point the finger of blame at content writers for perpetuating prestige model dominance, contrary to the diverse reality of English usage. However, a recent investigation has shown that it is often the publishing houses that are exerting pressure on course book writers to maintain the status quo, using only voice actors who have 'educated' accents from the South-East of England (Kiczkowiak 2021). Such reliance is outdated and severely out of touch with the reality of our industry. It can also perpetuate an idealised version of English to students (Scales et al 2006), from which divergent forms can be regarded with suspicion or negativity.

Investigating accent mismatch: a personal journey

As an inexperienced teacher, at the beginning of my career I received extremely limited pronunciation training and was entirely unprepared for the dominance of prestige models in the course books from which I was instructed to teach. I stumbled embarrassingly through a few exercises on vowel sounds and the intrusive /r/ before coming to the conclusion that my Scottish Standard English accent simply wouldn't fit what was on the page before me, and that such content was better left aside for another teacher who had the 'right' kind of accent. Years later, after further study and more awareness of this lack of diversity, I became incensed with the issue and determined to find out if other teachers had similar experiences where accent mismatch had dissuaded them from teaching pronunciation or exposing their students to local models. I reached out to Scottish teachers and asked them to complete a questionnaire, documenting their experiences while both training to become a teacher and upon qualification and entry into the classroom.

The results were revealing and alarming, reflecting a population of teachers just like me – they had next to no training and were often unsure of how to conduct pronunciation instruction when the materials did not match their own voices, and only a small number felt confident to source additional more diverse varieties. Soon after, I started hearing similar stories from Irish friends and colleagues and this led me to conduct the questionnaire a second time, but this time among teachers who were from the Republic or Northern Ireland. Over the two rounds of research in Scotland and Ireland, a total of 152 teachers shared their experiences, the results of which will now be outlined below.

Questionnaire and findings

The average Irish questionnaire respondent had been teaching EFL for over ten years, with the CELTA being their highest level of qualification. This was mirrored in Scotland, only there most respondents were employed in the ESOL industry rather than in EFL. The following key questions were asked to both the Scottish and Irish teachers taking part, and a striking similarity can be seen among many of their responses.

1. Did you receive explicit pronunciation training?

> " Such reliance is outdated and severely out of touch with the reality of our industry. It can also perpetuate an idealised version of English... "

One of the root causes of my own difficulties with pronunciation was the limited training I received, with no mention whatsoever of the differences between RP and the model spoken by all of the teachers-to-be on my course: Scottish Standard English. As such, in the questionnaire, after obtaining participants' basic demographic data, this was the first question asked. In response

53% of Scottish participants reported having received training in pronunciation instruction, 34% responded 'yes, but not in detail' and 13% said they had received none.

Among the Irish respondents, 49% had received training, 41% said 'yes but not in detail' and 10% had received none.

It's disappointing to find that among both Irish and Scottish participants, half felt their training lacked detail, if they received any at all. Many respondents also stated that if they did receive training, it was not during their initial qualification experience, but years later during more in-depth study such as on a Masters course, DELTA, or DIP Tesol. Such results suggest that there is a fundamental gap in the initial teacher training many English language teachers receive, a gap which can influence classroom instruction significantly.

The questionnaire then went on to request more information from those who had received pronunciation training, specifically regarding the model used.

2. If yes, you did receive training to teach pronunciation, which accent model was used?

63% of Scottish teachers and 60% of Irish teachers were taught using an RP model. Among the remainder of participants, 18% of Scottish teachers and 27% of Irish teachers reported being taught using a variety of other models. The remaining participants chose 'non-applicable' in response to this question, signalling they had received no training.

Having established that the majority of Scottish and Irish teachers were taught RP phonology, or pronunciation pedagogy with an RP model, the next relevant question to ask was whether this was the model they then went on to teach in the classroom.

"Among the Irish respondents, 49% had received training, 41% said 'yes but not in detail' and 10% had received none."

3. Which accent model do you use when teaching pronunciation?

Unsurprisingly, despite over half of teachers being taught using this prestige model, few went on to use it themselves.

76% of Scottish teachers stated that they use 'their own accent' as the model when teaching pronunciation, 13% stating they use 'other' accents, 9% saying they use RP, and 2% saying they don't teach pronunciation at all.

Among the Irish respondents, 66% stated that they used their own accents during pronunciation instruction, 22% used 'other accents' and 12% relied on RP.

The results from questions 2 and 3 clearly reveal a disparity between what teachers themselves are taught, and what they are expected to go on to teach to their students. Pronunciation using RP as a model is clearly not occurring in the classrooms of the majority of Irish and Scottish teachers if the data here is representative of the overall population. However, even among teachers who qualified as recently as 2010 (as per the typical questionnaire respondent) it seems there is still little guidance or input provided on pronunciation instruction outside of an RP format.

4. Have you ever struggled to find materials that matched your accent?

As previously mentioned, recent evidence from Kiczkowiak (2021) has revealed that publishing houses still prefer to produce audio resources using prestige models over diverse varieties. Therefore, it is not surprising to find that Scottish and Irish teachers rarely see examples of their own accents used in English language teaching materials. Upon being asked if they ever struggled to find materials with a similar or matching accent

19% of Scottish respondents said they 'never found materials that matched', 39% said 'yes they had struggled on many occasions' and 25% reported 'sometimes'. The remaining 17% described rarely or never having problems, though some also mentioned that they had simply never thought to look for such a thing.

Among Irish respondents, an even greater number, 39% said they 'never found materials which matched their accent', 24% said 'yes on many occasions they struggled' and 22% said 'sometimes'. Similar to Scottish teachers, a minority, 15%, claimed to rarely or never having this problem.

Some respondents seemed surprised by this question, and asserted that there was simply no need to look for materials that represented their accent or that of the local linguistic environment. However, with regards to perception training and listening comprehension, drawing students' attention to how accents change in different locations, and highlighting features they will likely encounter can be highly beneficial for listening decoding, not to mention building confidence for potential social interactions.

When introduced in a supportive way through guided tasks, students can develop positive and memorable associations with diverse forms of English, and build tolerance and awareness of accent varieties.

5. If yes, you have struggled to find materials, how did this affect your teaching?

As is clear from question 4, most respondents do not have access to materials which reflect their English or that of their local community. It was therefore useful to enquire as to how this affected their teaching. Interestingly, while similar numbers of Irish and Scottish respondents answered 'It doesn't affect my teaching' at 42% and 37% respectively, the majority ultimately report changing their plans in the face of pronunciation tasks and activities.

Instead, 18% of Irish respondents and 23% of the Scottish teach only 'the features that work' i.e. the features which are the same in both prestige models and their own variety. In addition, 18% of Irish respondents and 10% of Scottish reported the question was not applicable to them, and 3% of Irish teachers and 4% of Scottish teachers said they would simply not teach pronunciation at all in these circumstances.

However, it is noteworthy that a small sub-group appeared among the questionnaire respondents (20% of Irish teachers and 26% of Scots); they chose 'other' in response to this question. When given the opportunity to detail what they did in class when faced with prestige model materials, members of this group described a compare and contrast method where they used the 'book accent' to contrast against their own voice, highlighting differences and raising awareness of their own diverse, yet perfectly comprehensible, form of English.

6. Has there ever been a pronunciation feature in a textbook that you have been unable to teach due to your accent, and if yes what was the feature?

In response to question 6, 32% of Irish respondents and 23% of Scottish answered that they had been unable to teach something due to accent mismatch; a surprisingly small percentage, potentially due to an overall lack of pronunciation instruction being undertaken in general. Those who had had encountered features they couldn't teach reported very similar difficulties, namely vowel sounds and the post-vocalic /r/ which is not pronounced in RP, but is in Scottish and Irish English. Below are some of the responses from Irish participants detailing the features they could not teach due to accent mismatch:

The Scottish respondents were in unanimous agreement with their Irish counterparts in identifying vowel sounds and post-vocalic /r/ as being the primary source of their difficulties too.

Strategies for dealing with lack of materials and limited exposure

Clearly it is not possible to 'undo' the dominance of prestige English models in the ELT industry; to steal another's words 'the horse has already bolted'. However, there are small things we can do to increase the opportunity for pronunciation practice as well as exposure via listening practice, despite accent mismatch or lack of resources.

For example, when it comes to perception purposes and listening exposure, as highlighted in question 5's sub-group respondents, teach the 'book accent' from audio resources but compare it with your own accent in real time. Repeat this as many times as is necessary and at differing speeds, allowing your students to gradually perceive the difference, eliciting from them what variations are occurring and why. Exploit opportunities to do this, normalising the discussion and expectation of diversity among your students.

- I found vowel sounds and some diphthongs from the Underhill chart didn't correspond to my accent.
- Differences between the vowel sound in 'chair' and 'car'.
- Where RP omits /r/ e.g. horse, there, car.
- Three of the phonemes do not apply to Irish English; so I do not teach those lessons and, on occasion have to introduce my own exercises; especially around the rhotic /r/; and how we assimilate in connected speech.
- Sounds like 'caught' and 'court'.
- Vowel sounds tend to be the problem, especially /ʌ/ and /ʊ/ /ʊə/ and /ɔː/
- I don't use textbooks for listening/decoding. My students are adult refugees from low socio-economic backgrounds. They need to understand and communicate with local people. However I do use the BBC learning English pronunciation videos on occasion.

Participant Responses by Gemma Archer

Pic by ELT Ireland

Make listening to diverse '*Englishes'* a frequent part of your routine by exploiting online resources. Use different varieties from sources such as as *Youglish, Elllo*, the *International Dialects of English Archive* or *Dynamic Dialects*, all of which provide instantly accessible resources, for in class activities or assign them as asynchronous homework tasks.

Today, given the popularity of smart phones and instant editing apps and websites, it's extremely easy to make your own audio resources. Ask friends, family and colleagues for 10 minutes of their time to capture their authentic utterances using a voice recording app on your mobile phone. Recordings can easily be tailored by topic, accent feature, or by accent origin to create relevant and authentic input.

Final considerations: should we bring Irish and Scottish voices into our lessons?

Some teachers report finding no value in bringing diverse accents into the classroom and consider it unnecessary or a waste of time. For those that feel this way, the final participant comment from question 6 is extremely relevant: 'My students are adult refugees from low socio-economic backgrounds. They need to understand and communicate with local people.' While to a typical transitory EFL student listening to local accents in class may be interesting, eye opening, or helpful in the immediate term, for those students who plan to study, work and ultimately settle in our communities long term, receptive support, exposure to local varieties and listening decoding tasks could have a significant positive effect on their comprehension and confidence when communicating.

Therefore, consideration of our students' needs should be central when deciding whether or not to include local voices. All in all, it is extremely unlikely that provision of pronunciation instruction from a regional model such as an Irish or Scottish speaking teacher, nor exposure to local models in listening tasks, will be in any way detrimental to your students' progress. In fact, the opposite is a far more likely outcome.

> **"My students are adult refugees from low socio-economic backgrounds. They need to understand and communicate with local people."**

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Gemma Archer is an EAP teacher and programme coordinator in the English language department at the University of Strathclyde in Glasgow. She holds a CELTA, Dip TESOL and a Master's of Research in English language and linguistics and is the current editor of IATEFL PronSIG's bi-annual journal Speak Out! For more of the data from this study or to access the presentation slides, visit glarcher.com or email gemma.archer@strath.ac.uk

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