Attitudes towards accents of English at the British Council, Penang: What do the students want?

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Abstract

Students often come to the British Council to learn *proper* English and accent. They assume native speakers possess accents and methods that will best aid them in learning. However, recent literature has appeared promoting local accents, teachers, and variations of English. Also, some question exists as to the meaning of a British accent as it varies by region and country. The British Council staff reflects a variety of countries leaving one to question what model and accents is promoted to the students. This paper details a study conducted at the British Council, Penang regarding the accent preferences of the students. Audio samples of various accents were played for the students including American, Chinese, English, Malaysian, Scottish, and Welsh. Students indicated their feelings regarding each accent regarding personality, social status, and model preferences. Additionally, students indicated feelings about the promotion of Malaysian English.

Introduction

The spread of English has been documented by many (e.g. Graddol, 1997, 2000) and few imagine its dominance will end in the near future. As new speakers have acquired the language, native speakers of English have become outnumbered by non-native speakers (Crystal, 1997; Graddol, 1997, 2000). Natural varieties of English have formed. This process has led to changes that have given identity and voice to non-native speakers (NNSs) who can now call English their own.

However, native and non-native speakers have not necessarily accepted these new varieties. Negative attitudes towards varieties have led some to consider them 'signals of language decay, language corruption, or language death' (Kachru, 1986, p. 27). Others have labelled them as mere interlanguage on the way to good, quality English that has yet to be obtained (Jenkins, 2003). These attitudes have been disputed by many who see them as new, valid forms of English that should be recognized (e.g. Jenkins, 2003; Kachru, 1986; Kirkpatrick, 2007; Seidlhofer, 2003). These new English supporters often advocate replacing current British or American classroom models with local English models they believe provide more realistic and useful goals for students.

As an American English teacher at the British Council (BC) in Penang, Malaysia, I have also faced linguistic prejudice. Other teachers and some students have questioned my ability to teach English due to my ethnic background. It has made me question what the students think about the various accents they hear around them. At the British Council I am surrounded by English, Welsh, and Scottish teachers. Do these teachers provide the *correct* model that the students really desire? Which accent do they find easier to understand or more desirable as a goal? How aware are the students of their own variety of English?

The paper will begin with a short review of literature examining the issue of World Englishes and how they develop. After a discussion on the users of World Englishes, the concept of English varieties will be scrutinized. This is a controversial area as many may lay claim to their own English. The classroom ramifications of acknowledging these new forms of English will then be discussed. The next section will examine the results of previous attitudinal studies of non-native speakers. Some conclusions will be drawn based on the studies presented.

The literature review will be followed by a study conducted at the BC Penang that examines the attitudes of students towards accents of English. This will include a discussion of the controversies surrounding the use of English in Malaysia. The methods utilised in the study and the subjects themselves will then be discussed. Finally the results of the study will be analysed and further implications will be discussed.

Literature Review

Global spread of English

From the 17th to the 21st centuries, the number of English speakers has grown from 5-7 million to 1.5 to 2 billion (Jenkins, 2003). While English users were originally located in the British Isles, they now reside in most countries (*ibid*). This spread has affected our lives in positive and perhaps negative ways. This section will describe some of the reasons for and effects of the spread. In addition, a popular model of the users of English will be presented.

Reasons for and effects of the spread

The spread of English has been linked to many factors including colonialism by the British Empire, migration, new technology, and Western media (McKay, 2002). Widdowson (2003) argues that English has not been *distributed* as much as *spread*. Distribution implies conformity to a set standard, while spread implies adaption as English is used for differing purposes by various users (*ibid*).

Some feel the spread of English has damaged existing languages leading to 'language death' (Jenkins, 2003, p. 138) as needs and acceptance of local languages decrease. Others have expressed concern about loss of culture as more people look to follow the ways of the West (McKay, 2002). English has been promoted as an elite language that must be learned to be successful (*ibid*).

While few expect the importance of English to change in the near future, its prominence may be threatened by other languages (McKay, 2002). Graddol (1997, cited in McKay, 2002) indicate three main threats to English as the preferred language. Factors cited include competition from other languages (Mandarin, Spanish, etc.), the need to satisfy local concerns, and demands to focus on communication with neighboring countries. The dominance of English on the Internet has already shown a decline (Jenkins, 2003) possibly indicating future trends. Now that some of the reasons and effects of the spread have been examined, the next section will examine the users of English as represented by the 'three circles' model (Kachru, 1992).

The Users of World Englishes

As English has spread to various countries, its uses have changed. For some, English is used as their primary language and for others it is used occasionally for purposes of
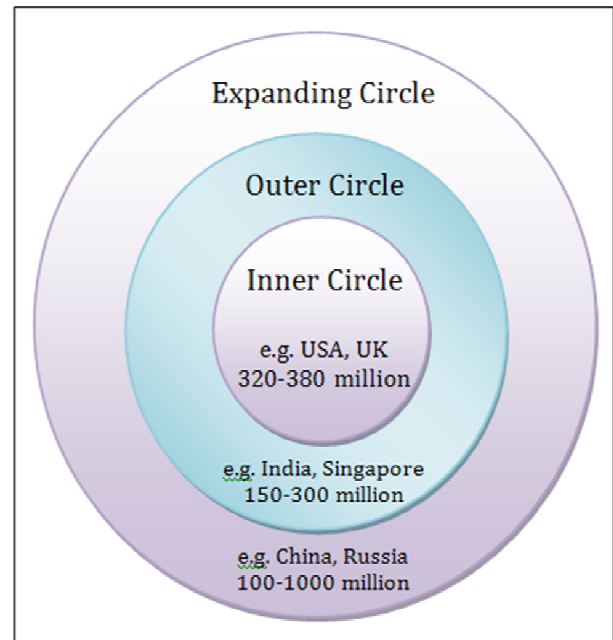
international communication. Several models for the spread of English have been created (see Jenkins, 2003, pp. 14-21) to indicate the state of English in the world.

Kachru's three-circle model

The most influential model of the spread of English is Kachru's three-circle model (Kachru, 1992). This model represents the spread of English as three concentric circles (see figure 1). These include countries who use English as a Native Language (Inner Circle), English as a Second Language (Outer Circle), and English as a Foreign Language (Expanding Circle). Kachru (1985, pp. 16-17) has labelled these as 'norm-providing' (supplying the standards), 'norm-developing' (developing new standards), and 'norm-dependent' (relying on standards) respectively.

Figure 1: Kachru's three-circle model for the use of English world-wide (Crystal 1997, p. 54)

He has also stated that Outer Circle countries generally use English in governmental and social (intercultural) circumstances.

While this model is often cited (e.g. Jenkins, 2000; Kirkpatrick, 2007; McKay, 2002), it is not without dispute as questions arise about countries which don't fit so easily into these circles and evidence of language shift leads to changes within these circles (McKay, 2002). In addition, there are problems in defining a native speaker as many users learn English to a native standard later in life or learn multiple languages simultaneously

(Jenkins, 2003). Due to these challenges, the categorisation of countries into particular circles is problematic and may be considered arbitrary.

This section has looked at the results and effects of the spread of English and presented a popular model of its users. The next section will discuss the concept of an English variety and what factors may be used to distinguish a variety.

What is a variety of English?

Background

When many think of varieties of English, British and American English often come to mind. This may be due to their use in the teaching world as the primary standards by which 'good' English is judged. However, recently new Englishes have gained recognition including Australian, Canadian, and New Zealand English. This may seem to be a normal progression as native speakers claim ownership of identity in their language. These new varieties may be viewed as acceptable since we, as native speakers, feel entitled to stake our claims.

However, what about English in other countries? Is there an Indian or Singaporean English? Do non-native speakers share these rights to their own variety?

Varieties are characterized by differences in pronunciation, lexical selection, grammar, and cultural conventions. Dialects can be thought of as subsets of language that groups of people are identified with, often based on their geographical or social background. However, there are no set rules as it is possible for people to speak different dialects even if they were raised under similar circumstances.

The word 'dialect' has garnered a negative connotation, as to some a dialect is a 'lesser, informal, or ungrammatical way of speaking' (Godley et.al., 2006, p. 30). Often dialects are compared to 'Standard English' which is thought of as the educated variety though it can be seen as a dialect in itself.

Languages are generally considered to be collections of mutually intelligible dialects. American English has many dialects (e.g. African American Vernacular English, white Southern American English) considered to be intelligible by their users (Kirkpatrick, 2007). The promotion of a particular dialect may lead for some to think of it more commonly as a language. Often this supported dialect is made popular simply because its users have more power, financial resources, and/or education.

Dialect vs. accent

When defining a dialect, often the terms dialect and accent are confused and even used interchangeably (Kachru & Nelson, 1996). However, accent specifically refers to the pronunciation of a speaker while dialect is associated with grammar and vocabulary. It is possible to speak one dialect with a variety of accents. While 'Standard English' may be linked with the Received Pronunciation (RP) accent, it is spoken in other accents by English speakers regionally in England and in other parts of the world (Trudgill, 1999).

Variety vs. interlanguage

If we accept that differences in language constitute a variety it may be useful to consider the limitations of this statement. For some, the number of varieties becomes endless while others place more strict restrictions on the term.

Some view varieties as mistakes or interlanguage (e.g. Selinker, 1992, cited in Kachru & Nelson, 1996). They view users of varieties as students on the desired path to Standard English that have not learned it properly. These views may be linked with *presciptivism*, the idea of prescribing 'the' language variety to be taught to groups of people (e.g. Quirk, 1990, cited in Seidlhofer 2003). Often recommendations are made regarding how to mend language learning problems to *fix* these anomalies before they get out of hand.

Others see it as more useful to take a *descriptive* approach and relate use and function to the various varieties of English (e.g. Kachru, 1991, cited in Seidlhofer, 2003). They consider it better to observe the varieties in their present forms and promulgate their uses. However, where do the varieties stop? Do we accept varieties based on geographical location, social, and racial mix? Or is there a testing ground to determine what constitutes a variety?

When is a variety a variety?

Bamgbose (1998, cited in McKay, 2002, p. 52) proposes five factors to determine if a new linguistic feature has the characteristics necessary to be considered a norm and part of an official variety:

- 'Demographic (How many people use the innovation?)
- Geographical (How widely is the innovation used within the country?)
- Authoritative (Who uses the innovation?)
- Codification (Where is the usage sanctioned?)
- Acceptability (What is the attitude of users and non-users toward the innovation?).'

    (Bamgbose 1998, cited in McKay, 2002, p. 52)

If we accept these determiners and examine a proposed innovation it may be judged for its validity. However, problems exist in these criteria. How many users are required to use an innovation for it to be considered a norm (Kirkpatrick, 2007)? Should non-users be allowed to determine the acceptability of another user's language? With the internet, chat, and SMS messages available, hasn't the idea of codification changed? Does lack of acceptance automatically make an innovation invalid?

What seems like a more reasonable list of criteria for a variety was proposed by Butler (1997, cited in Kirkpatrick 2007). His criteria include: pronunciation standards handed down among generations, regional lexical features and expressions, a recognised history, published literature identified with the variety, and reference works such as dictionaries or style guides (*ibid*). This list allows for users to invent and control their own language and leaves the determination of its validity in their hands.

Ramifications for the classroom

If we accept the validity of these new forms of English, then it may be natural to ask what we should do in the classroom. Should we continue to use British or American English materials or perhaps new textbooks should be created that reflect local varieties and preferred teaching methods?

Students often come to Western language schools with the notion that native speakers using British or American English present the ideal model and methods required to achieve 'good' English. However, several publications have appeared that dispute this belief. McKay (2002) argues that Western methods and models are not only inappropriate, but can also be intimidating and de-motivating for students in learning English as an International Language. She further indicates that non-native speakers may not need or want to acquire native-like competence and she presents new goals that she considers more realistic and

desirable (*ibid*). Kirkpatrick (2007) echoes these sentiments advocating the use of local teachers and models. Jenkins (2000) agrees, advocating what she refers to as the *Lingua Franca Core* that focuses on phonological goals of international communication instead of native speaker standards.

However, there are problems with these ideas. Can we realistically expect publishers to create audio and printed materials for several varieties? Would this be economically feasible? As the bulk of English materials are published in the West, are they qualified to determine the content of a local variety? If we decide to use an international standard as Jenkins (2000) advocates, then who will provide the model?

This section has discussed the concept of an English variety and some criteria to determine its validity. In addition, some implications for the classroom were discussed. As mentioned earlier, English speakers are not always ready to accept the existence of these new dialects. Often, people make judgements based solely on others' accents. The next section will examine this prejudice using a number of studies of the attitude of non-native English speakers towards accents of English.

Attitudes towards varieties

As can be seen there are many debates regarding varieties of English and liberal and conservative viewpoints on these issues. While it is interesting to see what linguists feel should be our choice of language, is it not more useful to see how students feel about the varieties that are available to them? Should students who are aware of their own needs and wants be the determiners of their validity?

Several studies have examined student attitudes towards varieties of English. Some have judged local varieties while others have asked subjects to make judgements about

varieties from other countries. However, there seems to be a limited amount of data available regarding student attitudes towards specific *accents*. Of the studies available, many did not use audio samples and simply required students to state their feelings about particular accents. These studies may be skewed due to personal bias simply towards the name of the accent.

In addition, research questions vary by study so comparison is challenging. For example, some studies required subjects to state their agreement with a limited amount of statements (e.g. Fraser, 2006) while others asked for subjects' reactions to several personality adjectives (e.g. 'reliable' (Bayard & Green, 2003)). Often the results are not equally presented causing further limitations on drawing conclusions.

The studies reviewed in this section have been limited to student studies which used audio samples. They have been restricted to non-native speaker impressions. In addition, these studies have been separated into two categories: European and Asian English speakers. Conclusions will be made regarding the attitudes of each group of English speakers. Finally, a summary of the European and Asian study results will be presented.

Attitudes of non-native European speakers towards varieties of English

Today, European countries commonly use English in international trade and government relations. While the presence of English is inconsistent in European countries (Kirkpatrick, 2007), most favour British English as a model for schools (Graddol, 1997, 2000). These countries can be seen as a mix of Outer and Expanding Circle countries as the importance of English varies. While English is relatively new to many of these countries, evidence of accent preference is evident. The studies in this section have been limited to Austria, Denmark, and Finland.

Studies

A 1997 study was conducted in Austria to examine the attitudes of 132 university students towards five accents of non-native and native English speakers (Dalton-Puffer et.al., 1997). Accents examined consisted of two 'weak' Austrian English accents, one RP accent, one 'near RP' accent, and one General American (GA) accent. Preference was indicated for native speaker accents (particularly RP) with the Austrian accents judged to be of low status. Subjects displayed strong ability in identifying the country of origin of the accents. Researchers linked the preference for the RP accent with its common use as the model of pronunciation for Austrian students.

A 1998 study of 96 secondary and university students in Denmark showed similar results (Ladegaard, 1998). Five accents were examined including RP, Standard American (SA), Cockney, General Australian, and Scottish Standard English. The RP accent was selected as the most prestigious and favoured choice as a model. Students found RP and SA accents the easiest to identify. Unlike other studies of this type, the Scottish and General Australian accents were viewed as most attractive even though the SA accent is of prevalent use in the media of Denmark.

Another study from this region examined attitudes of 137 Finnish secondary school students towards six accents of English (Hartikainen, 2000). The accents used included RP, General American (Mid-Western), General Canadian, Scottish Standard English, Standard Northern Irish, and General Australian English. RP and General Australian accents were rated positively while Scottish and Northern Irish accents were not. Unlike other studies, the General American accent was rated negatively indicating no correlation between familiarity and preference.

Conclusions

Some conclusions can be drawn based on this limited sample of studies from Europe. RP is considered a prestigious (or at least preferable) variety in the context of these studies. It has been indicated that its selection as a model in these countries may have some connection to this rating. While American accents (General and Standard) were often easy to identify, they were not often selected as a preference for school or personal use. This may lead to the conclusion that familiarity with an accent does not always lead to fondness.

Attitudes of non-native Asian speakers towards varieties of English

Asian countries often struggle to fit into the Western business world. In this rush for acceptance, these countries (e.g. Singapore) may demonstrate a prejudice against their varieties and favour a native variety of English, perhaps for fear of endangering their international communication (McKay, 2002). Studies using audio samples from Asia have been restricted in number and are often focused on limited countries. Due to this restriction, one may wonder which accent Asian students would like to emulate and have as a model in the classroom. The studies in this section have been limited to Japan, Singapore, China, and Malaysia.

Studies

In 2006, a study was undertaken with two groups of high school students in Japan (Fraser, 2006). Unlike most studies mentioned, accents were used from Inner Circle (England, America, and Scotland), Outer Circle (Zimbabwe), and Expanding Circle (Taiwan, Japan) countries. In addition to judgement of the accents, students were tested

on comprehension and asked to complete a questionnaire regarding their opinions of accents.

Students were judged on their ability to identify the country of origin for each accent. While students displayed limited ability to identify Inner Circle speakers, the accuracy in selecting the American speaker was significantly higher than others. However, subjects were generally able to identify the origin of the Japanese English speaker indicating awareness of their accent and possibly their variety.

In terms of preference and prestige, the American accent was judged highest. It was considered the most desirable goal and model for the classroom. While the local Japanese accent was judged to be most familiar and most likable, it was rarely chosen as a goal or model. Fraser (*ibid*) cites similar results from Matsuura et.al. (1994, cited in Fraser, 2006) and Matsuda (2003, cited in Fraser, 2006) supporting the findings of this study.

In 2002-2003, studies were published that judged student impressions of accents of native English speakers in several countries in a project managed by the University of Otago, New Zealand (Bayard & Green, 2003). Accents judged included male and female voices from New Zealand, Australia, the USA, and England. Subjects were asked to rate speakers based on several personality adjectives (categorized as status, power, solidarity, and competence) and attempt to identify the country of origin of the speakers. The results for all countries surveyed were made available online.

The studies from Singapore used two groups of students: 50 male/female university students and 67 high school boys. In terms of status, the group of university students rated the English accents as highest, while the high school boys rated the American accents as highest. However, the English accents received low ratings in all categories besides status. The American accents were rated highly in solidarity, competence, and

power by both groups of students. Male New Zealand accents received low ratings in all categories. Students had problems identifying the country of origin for all accents with the exception of the male American accent. Students often selected American accents for all samples despite the country of origin. The website links these results with the popularity of American media in Singapore.

The studies from China used a mixed group of 71 university students with the same samples and questionnaires (Bayard & Green, 2003). Results indicated similar findings including the high rating of American accents in all categories. English accents were rated lowest in all categories including status (in which they have typically received favourable ratings). As with the Singapore study, students had problems identifying any accents except the American accents. Again, they generally selected American for all accent samples.

The Malaysian study surveyed 54 mixed university students with the aforementioned samples and questionnaires (Bayard & Green, 2006). Generally, accents received similar ratings in the categories of power, status and competence with slight preference shown for the American, Australian, and English (male) accents. The American accents received high ratings for solidarity while the New Zealand male and English accents were rated poorly. As before, the students had difficulty identifying any accents with the exception of the American accents. The students especially had problems identifying the Australian, New Zealand, and English accents (*ibid*).

Conclusions

Though the data varied by country and method, some conclusions can be drawn. Unlike the European countries examined, American accents received favourable recognition with

rare exception in personality categories including solidarity and status. Results indicated problems in identifying all accents except American. In addition, it was indicated that English accents may not have preferred status in Asia.

Summary

The previous studies from Europe and Asia have offered us a mere snapshot in time of the feelings of various groups of students. While we should remain cautious in making generalisations based on these limited studies, some trends may be observed. It seems that while RP is still considered an accent of status in Europe, this may not be the case in Asia. The higher status in Europe may be attributed to its choice as a classroom model. As the 'powerful variety' (Kirkpatrick, 2007, p. 55), American English seems to score highly in recognition. Students in the studies reviewed seem to be able to identify it easily. In Asia, American English was considered to be the favoured accent perhaps due to the influence of American media (Bayard & Green, 2003).

The Study

Introduction

The section will discuss a study carried out at the British Council in Penang, Malaysia. The study had two principal aims. As previously mentioned, there is limited data available to explore student attitudes towards accents in Asia. Therefore, the first aim was to explore the feelings of Malaysian students toward accents of English to provide further insight into this area.

Additionally, it has been indicated that the selection of the English variety for the classroom may have great ramifications on students' success. Hence, the second aim of

the study was to explore students' feelings regarding English varieties for the classroom and Malaysia's own variety of English.

The section will begin with a background discussion of the changing status of English in Malaysia.

English in Malaysia

Malaysia was established as a British colony in the 1800s and its use of English has gone through many changes since this time (Kirkpatrick, 2007). When Malaysia gained independence from England in 1957, English and Malay were of equal status as official languages of the country (*ibid*). However, in an attempt to raise the status of Bumiputera Malay residents, the government began to favour the use of the local Bahasa Malaysia (Malay). Despite the existence of several ethnic groups (primarily Chinese and Indian), the government changed the medium of all education in Malaysia to Malay language in 1967 allowing for few exceptions. Recently, the government has changed the medium of education back to English for Science and Mathematics classes and some have pressed for a full return to the medium of English (Nadzri, 2007).

Today, students and parents in Malaysia are often concerned about English. While other ethnic groups commonly use English for communication, ethnic Malays favour Bahasa Malaysia. Recent estimates have indicated that 20% of Malaysians have some proficiency in English and 25% of urban residents use it in their everyday lives (McArthur, 2002, cited in Kirkpatrick, 2007).

As the status of English in Malaysia has changed, the language has developed and a separate variety known as Malaysian English (MSN Encarta Dictionary, 2007) has been established. While some accept this development, others are concerned about the quality of English in Malaysia and attend international universities or language schools to seek improvement.

The sample

The study subjects consisted of two groups of students from the British Council, Penang. The first group consisted of 8 students of a Business English class. The second group consisted of 11 students of a General English class. Both groups have been rated as Upper Intermediate using the BC testing system. Many are working professionals who are trying to improve their English proficiency to aid them in their jobs at international companies in Penang. Others are college graduates or are currently attending university.

The subjects ranged in age from 18 to 50 with an average of 26 years. 8 of the subjects were male and 11 were female. They have been learning English for an average of 17 years.

Residents of Malaysia are primarily of Malay, Chinese, and Indian origin with the majority being Malay. However, the island of Penang is primarily inhabited by Malaysian Chinese. The ethnic makeup of the groups included 13 Malaysian Chinese, 3 Malays, 1 Malaysian Indian, and 2 Japanese.

Based on previous studies, often students show preference towards native speaker accents. We will now describe the methodology of the study and see how Malaysian students feel regarding these issues.

Research methodology

Students were played audio recordings and asked to answer a multiple choice questionnaire to express their feelings about six accents (see Appendix A). In addition, they were asked to indicate their general feelings about English use in Malaysia.

Audio Samples

The audio samples presented were used with permission from a website (http://accent.gmu.edu/) which presents various accents of English for research purposes (Weinberger, 2007). For each sample, the website presents biographical information of the speaker (see Appendix B).

Six recordings were used for the study. Four were chosen based on the approximate makeup of the current native speaker BC Penang teaching staff: #1 English (Oxfordshire), #3 Wales (Wrexham), #4 Scotland (Glasgow), and #6 USA (Los Angeles, CA). One local accent (#2 Malaysian (Kuala Lumpur)) was selected. In addition, one Chinese accent (#5 China (Guangdong province)) was selected to reflect the large proportion of Chinese students at the BC as a possible accent of solidarity.

Selecting representative accents is always challenging as they vary by age, region, and background in each country. The accents were evaluated by teachers at the BC and were felt to be 'light' though distinguishable and should provide a reasonable approximation of speakers from these regions. It is accepted that these recordings are merely *one* example of an accent and not a model of the community and/or country from which they have been selected.

Three of the speakers were female and three were male. Their ages ranged from 28 to 69 with most of them being in their thirties. It is understood that prejudice (based on gender or age) may be a factor that will influence the results. The text was identical for all accents presented. Samples were played in the same order for both groups of students. As

issues of fatigue may arise due to duplicate readings, these were relatively short (average of 22 seconds) in length to aid the listener. The text from the audio samples is as follows:

'Please call Stella. Ask her to bring these things with her from the store: Six spoons of fresh snow peas, five thick slabs of blue cheese, and maybe a snack for her brother Bob. We also need a small plastic snake and a big toy frog for the kids. She can scoop these things into three red bags, and we will go meet her Wednesday at the train station.'

(Weinberger, 2007)

The text was selected to contain common English words, yet include most sounds of English (*ibid*). The complexity may have caused difficulties for the participants in the study. However, they did not reveal any hesitation or pauses which would indicate unfamiliarity with the text.

The two Asian samples selected may also be subject to scrutiny. Both samples were selected from speakers who had lived in England or the US for over ten years. It is expected that this would have an influence on their accent and may be a factor that affects the results of this study.

Questionnaire

Questions were formed using ideas from previous studies (Bayard & Green, 2003; Fraser, 2006) and modified (see complete questionnaire in Appendix A) to try to satisfy the following research questions:

a) **What accents of English do students at the British Council find likable?**
b) **What accents of English are associated with intelligence or a high level of education?**
c) **What accents of English do they find intelligible and/or familiar?**
d) **What accents of English do they find desirable and want as a classroom model?**
e) **What are their general feelings about Malaysian English and their future English use?**

Students were asked to check boxes to indicate their impressions of each accent. A Likert scale of 7 was given and students were asked to check the box which most closely indicated their feelings from agree (+3) to disagree (-3) with 0 being provided as a median. No specific definition of this scale was provided. Other types of questions were also used as necessary.

Data Collection

The study was conducted on November 29th and 30th of 2007 at the British Council, Penang with permission from the BC management, class teachers, and the students themselves. The study was conducted during class time. After an introductory session to discuss the study, each recording was played twice. Ample time was given between play back to fill in the questionnaires. Time was given at the end of the session for students to complete the general section of the questionnaire. Each question (or statement) was explained and students were invited to ask questions for clarification.

Results & Discussion

The results of the study were recorded and averages were calculated (complete results are available in Appendix C). In this section, these will be explained and compared with previous attitudinal studies reviewed. While the results indicate similarities with the other

studies, many differences became apparent. The results have been organised according to the research questions in the previous section.

a) What accents of English do students at the British Council find likable?

Items 1 (friendly) & 2 (attractive) were used to make this judgement (see figure 2). In terms of friendliness, Scottish and American were judged highest while the English accent was judged the lowest. The high rating of the American accent corresponds to most
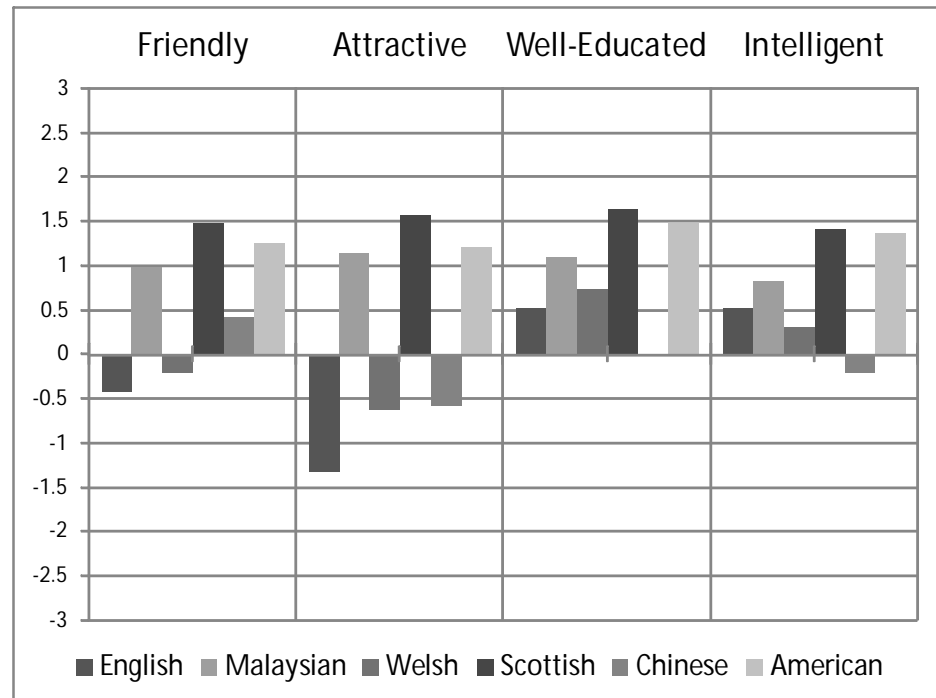
Figure 2: Results by accent and trait.

previous studies reviewed from Asia (Bayard & Green, 2003; 2006; Fraser, 2006). However, European studies reviewed rated Australian accents, English (Finland only), and Scottish (Denmark only) accents highly for this trait (Hartikainen, 2000; Ladegaard, 1998). The English accent received similarly low ratings in terms of friendliness in the Asian studies (Bayard & Green, 2003, 2006; Fraser, 2006).

b)   What accents of English were associated with intelligence or a high level of education?

Items 3 (well-educated) & 4 (intelligent) were used for this answer (see figure 2). Scottish and American accents were judged highly in these traits while the Chinese accent was judged neutrally (well-educated) or unfavourably (intelligent). The high rating of the American accent generally corresponds to the results from other Asian studies reviewed (*ibid*). However the Scottish accent was rarely judged in the studies reviewed (only in Fraser, 2006). Unlike Asia, European studies have indicated high preference and status for the RP accent (Dalton-Puffer et.al., 1997; Hartikainen, 2000; Ladegaard, 1998). Increased exposure to British speakers and media in Europe may be a factor contributing to these differences. Previous results for Chinese accent studies have not been indicated.

c) What accents of English do they find intelligible and/or familiar?

Items 5 (intelligible), 7 (used to), and 10 (country of origin) were used for this answer (see figure 3). As this study did not judge actual comprehension, the results of this question will be limited to students' impressions of the accents. Of the other studies reviewed, only one (Fraser, 2006) used a comprehension test to evaluate understanding and the results indicated high ratings for the local accent (Japanese). Students in the BC study rated American and Malaysian accents as the most intelligible and familiar and rated the English accent the lowest. There is some correlation indicated between intelligibility and local accent (Malaysian) as it is likely the accent to which the students are most commonly exposed.
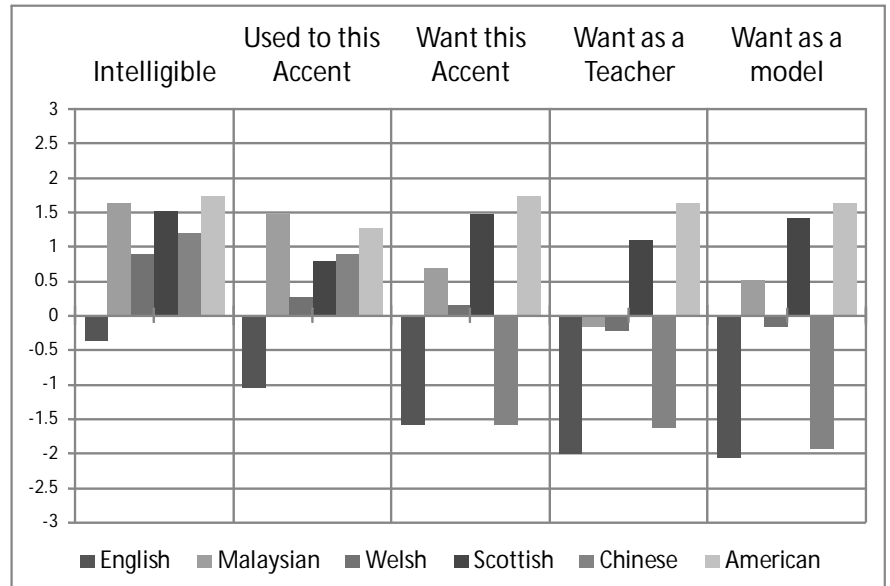
Figure 3: Additional results by accent and trait.

As with other studies reviewed, students were asked to select the country of origin for the speakers (Bayard & Green, 2003; 2006; Dalton-Pufferet.al., 1997; Fraser, 2006; Ladegaard, 1998). As with these studies, the American accent was chosen most accurately. As suggested by others (e.g. Bayard & Green, 2006), the media may have an influence on this ability as several of the available television shows in Malaysia are from America.

d) What accents of English do they find desirable and want as a classroom model?

Items 6 (want to speak), 8 (want as a teacher), and 9 (want as a model) were combined to formulate this answer (see figure 3). The differences between teacher and model were clarified during the study. Model was indicated as choice of listening materials and pronunciation standards. For these traits, the American and Scottish accents were rated highly in this study while the English accent was judged to be the lowest. This seems to contradict the students' choices on the General questionnaire (see next section, question ii) where they overwhelmingly chose English for their desired accent and model (89%). Only one of the reviewed studies judged these traits (goal and model) and the American accent was rated highest (Fraser, 2006). However, European studies generally selected the English RP accent as the most common preference and the Finnish study even indicated a negative impression of the American accent (Dalton-Puffer et.al., 1997; Hartikainen, 2000). This BC study may confirm that the American accent is well accepted in Asia.

e) What are their general feelings about Malaysian English and their future English use?

Items from the General section were used to evaluate the answers for this query. This answer will be broken down by reviewing the results of the following research questions:

  i. Where and with whom will the students use their English in the future?
  ii. What model of English do the students feel is important for the classroom?
  iii. How do the students feel about Malaysian English?

  i. Where and with whom will the students use their English in the future?

Kachru (1991, cited in Seidlhofer, 2003) indicates it is a common fallacy that English is learned to communicate with native speakers. While students in this study indicate (see figure 4) they expect to use their English in Malaysia much more (over 25%) than in the West, results show they will use their English with native and non-native speakers almost

equally (within 2%). The large amount of international companies in Penang may have an influence on this response.
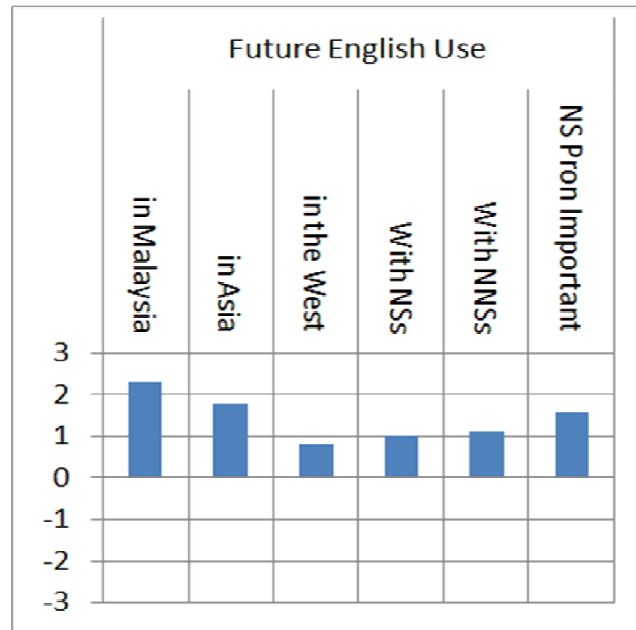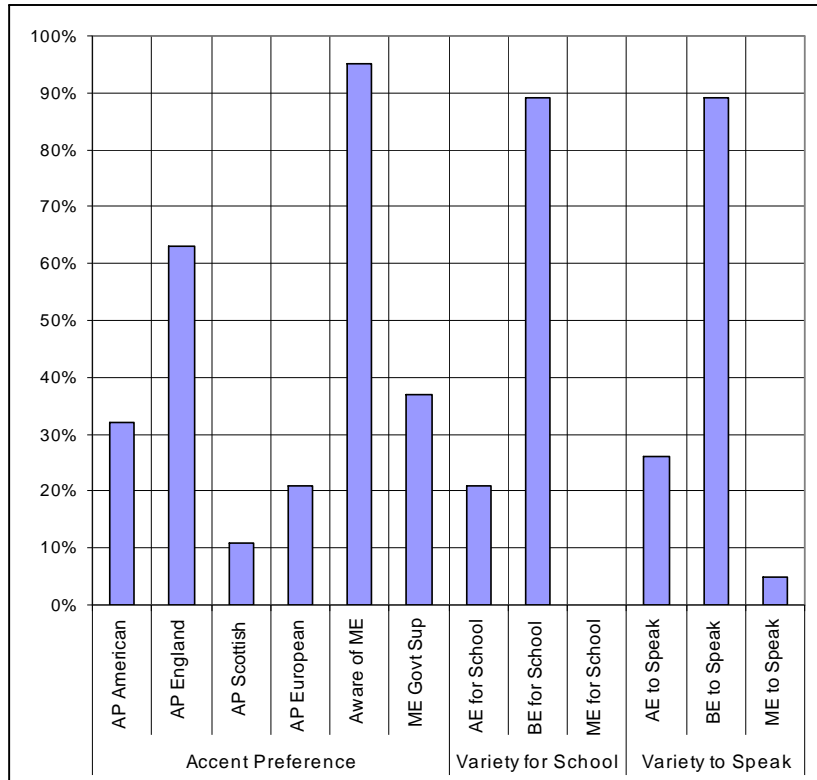

Figure 4: General results.

ii.   What model of English do the students feel is important for the classroom?

Despite the recommendations of 'experts' on the subject (Jenkins, 2000; Kirkpatrick, 2007; McKay, 2002), students (89%) supported British English (and accents) for the classroom (see figure 5). As these are students of the British

Council, this result is not unexpected. As it is a common idea that native speaker teachers and models are the best choice for class one might expect to find similar results in other schools in Malaysia. However, these results contradict students' earlier negative reactions to English (and Welsh) audio samples. This indicates students may have had problems connecting the English sample provided to their view of a British accent.

iii.   How do the students feel about Malaysian English?

In addition to items regarding model (where Malaysian English was an option, but not chosen), students were asked about their awareness of Malaysian English (ME) and whether the Malaysian government should support it (see figure 5). While students were aware of ME (95%), a limited number indicated that it should be supported (37%), or had any desire to speak English with a Malaysian accent (5%).

Figure 5: Additional General results.
Accents with no results have been eliminated.

A comment section was provided for students to indicate their feelings about having a Malaysian English variety. While most students indicated they felt that ME was an inferior variety of English, some indicated a certain pride or purpose for it as a variety. This may indicate some support for its acceptance in the community for specific purposes such as social situations. However, their lack of interest in supporting it as a classroom language indicates that they may still have a long way to go before recognising it as on equal terms with other varieties. These results seem similar to the case of Singapore (McKay, 2002) where residents expressed shame when referring to 'Singlish'.

Discussion

Due to the limitations of the study, it would be unfair to present this data as a complete representation of Malaysia or even all students at the British Councils in Malaysia. However, some conclusions may be drawn. The students' high ratings of Scottish and American accents in all categories points to awareness of different accents and some agreement on which ones they like. The lacklustre ratings of the English accent may indicate a trend that can be connected with other parts of Asia.

This may bring one to question the varieties and models of English being used in the classrooms in Asia. Should British English be used with American accents, which the study results have indicated is the student desire? Or perhaps a variety of accents from various regions would be more appropriate and manageable.

The undeniable influence of the American media has been connected to the preference demonstrated for American accents in Asia. Yet, why has the Scottish accent received such favourable ratings in this study? Further investigative methods would be useful to clarify the meaning of these results and understand the motivation involved.

While there was an overwhelming preference for British English (accents and model) on paper, they were not often selected (English and Welsh) as a model or teacher when using the audio samples. This indicates that students either had problems identifying these accents or did not care for the ones used in this study.

While the students indicated limited support for Malaysian English, they seem open to its use in Malaysia though it was clearly not considered of high status.

These students share some ideas on the use of English in Malaysia. They indicate it will be used to speak in Malaysia (or Asia) with non-native *and* native speakers. It may be assumed that they will use their local languages when speaking with Malaysians, but the ethnic makeup of Malaysia may make this challenging.

Conclusion

This paper has investigated students' impressions of a variety of accents used at the British Council, Penang. It has attempted to review relevant literature relating to varieties of English. In addition, a select group of previous attitudinal studies using audio samples of speakers was reviewed and conclusions were drawn. These studies indicated favourable opinions of American accents in many contexts and limited preference for English (RP) accents in Asia.

The study itself indicates similar results with students showing preference for American and Scottish accents. In addition, students gave their opinions regarding the use of English in Malaysia and preferences for classroom usage. Their answers indicated awareness of Malaysian English, but a strong preference for British English and accent for use in school settings. Malaysian English was recognised as a useful variety, but with limited applications within Malaysia.

While useful conclusions from the study may be drawn, its limitations must be acknowledged. A limited number of subjects were used for the study and they were primarily of a particular ethnic group. Only one accent was used from each country and this is unrepresentative as each country includes a variety of accents.

The study results contained a puzzling contradiction. The students indicated a preference for the English accent on paper (British), but not when using the audio sample provided. This may indicate a poor choice of audio sample though teachers at the BC did not indicate any problems with the selection.

Students bring their opinions regarding education and what is required for success to this study. Their responses to questions may be more of a reflection of their attitudes than a reaction to the audio samples. As students of the BC, they have already selected a British English model simply in their choice of school and may look unfavourably upon local varieties.

While the study results are useful, more studies of this type could shed light on the opinions of students towards accents in Malaysia. The most obvious place to start would be in other areas and in other school contexts such as those not specifically tied to a Western variety of English. Results from these studies could shape policy decisions as English language usage changes in Malaysia.

As student motivation and attitude have proven to be important factors in attainment of language (Krashen, 1981), we may question if we should give the students what they want. As British Council students have indicated a preference for American accents, perhaps it should be included in audio class materials with accents from other countries. In addition, teachers from a variety of native speaker countries may be employed. It seems that the current limited selection of only British accents may not be satisfactory to students.

It has been indicated that it is not realistic or right to show such favour for native speaker accents or models (Jenkins, 2003; Kachru, 1986; Kirkpatrick, 2007; Seidlhofer, 2003). However, the preference for these accents cannot be ignored. If students have a desire to

speak like native speakers, then we as teachers should try to provide an environment to best accommodate their wishes.

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Appendix A – Language Accent Questionnaire

1. Age:_____ Sex:__M/F___ Years of English Study:_____
2. Ethnic Background: ☐ Malay ☐ Chinese ☐ Indian ☐ Other:_____
3. Educational Highlights:_____
4. Occupation:_____

This study examines the impressions that speakers' accents make on students in Malaysia. Often people form impressions of others by simply listening to their voice on the phone or radio. You will hear six recordings of native and non-native speakers. You will hear each recording two times. Each speaker will say the same thing. As each speaker talks, please listen to the characteristics of their voice and fill in your responses to the sentences.

For each sentence, please check (√) the box that most closely indicates your feelings – Agree to Disagree. Please mark your first impression. There are no right or wrong answers. Simply indicate your honest feelings about each voice.

The last question asks for you to check the country you believe each speaker is from. Additionally, a comment section has been included for you to add any ideas or impressions you may have about each accent. The comment section is optional, but any information (positive or negative) would be helpful.

On the last page, please indicate your general opinions about accents and English in Malaysia.

Thank you very much for your participation!

(*name removed for review*)

Recording #1 (-6)

For each sentence, please check (√) the box that most closely indicates your feelings.

1. This person sounds friendly.
2. I find this speaker's voice to be attractive.
3. This speaker sounds well-educated.
4. This speaker sounds intelligent.
5. This person is easy to understand.
6. I want to speak English like this speaker.
7. I am used to this type of pronunciation.
8. I'd like this person as my English teacher.
9. I'd like this speaker to be used as a model in class.

1. Agree Answer   ☐ +3 ☐ +2 ☐ +1 ☐ 0 ☐ -1 ☐ -2 ☐ -3 Disagree   ☐ No

2. Agree Answer   ☐ +3 ☐ +2 ☐ +1 ☐ 0 ☐ -1 ☐ -2 ☐ -3 Disagree   ☐ No

3. Agree Answer   ☐ +3 ☐ +2 ☐ +1 ☐ 0 ☐ -1 ☐ -2 ☐ -3 Disagree   ☐ No

4. Agree Answer   ☐ +3 ☐ +2 ☐ +1 ☐ 0 ☐ -1 ☐ -2 ☐ -3 Disagree   ☐ No

5. Agree Answer   ☐ +3 ☐ +2 ☐ +1 ☐ 0 ☐ -1 ☐ -2 ☐ -3 Disagree   ☐ No

6. Agree Answer   ☐ +3 ☐ +2 ☐ +1 ☐ 0 ☐ -1 ☐ -2 ☐ -3 Disagree   ☐ No

7. Agree   ☐ +3 ☐ +2 ☐ +1 ☐ 0 ☐ -1 ☐ -2 ☐ -3 Disagree   ☐ No

Answer

8. Agree   □ +3 □ +2 □ +1 □ 0 □ -1 □ -2 □ -3 Disagree   □ No

Answer

9. Agree   □ +3 □ +2 □ +1 □ 0 □ -1 □ -2 □ -3 Disagree   □ No

Answer

10. This speaker is from:

America □   China □   England □   Malaysia □   Scotland □   Whales □   Europe □

Comments regarding this accent:

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

General

1. I plan to use my English in Malaysia.
2. I plan to use my English in another Asian country.
3. I plan to use my English in a Western country.
4. I plan to use my English to speak to Native Speakers.

5. I plan to use my English to speak to Non-Native Speakers.

6. I think having native speaker pronunciation is important.

1. Agree ☐ +3 ☐ +2 ☐ +1 ☐ 0 ☐ -1 ☐ -2 ☐ -3 Disagree ☐ No Answer
2. Agree ☐ +3 ☐ +2 ☐ +1 ☐ 0 ☐ -1 ☐ -2 ☐ -3 Disagree ☐ No Answer
3. Agree ☐ +3 ☐ +2 ☐ +1 ☐ 0 ☐ -1 ☐ -2 ☐ -3 Disagree ☐ No Answer
4. Agree ☐ +3 ☐ +2 ☐ +1 ☐ 0 ☐ -1 ☐ -2 ☐ -3 Disagree ☐ No Answer
5. Agree ☐ +3 ☐ +2 ☐ +1 ☐ 0 ☐ -1 ☐ -2 ☐ -3 Disagree ☐ No Answer
6. Agree ☐ +3 ☐ +2 ☐ +1 ☐ 0 ☐ -1 ☐ -2 ☐ -3 Disagree ☐ No Answer

7. I prefer the pronunciation of _____ English speakers.

American ☐   Chinese ☐   English ☐   Malaysian ☐   Scottish ☐   Welsh ☐   European ☐

8. Which country would you like to visit?

America ☐   England ☐   China ☐   Scotland ☐   Wales ☐   Other ☐ _____

9. Have you ever heard of Malaysian English?   Yes ☐
No ☐

10. Do you think the education system should support Malaysian English?   Yes ☐   No ☐

11. Which variety of English would you prefer to learn in school?

American English ☐   British English ☐   Malaysian English ☐   Other ☐ _____
_____

12. Which variety do you want to speak?

American English ☐   British English ☐   Malaysian English ☐   Other ☐ _____

_____

13. Where would you like to live in the future?

America ☐   Malaysia ☐   England ☐   Asia ☐   Other ☐ _____

14. How do you feel about having a Malaysian English?

Appendix B – Biographical information of the speakers

Recording #1

- birth place: Henley on Thames, Oxfordshire, UK
- native language: English
- other language(s): none
- age, sex: 69, male
- age of English onset: 0
- English learning method: naturalistic
- English residence: UK
- length of English residence: 69 years

Recording #2

- birth place: Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- native language: Malay
- other language(s): Italian Arabic Spanish
- age, sex: 28, female
- age of English onset: 3
- English learning method: academic
- English residence: USA
- length of English residence: 10.5 years

Recording #3

- birth place: Wrexham, Wales, UK
- native language: English
- other language(s): French welsh
- age, sex: 31, male
- age of English onset: 0
- English learning method: naturalistic
- English residence: Wales, Australia
- length of English residence: 31 years

Recording #4

- birth place: Glasgow, Scotland, UK
- native language: English
- other language(s): French
- age, sex: 37, male
- age of English onset: 0
- English learning method: naturalistic
- English residence: UK, USA
- length of English residence: 37 years

Recording #5

- birth place: Guangdong province
- native language: Teochew
- other language(s): Mandarin Cantonese Malay
- age, sex: 59, female
- age of English onset: 8
- English learning method: academic
- English residence: England, Malaysia
- length of English residence: 13 years

Recording #6

- birth place: Los Angeles, California, USA
- native language: English
- other language(s): Spanish
- age, sex: 39, female
- age of English onset: 0
- English learning method: naturalistic
- English residence: USA
- length of English residence: 39 years

(Weinberger, 2007)

Appendix C – Result Averages of Study

1. Average of main characteristics (Individual accent questions 1-5).* **

Speaker	Likable		Intelligence		
	Friendly	Attractive	Well-Educated	Intelligent	Intelligible
English	-0.42105	-1.3157895	0.526315789	0.52631579	-0.3684211
Malaysian	1	1.15789474	1.105263158	0.84210526	1.63157895
Welsh	-0.21053	-0.6315789	0.736842105	0.31578947	0.89473684
Scottish	1.473684	1.57894737	1.631578947	1.42105263	1.52631579
Chinese	0.421053	-0.5789474	0	-0.2105263	1.21052632
American	1.263158	1.21052632	1.473684211	1.36842105	1.73684211

2. Average of main characteristics (Individual accent questions 6-9). Accent accuracy guess and percentage who selected a NS accent.

Speaker	Want this Accent	Used to this Accent	Want as a Teacher	Want as a model	Correct Accent Guess	Speaker is a NS/NNS
English	-1.578947368	-1.052631579	-2	-2.052631579	11%	58%
Malaysian	0.684210526	1.473684211	-0.157894737	0.526315789	37%	58%
Welsh	0.157894737	0.263157895	-0.210526316	-0.157894737	11%	53%
Scottish	1.473684211	0.789473684	1.105263158	1.421052632	21%	95%
Chinese	-1.578947368	0.894736842	-1.631578947	-1.947368421	32%	100%
American	1.736842105	1.263157895	1.631578947	1.631578947	42%	74%

* Highest and lowest values per characteristic are highlighted.

** A ratings scale of +3 (agree) to -3 (disagree) was used for most questions.

3. General average results of future English and accent preference (General questions 1-7).

Future English Use					
Malaysia	**Asia**	**the West**	**With NSs**	**With NNSs**	**NS Pron Important**
2.315789	1.78947	0.789474	1	1.10526316	1.578947368

Accent Preference (AP)						
AP American	**AP Chinese**	**AP English**	**AP Malaysian**	**AP Scottish**	**AP Welsh**	**AP European**
32%	0%	64%	0%	11%	0%	21%

4. General average results regarding Malaysian English (ME) support and accent choice for school and to speak (General questions 9-12).

Aware of ME	ME Govt Sup	AE for School	BE for School	AE to Speak	BE to Speak	ME to Speak
95%	37%	21%	89%	26%	89%	5%

ME = Malaysian English, AE = American English, BE = British English