‘I would like to sound like Heidi Klum’: What do non-native speakers say about who they want to sound like?

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An investigation into the place of native and non-native speakers as role models for learners’ acquisition of English pronunciation

Introduction

English nowadays plays an important role in the political, diplomatic, commercial, economic and cultural activities on the global stage (see, e.g., Graddol, 1997, 2006; Jenkins, 2000; Warschauer, 2000; Crystal, 2003). As a result of the widespread use of English around the globe, several scholars contend that English no longer exclusively represents the culture of native English-speaking countries, nor are they the exclusive ‘owners’ of English (see e.g. Widdowson, 1994).

More notably, English now serves as a global lingua franca and is increasingly used by both native and non-native speakers as a means of intercultural communication. It is perhaps not surprising that English is spoken in a variety of accents by speakers from different parts of the world. In particular, some scholars argue that it is unnecessary for non-native speakers to sound like native speakers of English or to conform to native-speaker norms of pronunciation in order to be seen as competent speakers of English (see e.g. Jenkins, 2000, 2007; McKay, 2002; Kirkpatrick, 2007). Instead, it is suggested that non-native speakers should be allowed to preserve their lingua-cultural identity by retaining some of their L1 phonological features when speaking English, since they may like to preserve their own lingua-cultural identity as expressed in their pronunciation. As Jenkins (2002: 85) points out, they should be entitled to the right to ‘express their L1 regional group identity in English by means of their accent, as long as the accent does not jeopardize international intelligibility’.

In addition, while native-speaker pronunciation has traditionally been considered as a suitable model for non-native speakers, recently several prominent scholars (e.g. Jenkins, 2000, 2002; Kirkpatrick, 2007) have argued that native-speaker pronunciation should not be the objective of the majority of non-native speakers, since they are
more likely to communicate with other non-native speakers of English than with native speakers in today’s globalized world. Given that pronunciation is an indispensable aspect of communicating in speech, it is worth understanding the views of non-native speakers about how they would like to sound when they speak English. This article therefore reports on what a group of non-native speakers of English in Hong Kong said about how they would prefer to sound and who they would wish to sound like in English.

Understanding non-native speakers’ views

I recently conducted a one-hour workshop on English pronunciation with fifteen undergraduate students at a university in Hong Kong. All of these students were Hong Kong-born non-native speakers of English eager to improve their English pronunciation. At the beginning of the workshop, I asked them about how they would like to sound. While four of them mentioned that they just wanted to speak English more clearly and intelligibly, eleven of these students responded by saying that they would like to sound like native speakers of English as closely as possible. In other words, the majority of them regarded ‘sounding more native-like’ as a desirable outcome of their pronunciation.

Another question I asked them was ‘Who do you want to sound like when you speak English?’ By asking them this question, I was also trying to get a sense of which variety of English was perceived to serve as the ideal pronunciation model for them. To my surprise, most of these students had one or more people in mind who they thought could serve as a good model of English pronunciation. However, these students seemed to hold very different and varied views about ‘who’ (or which particular speaker of English) could serve as an appropriate pronunciation model of English, which I shall discuss below.

Native speakers aren’t always preferred as a good pronunciation model

Although most of these students would like to sound more native-like in terms of their pronunciation, several students mentioned that (some) native speakers of English were not necessarily good models of pronunciation. For example, one student stated: ‘Native speakers, like David Beckham, are not good pronunciation models. I never really understand what he is talking about on TV. His accent is a bit weird and unclear. I don’t want to speak like him.’ Another student had a similar view about the difficulty in understanding native-speaker accents: ‘American accents are really difficult to understand. Sometimes, I have to read the subtitles when I am watching Hollywood movies. I am not sure if I should regard these American actors as the model speakers of English. To me, American accents are not exactly as intelligible as I used to think.’ Another student also mentioned that she was aware of the prestige associated with a native-speaker accent, but did not find it intelligible: ‘To be honest with you, I don’t quite understand what Harry Potter is talking about when I watched the movie. He sounds too British, I suppose. Everybody is saying how prestigious the British accent is, but I don’t think British English is easy to understand. Sometimes, I think it’s not clear. And I think I had trouble understanding the British accent.’

From the comments here, there seems to be a mismatch between the idealized notion of a native-speaker accent and the accent in reality. Although native-speaker accents were thought to be the ‘ideal’ pronunciation model in their minds, these students did not find these accents intelligible in reality. Furthermore, while these students indicated that they would like to achieve a native-like pronunciation, they did not necessarily see native speakers as the ‘default’, or appropriate, pronunciation model. In particular, their contact with certain native-speaker varieties of English made them realize that native-speaker pronunciation was not necessarily intelligible or appropriate for imitation.

In addition, two of the students explicitly stated that they did not want to speak English with an American accent because of it being closely associated with the American culture. One of them said: ‘I don’t think I want to sound like the Americans. I would avoid doing so. I think we can now easily feel the American influence around the world, but some of their influences are not positive. More importantly, such a development poses a threat to the existence of cultural diversity. So I don’t want to sound like the Americans.’ Another student echoed this: ‘Some of the Americans I know are very self-centred and they always think that they are the centre of the world. I don’t want to sound like them or be identified as Americans.’ From the two students’ responses, it is clear that their resistance to speaking English with an American accent was related to their negative perceptions of the widespread American presence in the global
world and of the American people in general. In other words, it seems that psychological and socio-cultural reasons may come into play and account for the students’ decisions as to whether or not to sound like a particular group of native speakers of English. In this case, as a result of the unfavourable impressions of native-speaker countries and their people, particular native-speaker accents may not be viewed positively by non-native speakers, or preferred as the pronunciation model.

Local non-native speakers of English as the pronunciation model

Four other students also mentioned examples of the accent of educated Hong Kong speakers of English as the ideal pronunciation model. One of the students stated: ‘I like to sound like the news reporters on TVB Pearl, the English TV channel in Hong Kong. Although these reporters are from Hong Kong, they don’t seem to speak English with an accent. I mean their accent is quite native-like. It’s very clear and I find them pleasant to listen to.’ Another student also shared a similar idea and reported that she would like to sound like the former Chief Secretary of Hong Kong: ‘I think Anson Chan can serve as a good model. She was born and raised in Hong Kong, but her English pronunciation is very clear. I don’t think it is any different from native-speaker accent. She also speaks English with good intonation. I think she can be my pronunciation model.’ Another student also mentioned another good example of English pronunciation, Ti-liang Yang, the former Chief Justice of Hong Kong: ‘He speaks English with good pronunciation. I think he can be my model. As far as I know, he also teaches English pronunciation on the radio and speaks English with a good accent. I think he can be the authority of the English language. I think there is no problem with using his English pronunciation as a model. I think it’s quite acceptable by most people around the world.’ What we can see here is that a number of prominent figures in Hong Kong who are also proficient non-native speakers of English were perceived as good models of English pronunciation. It is interesting to note here that despite evidence of negative attitudes towards the local Hong Kong accent in previous research (Forde, 1995; Pang, 2003; Sewell, 2009; Sung, 2010, 2011), the students showed very positive attitudes towards the English accent displayed by these educated speakers of English. One reason for this may be that while Hong Kong people may hold negative attitudes towards the strongly accented local accent (which is stigmatized in the local context), they may not express similar feelings towards some of the educated Hong Kong speakers who in general show rather few traces of the local accent in their speech. As such, the generally unfavourable perceptions of the local Hong Kong accent do not necessarily preclude non-native speakers from looking up to educated local speakers of English for their pronunciation model.

Foreign non-native speakers as the pronunciation model

In addition to several local non-native speakers being cited as providing the ideal pronunciation model, some students also indicated that they would like to sound like other foreign non-native speakers of English. One of the students mentioned the German-born world-renowned supermodel Heidi Klum as offering an ideal pronunciation model: ‘I would like to sound like Heidi Klum. She is German but speaks English with a very good American accent. Although she is not a native speaker, I feel that her pronunciation is even clearer than American speakers of English. Sometimes, I find that American speakers have a strong accent and I don’t fully understand them.’ Another student echoed this: ‘Her German accent is sexy. I just find it cute. Some American speakers have a much stronger accent.’ From the responses here, it seems that a non-native speaker of English was not necessarily perceived to be inferior to a native speaker of English in providing the pronunciation model. In particular, Klum, a non-native speaker of English, was seen to have a weaker accent than native speakers of English, but was able to speak English in a similar accent to a native-speaker one. This may explain why she was perceived to be the preferred pronunciation model.

In a similar vein, another student mentioned that he wanted to sound like French actor Hugo Becker, who appears in an American popular TV series, Gossip Girl. The student said: ‘He plays the role of a prince from Monaco. I mean his accent conjures up the image of the royal family. His accent is very clear, but obviously with a European flavor. It’s just special and is different from the American accent. I think his European accent sounds quite prestigious.’ It appears that the student chose to sound like Hugo Becker because his French accent was perceived to be associated with prestige. And perhaps the ‘non-nativeness’ of his accent was not seen to be of relevance.

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when the student decided upon who to sound like. In other words, it is not the ‘nativeness’ of the accent but the connotations associated with a particular accent that accounts for the appeal of it as the appropriate pronunciation model.

**Any speakers of English as the pronunciation model**

While most of the students mentioned explicitly people or groups they would wish to sound like, two students stated that they were not consistent on imitating the pronunciation of a specific person or of a specific variety of English, despite their wish to sound more native-like. One of the students considered it impractical to choose one particular speaker of English as the pronunciation model: ‘I don’t think I imitate any one speaker of English. I come into contact with so many different speakers of English. It’s not always possible to model my pronunciation on one particular speaker of English.’ Another also said: ‘I think we don’t really sound very different from native speakers of English. What we are speaking is English and our pronunciation is also pretty much similar. So I think I can learn to improve my pronunciation by listening to different speakers of English.’ In other words, in order to achieve a native-like pronunciation, these two students did not necessarily consider one variety of English or one particular speaker of English to be the pronunciation model. Instead, they may prefer to develop their own English pronunciation through exposure to different speakers of English.

**Discussion and conclusion**

What can be seen from the students’ responses is that while most of the students indicated their desire to sound more native-like in terms of their pronunciation, these students did not necessarily look up to native speakers of English only as the ‘model’. In other words, there is no deterministic relationship between the wish to sound native-like and the use of native speakers as the ‘model’ speaker.

It is also important to note that the accents of native speakers were not necessarily perceived to be superior linguistic models for non-native speakers of English (cf. Braine, 1999, 2010). As one student mentioned, for example, native-speaker pronunciation may sometimes be strongly ‘accented’ and does not always sound clear. In other words, ‘accentedness’ is not only associated with a ‘foreign’, or ‘non-native’, accent, but also with native-speaker accents as well, a point which is generally overlooked in the public discourses about native-speaker accents. On the other hand, the analysis shows that a number of competent non-native speakers of English were seen to serve as an ideal model of English pronunciation. In particular, these speakers were perceived to speak English with clear, intelligible and widely acceptable pronunciation, often without a noticeably ‘strong’ foreign accent. In other words, while being non-native speakers, they were perceived to speak English in a native-like manner.

Based on these students’ responses, it therefore seems important for researchers to move beyond the simplistic dichotomy between native-speaker and non-native-speaker ‘models’ of English pronunciation when they make recommendations about how non-native speakers should sound. Instead, it may be useful to suggest that any speakers of English who display intelligible and widely acceptable pronunciation patterns can provide an ideal pronunciation model. In other words, what matters is not the ‘native-speakerliness’ of the pronunciation model, but rather the specific pronunciation features, both segmental and supra-segmental, displayed by the ‘model’ speaker or speakers of English. It should be noted, however, that speakers who show great deviations from ‘standard’ native-speaker pronunciation were not generally preferred. We can suggest that while native-speaker norms of pronunciation were not necessarily perceived as the ‘ideal’ pronunciation model, they were still seen as an important point of reference among non-native speakers.

Furthermore, the analysis above also reveals that the university students surveyed were perfectly capable of articulating their pronunciation models and targets (i.e., who they would like to sound like), and that their ideal pronunciation models were quite different from one another. As a result, it may not be appropriate for researchers to impose a particular pronunciation model on these non-native speakers. Indeed, the choice to sound native-like or not is a rather personal one (Derwing & Munro, 2009), and such a choice may vary from one individual to another. As the choice of accent is closely related to one’s identity (Jenkins, 2000), non-native speakers’ decision to sound like a particular speaker of English or not may be a reflection of the kinds of identity they would like to project. Therefore, it may be sensible for non-native speakers to decide upon their own pronunciation model(s), or the speaker(s) upon whom they would like to model their pronunciation.
In summary, this article has shown the complexity of non-native speakers’ perceptions of their perceived ideal pronunciation model(s) and who they would like to sound like. It is hoped that a better understanding of these speakers’ wishes and expectations will prompt researchers to ponder the question concerning accent and identity with respect to non-native speakers. However, it must be acknowledged that, given the small sample size, the results reported in this paper cannot be generalized as the views of the entire global population of non-native speakers of English.

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