

Near-native pronunciation? Who cares?

Frans Hermans

It will be hard to find a Dutchman under 50 years old who is not able to understand and speak English. Dutch pupils in secondary education spend about 4 hours a week studying grammar, reading texts, listening to conversations and giving presentations, all in English, and that for four to six years. They even study cultural and historical aspects of the English speaking world. Music, films and playing online-computer games all add to a better understanding of the English language. The quality of most Dutch vowels and consonants are quite close to the quality of many English vowels and consonants. Most of the time an English utterance produced with Dutch vowel and consonant qualities will still be easily understood by native speakers of English. Phonological interference does not automatically make a Dutchman's English unintelligible. However, why is it so easy to recognise a Dutchman as being Dutch while he is speaking English?

When so much time is devoted to learning English at secondary schools, when there are so many English influences surrounding the Dutch, when most of the Dutch phonemes are already close in quality to English phonemes and when the Dutch feel confident enough to speak English because they know how to use its grammar, syntax and vocabulary, why do they sound so Dutch while speaking English? Are the Dutch unaware of their phonological interference when they speak English? Is pronunciation not a major issue for EFL teaching in secondary education? Or are the Dutch just lazy because they know they will be understood anyway, despite their Dutch accent?

I spent 20 of my working years as an English teacher in secondary education before moving on to teaching English at the teacher training college of the Fontys University of Applied Sciences in the city of Sittard in The Netherlands. My first task at Fontys was teaching phonetics to students who were studying to become teachers of English themselves. Of course I was familiar with the subject, as I had been taught the same course 24 years earlier. I remembered it being awfully theoretical and difficult and forgot about the International Phonetic Alphabet as

soon as I had passed my transcription test, to never worry about it ever again until I had to teach it myself.

Refreshing my phonetic memory, I started to wonder in what way I had ever tried to use my knowledge of RP while teaching EFL to Dutch pupils in secondary school. Had I ever focused on a near-native pronunciation with my pupils? Had I corrected them whenever I heard Dutch sounds while my pupils were speaking English? Or had I been satisfied when they were able to get the message across? Had I accepted some sort of 'World English'?

Then I started to think and worry about my own pronunciation. Yes, while studying to become an English teacher I was 'forced' to speak RP. But when I started teaching myself I sort of lost contact with the English-speaking world, as the day-to-day practice of being a teacher involves so much more than just teaching English. Did I just stop working on my own skills and let things slide? What did being surrounded only by pupils who spoke English with a heavy Dutch accent on a daily basis do to my own pronunciation skills? The Horror...!!

Yes, I had been unaware, had not really focused much on pronunciation in my own lessons and I had been lazy, too. I lost my RP accent and in that way I became a speaker of 'World English', too. Speaking with an RP accent in front of pupils who weren't aware of the existence of a standard accent (because I never told them) seemed a bit silly at the time.

I was so impressed by all the other English teachers at the Fontys University of Applied Sciences, as their pronunciation was so near-native-like (and of course that is to be expected at a teacher training college) that I spent hours each week working on my own RP accent by listening to the BBC, using pronunciation CDs, practising aloud and recording myself, etc., in order to get a more native-like pronunciation. Not only did I consider this to be important because I was going to teach phonetics, but I wanted to set an example for my students, for whom 'world English' would not be enough.

Now I speak with a relatively near-native RP accent. As a non-native teacher of English I will never sound like a native-speaker, as I started practising too late. Just like with sports, it is advisable to start at a young age in order to achieve maximum result. As with sports, pronunciation is a physical activity. Once you have shaped your muscles (in your mouth) it is very hard to try and learn new movements, as your muscles won't have the flexibility any more to adjust to all the

possible movements you need to produce the new target language. That, however, does not mean that you cannot get close, so teaching and practising pronunciation is always worthwhile, regardless of at what age you start!

Some might argue that achieving a near-native-like accent is not important at all. Any accent will do as long as you can make yourself understood in the target language. Therefore it is a waste of time to focus too much on pronunciation in class. Even native speakers warn that there is no such thing as one generally accepted accent of English, because that would imply that other accents are not completely accepted and of less quality. People might feel insulted when their accent is labelled 'non-standard', because a speaker's pronunciation is of cultural value, too.

But where does that leave non-native teachers of English? Should we accept just any accent? Should we not focus on, e.g. RP or GA? Is 'World English' enough? I dare to say 'No'! Research points out that when a non-native speaker of English is able to speak with a near-native accent, native speakers consider what is being said to be more credible than when the same sentences are being uttered by someone speaking with a mild or heavy accent (Shiri Lev-Ari & Boaz Keysar, 2010). In a globalising world, I would like my pupils and students to 'sound' as credible as possible. If I can add to that as a teacher of English, I consider it my duty to do so.

Next to that I think it would be easier for students in The Netherlands (and Europe) to focus on one particular generally accepted accent instead of teachers frantically trying to expose them to materials dealing with all sorts of varieties of English accents without concentrating on one particular accent for them to try and get familiar with when speaking English themselves. I know that some linguists might disagree with me on this, believing that it is very important to use authentic materials covering various varieties of English, so that we can understand the native-speakers of all the English-speaking countries. But in a globalising world, would it not be easier if non-native speakers from Germany, France, Spain or Italy were all trained in a generally accepted accent, so that, when speaking with each other, they would not have to struggle with so many varieties and accented (be it mildly or heavily) versions of the same language?

I know that many native speakers attach cultural value to their own accent. Does that mean that I cannot ask my Liverpudlian, Irish, or African student to use RP when speaking and teaching English in the Dutch secondary school system? Is it

fair for pupils outside the English speaking world to have to depend on a teacher's (cultural) background with regard to accents used while teaching a foreign language? What's wrong with demanding a generally accepted accent for teachers, who are role models for students, when they teach EFL. Should we use language to strengthen cultural identities or should we use language to bring various cultures together?

I was born and raised in the south of The Netherlands and, although I speak Dutch, I speak it with a heavy southern accent. I also have a degree which allows me to teach Dutch. Would it be fair for foreign students who are interested in studying the Dutch language to have to copy my heavily accented southern Dutch pronunciation or should I, as a teacher, try to teach the generally accepted Dutch accent (AN = Algemeen Nederlands, or Standard Dutch)? If you think that the latter should be done, why not drop the discussion about cultural values attached to accents and agree to focus on generally accepted accents worldwide when teaching English as a foreign language?

But which generally accepted accent? Once again, I'm on dangerous ground here. However, from experience I know that most course materials developed to help students learn EFL present sample materials based on Received Pronunciation and General American. Geographical and cultural issues may influence the choice for teaching RP or GA. However, I do not see the point in teaching South African English pronunciation outside South Africa or an Australian accent outside Australia, even if it's only meant for receptive purposes. I don't see the point in forcing my students to study in order to understand English with a mild or heavy Scottish accent. I do think it would be helpful for a Dutch speaker of English if (s)he had been trained in secondary education to try and speak with a nice RP or GA accent, so (s)he will be able to understand and communicate with the Italian speaker of English, hopefully trained in the same way, better.

So yes, I am making a (dangerous?) plea for teachers of EFL in secondary education to spend more time practising RP or GA pronunciation. Worldwide these are the most commonly taught accents and, as they are mutually intelligible, it does not really matter which of them a non-native speaker uses, as long as they use it consistently. A mixture of both would make it less credible again. Pronunciation matters and we want our pupils and students to sound as credible as possible in a globalising world. So if it matters, let's teach it!

References

Lev-Ari, S., & Keysar, B. (2010). Why don't we believe non-native speakers? The influence of accent on credibility. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 46, 1093–1096.

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Editor's note

The role of standard native-speaker accents in the teaching of the pronunciation of English has become a controversial issue over the last few years. On receiving Frans Hermans' manuscript I approached him to see if he would give me permission to seek a response to the arguments that he sets out for his own teaching context. He generously granted permission, and PronSIG members Laura Patsko and Katy Simpson agreed to write the response. This follows on p47.

Speak Out! is grateful to all three for offering us the opportunity to reflect upon the complexities of one of the basic issues in pronunciation teaching wherever you work.