

The Use of Native-speaker Pronunciation Models

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Introduction

Native-speaker pronunciation models are part of the traditional approach in English language teaching in the Netherlands. There seems to be a widespread assumption that they are the right tool to use. At many teacher education institutions, students are taught pronunciation through these models, and in their subsequent job as teachers they pass on these skills. This system has worked for many decades and it still seems to be relatively common.

Times change, and the idea that the named models will be the right tool in the future is not as alive as it used to be. At several universities and teachers' colleges, pronunciation teaching on the basis of a model is no longer practiced. The new assumption seems to be that without such models, and without explicit pronunciation teaching, students do well anyway. There is some truth in that, because students nowadays are exposed to a plethora of intelligible and natural native and non-native English speech in their daily lives, and they are likely to be influenced by these. They naturally learn the many general principles that understandable English entails and develop their own ideas on style and accent. In a globalising and diversifying world, this new *laissez faire* approach seems to be working. The question, then, is what to do with this new reality when it comes to pronunciation teaching choices.

This article will first discuss the globalising paradigm through which pronunciation teaching may be viewed nowadays. It then lists a number of pros and cons of using native pronunciation models. It then asks the question which English pronunciation models to use and on which grounds. The situation in the Netherlands is the focus.

Pronunciation teaching in the past and now

The past

Some time in the 1930s, W. Rijkee wrote a booklet with tips and exercises for Dutch learners of English pronunciation (Rijkee, 1930s). The title of this booklet is *Engels in een maand*, "English in a month", and explicitly aims at self-study by lay learners. Pronunciation is one of the issues dealt with in this small-sized, 32-page booklet. Below are two sample sentences from this booklet:

- | | | | | | | | | |
|----|--------------|------------------|--------------|--------------------|------------|--------------|----------------|-----------------|
| 4. | Thank | goodness, | there | is | the | coast | of | England. |
| | <i>senk</i> | <i>goednes</i> | <i>dzeer</i> | <i>iz</i> | <i>dze</i> | <i>koost</i> | <i>ov</i> | <i>inglend</i> |
| | Goddank, | | daar | is | de | kust | van | Engeland |
| 5. | The | boat | is | stopping. | We | have | arrived | at last. |
| | <i>dze</i> | <i>boot</i> | <i>iz</i> | <i>stopping</i> | <i>wie</i> | <i>heev</i> | <i>erajvd'</i> | <i>et laast</i> |
| | De | boot | is | stoppende (stopt). | We | zijn | aangekomen | eindelijk |

Several observations can be made here. First of all, the author did not use the International Phonetic Alphabet (which was available in the 1930s). Instead, the tips given take as a point of departure the way spelling represents Dutch sounds, and they build on the assumption that certain sounds in English are close enough to certain Dutch equivalents to be considered the same. If Dutch speakers followed the improvised pronunciation through spelling (the italicised sentences) and apply Dutch pronunciation rules, then in most cases relatively understandable English would come out, albeit with a very blatant Dutch accent. However, because the system of ‘translating’ English sounds into Dutch is highly irregular and intuitive, very confusing English sounds would come out every now and again in spoken sentences if this system is applied strictly. For instance, the ‘g’ in Dutch is a rasped fricative (most likely to be voiceless), not a voiced plosive (/g/). The replacement of English ‘th’ with a ‘d’ followed by a ‘z’ may also be confusing.

Despite the fact that a Dutch pronunciation of English is actively encouraged in the book, British English is taken to be the norm pronunciation (the Union Jack is on the cover of the book). The norm, therefore, is a Dutch way of pronouncing British English, not genuine-sounding native-like English. The English that would come out would probably be acceptable in the 1930s, but it would nowadays be considered less acceptable. In fact, it would probably be mocked.

After World War II

The grown influence of the Anglophone world after the Second World War as well as the increasing international trade and communication led to a more explicit focus on British and American English. Rather than replacing English sounds with Dutch near-equivalents, efforts to actually sound like native speakers became more common and realistic after the Second World War. In the 1930s, recordings of native speakers were less easily accessible and discourse with native speakers was also less common. From the 1950s onwards, Dutch people became increasingly exposed to native English from the UK and the US. They were willing to mimic this speech, because they held these two countries, their liberators from the Nazis, in very high regard, and on top of that there were no realistic alternative pronunciation models widely available.

Nowadays

It seems that nowadays, a new pronunciation era has arrived, which in a way resembles the one that was common in the 1930s. The appreciation of non-native accents seems to be on the rise, European and Asian ways of speaking this language are growing in number and status, and native speakers of some of these new languages now exist (Jenkins, 2009). More and more people are developing a mixture of native and non-native accents nowadays.

An issue facing us is the question what ‘native’ constitutes. There are many types of native Englishes, and imitating a native speaker means, first of all, deciding who to imitate. British and American English are the traditional native speaker models, and they are described very well. There are also other Englishes in the so-called Inner Circle (Kachru, 1985), namely Irish English and Australian English. All kinds of other Englishes exist that are also native, like South African English, Singaporean English, and Indian English. Another category of English that is of a more international kind, and which is the native language of many speakers, is the English that the offspring of expats speak as well as other people who used to live in different places during their formative years. The acceptability of less traditional ways to pronounce English seems to be growing, and it is safe to say that rejecting a native-speaker model explicitly is becoming less unmarked than before. The status of the UK and the US is nowadays also different than before, because of highly visible political and other developments, and

some say that they may have lost some of their glory. In other words, the native speaker norm may be blurring in various ways and speakers seem to be becoming more free than before to model their own pronunciation, based on the various options they hear through modern media and in day to day (often urban and/or professional) settings.

The future

Arguments in favour of a native pronunciation model.

One argument in favour of using a native-speaker model is that it facilitates teaching and learning. It enables future teachers of English to teach their students pronunciation. Also, although scholars may feel that native-speaker models are increasingly becoming obsolete, the current situation in Dutch schools is still that teachers who abide by models still have a high status. The average pupil and their parents will expect the teacher to sound like an Englishman, or perhaps an American. A teacher seems to have more authority if they have a convincing and unambiguous accent. Students, pupils, or anyone taking a course will want a pronunciation model and they don't want their teacher to tell them that anything goes just as long as they are understandable. It is generally frustrating for students who are learning English if there is no model.

There are also didactic and cognitive motivations. Delving into a specific model helps one gain a deeper insight into language variation and the concept of a language norm. Learning a model, moreover, is a highly relevant didactic exercise and experience. Future teachers need to know what it is like to learn pronunciation and become aware of cognitive restrictions and possibilities. Related to the previous point is a practical motivation. Having a native-speaker model makes it easier to teach or take a course in Phonetics. Knowing Dutch pronunciation and that of a major variety of English helps to talk about and think about the phonetics of English, as a contrastive approach can be applied (terms such as 'more open', 'semi-diphthongal', 'lengthened' and 'devoiced' are intrinsically contrastive). This is particularly true at universities

Another argument in favour of teaching a pronunciation model is the international status of speakers. Northern European academics and language teachers in particular often distinguish themselves internationally from others by sounding like native speakers. They have a high status providing they don't overdo it in their mannerisms but just sound English or American with no or a minor accent. A reason for Dutch institutions of higher education to embrace a native pronunciation model is that it is increasingly becoming a unique selling point. Not all English departments are still teaching it explicitly. Finally, a pronunciation model is teachable; there are no well-known books and other materials for international English yet when it comes to pronunciation, only descriptive books.

Which native model should one teach?

If one decides to teach from a pronunciation model, then one basically has a choice between two major models; General American or Standard British English. Both models are written down in practice books and are widely taught. Huttenga (2017) found that amongst students of English there is a strong preference for British English, while Van der Haagen (1998) found a preference for British English amongst students at Dutch secondary schools, albeit much less strong. These pupils mostly preferred British English. They often also liked American English, but they were hesitant to view American English as their preferred model. This situation may have changed by now, but we are not sure. Edwards (2016) performed a survey amongst highly educated participants, including English-language experts. A majority (more than half) preferred British English as a model, while a small group preferred

American English. Strikingly, almost one in three of these experts reported that they did not aim for a specific model. Instead, they preferred a neutral accent.

British English is still the most common European standard. In Dutch schools. It is the most common norm amongst teachers, and schools hiring teachers will probably be looking for someone who sounds like a BBC newsreader. British English as a model is likely to be declining in popularity at schools, at the expense of more international-sounding English, but it is probably going to continue to be the official and unofficial norm in the coming years. American English would be an alternative, because it is probably more internationally acceptable and unmarked. In European schools, it is probably slightly marked amongst teachers but associated with a fast international lifestyle by pupils (Van der Haagen, 1998).

In practice, and covertly, the most internationally accepted way to speak is probably a native-sounding accent that is neither clearly British nor American. It sounds a little bit like the native tongue of the learner (so they have ‘an accent’). This model is also an unwritten model that no one refers to but many follow anyway. It is quite common for learners to indicate that they speak British or American English but sound neither British nor American in reality. Van der Haagen (1998), amongst others, qualified such a mixed accent as ‘Mid-Atlantic’.

Arguments against a native pronunciation model

There are many reasons to object to teaching pronunciation on the basis of a native-speaker model. In general, pronunciation models are a sensitive issue. Students often struggle with them, and some are highly embarrassed imitating native speakers. Others are annoyed because they do not see the point if their English is already quite understandable. Even if one is able to imitate a native model successfully, one may personally object to doing so (Smakman, 2015). Teaching in accordance with a native-speaker norm is somewhat old-fashioned in today’s globalising world. Students may be aware of this obsolescence and struggle to do the exercises because of their hesitation. Imitating native speakers involves a type of unnatural and uncomfortable mimicking of individuals from other cultures; often it even involves a degree of idolisation. Those who take this very far will start to sound unnatural. Native speakers themselves may feel uncomfortable talking to someone who is trying to imitate them (but probably undershooting and overshooting the target regularly and generally being inconsistent).

Traditional teaching on the basis of a model goes against the principles of globalisation and superdiversity (Blommaert & Rampton, 2011; Vertovec, 2007). There is nowadays a trend towards diversification and acceptance of mixed forms. Teaching a strict model undermines the acceptability of those mixed forms. A drawback of a native-speaker model is that it gives lower status to mixed, non-standard pronunciations of English. The word ‘native speaker’ traditionally refers to native speakers in the Inner Circle (UK, US, Australia, etc.), but, as explained above, there is a growing group of global nomads whose English is native but does not sound like a speaker from the Inner Circle. It is not realistic or reasonable to consider these accents less than perfect or ‘deviant’.

What to teach if one doesn’t use a native model?

Besides the option of teaching British or American English, there is the possibility of teaching on the basis of understandability. This would mean making learners aware of certain principles that all major Englishes have in common. Knowing about and applying certain principles will help a learner’s understandability.

It is useful to teach aspects that the most important native models Englishes have in common. One could teach awareness on the variation in the production of post-vocalic ‘r’, for instance. The presence of this phoneme in this position constitutes an important difference amongst varieties of

English. Students need to choose whether they want their English to be rhotic or not; i.e. with or without ‘r’ at the end of syllables. This choice has strong cultural and identity consequences (Huttenga, 2017). Speaking with or without postvocalic ‘r’ strongly affects how speakers are viewed by their audience or interlocutor. Fortis/lenis distinctions, in addition, are shared by most internationally used Englishes, and explaining the system behind this can make learners’ English more understandable. Other possible components of a course about international English could include aspiration, vowel distinctions, vowel length, devoicing, rhythm, and intonation.

Conclusion

So, what to teach? This may depend on the circumstances in which the learner is and what their professional goals and identity aspirations are. Learners who in their future job will not need a native-like pronunciation will benefit less from a native-speaker model than students who wish to become teachers of English. Knowing a native variety is useful for teachers, amongst others because at Dutch schools it is often still a requirement. Another option to consider is to view pronunciation teaching according to a model as an advanced type of pronunciation teaching. Students first need to learn to be understandable before they are ready to embark on polishing their pronunciation towards native standards. This means that becoming like a native speaker is referring to a high level of pronunciation.

Choosing whether to use a pronunciation model that benefits students most requires a consideration of several conditions. One needs to know what students themselves expect and want, what the teaching institution expects, what future employers expect (especially if these are schools). In addition, the teacher should have a clear and principled perspective of what they think is the right model or whether it is right to use a model, irrespective of what the ‘market’ wants and irrespective of all kinds of practical consideration.

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