An exploration of attitudes towards various models of English pronunciation among Singaporean teachers: some methodological considerations

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Introduction

The teaching of English pronunciation in Singapore poses some pedagogical problems because, though Singapore's colonial past would suggest a British English standard and descriptions and transcriptions in the English syllabus tend towards a standard British English model, no model is explicitly specified. The pronunciation of contemporary young educated Singaporeans has a character of its own, which includes some British features, some American features and some features which are distinctly local. If English teacher trainees in Singapore are to address the issue of pronunciation at all, they need to agree on a model which is internationally intelligible and which, at the same time, local teachers feel comfortable with. What might the characteristics of such a model be?

An answer to this question requires an exploration of attitudes of Singaporean teachers towards various models of pronunciation. As pointed out by de Klerk & Bosch (1993), attitude is a hypothetical mental construct which may be used to explain behaviour, but which cannot be observed directly. In terms of language use, speakers use variable features of their language to signal identity and hearers interpret these clues. Language attitude studies are thus of great importance for revealing the perceptions and stereotypical reactions of speakers and hearers in a given community.

In second language acquisition and in the teaching of a standard variety in an environment such as Singapore, where most children are bilingual and where nearly all control a local colloquial variety of the standard language, understanding attitudes of both pupils and teachers towards features found in various competing models of pronunciation is crucial to successful planning of curricula for the teaching of oral communication skills. According to Accommodation Theory (Beebe & Zuengler 1983), speakers tend to converge in the direction of interlocutors towards whom they are favourably disposed and diverge away from those towards whom they are negatively disposed. There is thus no point in attempting to teach features towards which students react
negatively. If teachers also react negatively to these features they will not be able to present them convincingly and their negative attitudes will carry over to the students and reinforce any negative attitudes which the students already hold.

Aware of the importance of attitude and of the presence of variation in pronunciation features in the speech of Singaporean teachers and students, the present researchers decided to attempt to identify attitudes towards the features which appear to vary most, in an effort to select from competing models the collection of features which would be both acceptable to local teachers and students and at the same time not interfere with international intelligibility. Such a collection of features could then be adopted as the local standard for teaching oral communication skills in teacher training courses.

A variety of methods have been used to study the attitudes of local teachers towards various features of pronunciation heard in local speech. The results of some of these methods have been presented elsewhere (Poedjosoedarmo 1995, Poedjosoedarmo & Saravanan 1995). The present study summarises and compares the results of the methods and discusses the degree to which they produce similar results and the merits of each.

A review of methodologies in the study of attitude
There are two principal methodologies which have been employed in the study of attitudes towards variable features in language. One is the matched-guise technique which, despite acknowledged drawbacks (discussed in Lambert et al 1960), is widely regarded as the best method for indirectly assessing language attitudes (Edwards 1985:150). The other is the observation of performance in various situations ranging from very formal to informal. This latter technique, the one developed by Labov (1966) for the primary purpose of discovering and describing patterns of language variation and their implications for identifying directions of language change, is also a very good indicator of attitudes and of differences in attitudes between various groups of subjects in such a study. Each of these techniques will be discussed in more detail below.

In addition to methodologies developed specifically for the study of attitude towards language, there are the more general methodologies which have been used in general qualitative research to assess attitudes. These include questionnaires and interviews in which respondents are asked either directly or indirectly what they think about various topics. These methods are also discussed in more detail below.
The matched-guise technique

The matched-guise technique involves playing recordings of a speaker who uses first one dialect or language and then another. Attitudes of respondents to each ‘speaker’ are then elicited. The respondents believe that they are reacting to different speakers but since the speaker is in fact the same person, in different ‘guises’, the respondents must in fact be reacting to the differences in language. This technique has been used in a fairly broad range of sociolinguistic, psycholinguistic and educational studies (e.g. Gardner & Lambert 1972, Ford 1984, Fayer & Krasinski 1987, Markham 1988), including studies of attitudes towards different varieties of the same language (e.g. Fremder, Brown & Lambert 1970, Fremder & Lamben 1973). The use of this technique in Britain has shown that speakers using an RP guise are generally regarded as more intelligent and better educated but less friendly and less likeable than those using local features (Trudgill 1975).

Observation of performance

The technique developed by Labov (1966) involves eliciting speech in a variety of styles from each informant used in the study. The styles conventionally used, ranging from least to most careful, include (1) casual speech, (2) careful speech, (3) reading a passage, (4) reading a word list and (5) reading minimal pairs. From the point of view of attitude studies, the assumption is that the more careful the style, the more likely informants are to use features which they regard as ‘correct’. Thus in Labov’s study in New York City, the more careful the style, the more frequently informants pronounced post-vocalic /r/.

Questionnaires and interviews

With regard to research methods which attempt to explicitly elicit the opinions of respondents, questionnaires have the advantage of saving time (over interviews), as they can be administered to a large group of people simultaneously. They have the additional advantage of assuring anonymity, which presumably encourages honesty (Seliger & Shohamy 1989). The major disadvantage of questionnaires for research into attitudes is that they limit responses to selection of one from among a fixed number of choices. There are certain standard choice types used in questionnaires which strive to assess attitudes and opinions. One of these is the Likert scale (Likert 1932), which asks respondents to indicate whether they ‘strongly agree’, ‘agree’, are ‘undecided’, ‘disagree’ or ‘strongly disagree’ with a given statement.

Open-ended questions which allow respondents to elaborate on a subject are possible. They have the advantage of not pre-categorising the respondent’s
choices in expressing his or her opinion but the disadvantage that they are more time-consuming to analyse.

Interviews, like open-ended questions, have the advantage of allowing the respondents greater freedom of expression, but the disadvantage that respondents may be reluctant to express their views openly in front of a person whom they may not know well.

Methodologies used in the present study
In this study the following methodologies were used: (1) two modified versions of the matched-guise technique, (2) observation of performance on two parts of an oral test, (3) questionnaire responses which were both closed and open-ended in nature, (4) writing assignments done by students on the topic of whether Singlish should be used in the classroom. Each of these will be discussed individually.

Modified matched-guise techniques
Although the matched-guise technique has been lauded by some researchers as the best method of assessing attitudes towards variations in language, there are problems involved with the procedure for collecting samples which the respondents will listen to. One important problem is finding speakers who can accurately produce each of the guises to be used. In Singapore in particular, finding speakers who can produce either (1) a British RP-like accent and a local accent or (2) an American-like accent and a local accent is relatively easy but to find a local speaker who can accurately produce both a British RP-like and an American-like accent, as well as a local accent, is nearly impossible. A further problem is that those who can produce a native speaker-like accent usually use this accent under formal circumstances and use a local accent only in informal circumstances in which the accent is combined with other local features such as local lexical items and non-standard grammar.

The initial experiment involved using recordings of TV broadcasts in which the same actor appeared in two different roles. One actor was recorded using an American-like accent and a local accent while a second actor was recorded using a more British-like accent and a local accent. Reactions to the two guises of each actor were different, indicating that the guises successfully masked the identity of the speakers, but it was feared that the content of what the actors were saying in each role may have influenced the judgements of the respondents. Consequently a second experiment was conducted in which a different modified version of the matched guise technique was used.
In the second experiment, lecturers rather than actors were recorded. All of the lecturers were women. Each was selected because of her particular accent. They included an American, an English woman, a Singaporean with a British-like accent, a Singaporean with an American-like accent and a Singaporean with a clearly local accent. Each of these speakers was asked to read the same passage so that content would not be a factor in eliciting responses.

Thus, though neither of these two experiments involved true matched-guise techniques, each variable factor was only present in one experiment: the content differed in the first experiment while the speakers differed in the second experiment. The hypothesis was that if these two experiments produced similar results, then the results probably accurately reflected attitudes.

**Observation of performance**

In another study by Poedjosoedarmo (1996), 326 students in the Postgraduate Diploma in Education programme were recorded as part of an oral test (1) reading a wordlist and (2) reading a passage. This data was analysed to determine the frequency of occurrence of (1) American features (as opposed to British), (2) local features and (3) ethnic-group-specific features in each style. The hypothesis was that, if a feature occurred more frequently in the wordlist style, it was regarded by the speaker as more 'correct' and possibly more 'formal'.

**Questionnaires**

The respondents to the second modified matched guise technique were also given some questions meant to explicitly elicit their opinions about appropriate language use in the classroom. These included six questions with fixed response choices and one open-ended question. The questions with fixed response choices included the following:

1. Would you use Singlish if your pupil failed to understand what you were teaching?
2. Would you use Singlish if your pupil failed to understand a question that you asked during an English lesson?
3. Would you use Singlish if your pupil failed to understand a question that you asked during a Maths or Science lesson?
4. Would you use Singlish if your pupil failed to understand an instruction such as 'Please go to the staff room and bring all the exercise books to me'?
5. Would you use Singlish in class when discipline failed?
6 What is your reaction to the following quotation from Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew?

Do not speak Singlish! If you do, you are the loser. Only foreign academics like to write about it. You have to live with it and your interlocutors, when they hear you, their ears go askew. You detract from the message that you're sending them.

The response choices for the first five questions were 'without question', 'perhaps', 'probably not' and 'certainly not'. The response choices to the sixth question were Likert scale responses: 'strongly agree', 'somewhat agree', 'somewhat disagree' and 'strongly disagree'.

The open-ended question for this group was to write down their responses to the quotation.

Writing assignments

Students in the Diploma in Education programme wrote essays on the topic 'Should Singlish be used in the classroom?' These essays were analysed in order to identify opinions frequently expressed in them. Writing assignments were felt to be a more efficient as well as a more accurate means of gathering data on the students' opinions than interviews would have been. Interviews would have been difficult to arrange and recording and transcribing them would have been difficult. Furthermore, it was felt that the students would be more likely to be honest in expressing their opinions in a writing assignment in which everyone was given the same topic.

Results of the various methods

Modified matched-guise experiments

The personality traits according to which respondents were to evaluate the speakers in both modified matched-guise experiments included (1) authenticity/typicalness (as a Singaporean), (2) intelligence, (3) friendliness and (4) modesty. Intelligence and friendliness are traits commonly included in matched-guise research. We added authenticity/typicalness because we felt that this was an important trait for a Singaporean teacher to have so that students would identify with him/her. We added modesty because we felt that this was a valued Asian trait and that 'foreign' accents might project an 'immodest' image to Singaporeans.

In the first experiment, in which two actors each appeared in two guises, the British RP accent was rated most intelligent but least friendly while the local accents were generally rated friendly but less intelligent. The British RP accent was rated least typical. The American accents were rated most friendly but less intelligent and modest. The local accents were rated as most authentic/typical, the British accents as least typical.

In the second experiment, in which all five passages were read, the American was rated most intelligent but less friendly and modest while the British RP accent was rated most friendly and modest. A Singaporean with local features was rated most appropriate, A Singaporean with local features was rated most typical. The local accents were appropriately more friendly and modest than the foreign accents.

Though in general in both experiments, the local accent was rated as most intelligent but less friendly and modest, the British accent was rated most intelligent but more friendly and modest. Differences between the results of the two experiments were students in their late 20s/early 30s were generally more critical of the use of Singlish in the classroom. Interestingly, the British RP accent was rated least friendly while the younger respondents found the British RP accent to be the most friendly. While the older respondents ranked the American accent as least friendly while the younger respondents found the American accent as most intelligent but least friendly. We hypothesise that the perceptions of which features of the local accent are a value of Singapore appears to have taken place.

Observation of performance

In their recordings for an oral test, students distinguished short and long vowels and fricatives and distinguished short and long vowels and fricatives. In reading a passage, students are generally regarded by the speaker as being better at distinguishing short and long vowels and fricatives.
Essays were analysed in writing assignments means of gathering interviews and transcribing them would students be more project an ‘immodest’ image appeared in two guises, the friendly while the local accents were generally rated friendly to very friendly but least intelligent. The local accents were rated most modest (a positively valued Asian trait) and the British RP accent least modest. The local accents were appropriately identified as most authentic/typical, the British RP and American accents as least typical.

In the second experiment, in which five different lecturers (all women) read the same passage, the American was rated most intelligent, with the British speaker close behind, while the local accents were rated least intelligent. A local accent, on the other hand, was rated most friendly, the American accent least friendly. A Singaporean with local features was rated most modest, an older British-educated Singaporean with a very RP-like accent was rated least modest. Again the local accents were appropriately identified as most typical, the British and American accents as least typical.

In the second experiment, respondents were also asked to rank the speakers in terms of appropriateness of their pronunciation for teachers in a Singapore classroom. Interestingly, the British and American speakers came out in the middle. Local speakers with local features in their speech were judged to be most appropriate, while the British-educated local speaker with the near RP-accent was judged to be least appropriate.

Though in general in both experiments foreign accents were rated more intelligent but less friendly and modest while local accents were rated less intelligent but more friendly and modest, there was an interesting difference between the results of the two experiments. The respondents for the first experiment were students in their late teens and early twenties while the respondents for the second experiment were mature experienced teachers. While the older respondents found the American accent most ‘foreign’, the younger respondents found the British accent most ‘foreign’. Similarly the older respondents ranked the American accented speaker as most intelligent but least friendly while the younger respondents ranked the British RP accent as most intelligent but least friendly. With regard to non-local accents, a shift in perceptions of which features of these accents are typical or appropriate for Singapore appears to have taken place.

Observation of performance
In their recordings for an oral test, students pronounced dental fricatives as fricatives and distinguished short and long vowels more frequently in wordlist reading than in reading a passage. Features which occur in more careful speech are generally regarded by the speakers as more ‘correct’. We can thus conclude...
that Singaporean teacher trainees feel that Singaporean teachers, at least when speaking carefully, should make these adjustments.

Certain American rather than British features were also found in the recordings for the oral test. These included the presence of post-vocalic /r/, the use of /æ/ rather than /a:/ in words such as class, and the flapping of intervocalic /t/. While the first two features occurred most frequently in wordlist reading, flapping occurred more frequently in the reading of the passage. Since flapping is not a local feature, this was interpreted as an indication that the speakers who use it feel that it is a mark of lesser formality.

**Questionnaire results**

50 to 60% of teachers responded positively to questions about using Singlish in the classroom while 30 to 40% responded negatively. The remainder were undecided. The situation in which the greatest number said that they would not use Singlish was during an English lesson, while the situation in which the greatest number said that they would use Singlish was if their pupils failed to understand what they were teaching (presumably in subjects other than English).

More respondents agreed than disagreed with Lee Kuan Yew’s statement: More than 20% agreed strongly while nearly 40% agreed somewhat. Nearly 20% did not respond to the question.

In response to the open-ended question, a variety of opinions were expressed. In favour of standard English, the comments were made that it

- was the mark of an educated person
- reflected one’s higher qualifications and professional status
- should be used because Singapore was a city state, a metropolitan area and therefore had to maintain its international status
- should be used in the classroom to facilitate intelligible communication

The more cautious said that it had its respective functions and that it was appropriate for formal situations.
Regarding Singlish, it was said that it also had its respective functions and that it was appropriate for informal situations. Specifically, it was said that Singlish

- could be used for expressing solidarity and friendship
- captured the cultural and social nuances of Singaporean speech

However, on the negative side, it was stated that Singlish

- should not be a model for students, teachers or for school
- showed lack of proficiency

Some, however, thought that it should be allowed in the classroom under certain circumstances. It was said that teachers should use it to

- establish rapport
- admonish children

**Writing assignments**
The attitudes expressed in the students' essays were similar to those expressed by the experienced teachers, though the students' opinions were somewhat more conservative. Some of their comments about standard English are given below.

- Standard English should definitely be used in the classroom.
- Standard English is part of the professional image of teachers.
- Standard English is for fluency in reading and writing; [it] helps [students] to master and perfect the standard of [their] written and spoken English.
- Standard English is the standard set by the Cambridge Examination Syndicate.
- Standard English is for international intelligibility.

Concerning Singlish, they made the following comments.

- Use of Singlish in the classroom shows mental sloth.
- Singlish shows lack of confidence in expressing themselves.
- Singlish reflects poor competence and lack of education.
- Singlish should not be the norm in the classroom. It is grammatically incorrect and shows a lot of mispronunciations.
Some comments about Singlish, however, were less judgmental.

- Singlish is for informal situations.
- Singlish is for local flavour.
- Singlish is for national identity.
- Singlish should be allowed in the classroom to build confidence, to build rapport with the pupils — effective means of communication between pupils and teachers.

The responses of trainee teachers reflect to some extent very prescriptive notions towards language teaching and classroom language and show acceptance of the norms and standards as stated in the 1990s English Language Syllabus and English Language Curriculum, the School Scheme of Work.

As students in the Singapore school system, they would all have been trained to read and write in standard English and been made aware of correctness in form and structure. Evidence for this appears in quotes from some of their essays.

As I recall, my past teachers in the different stages of my school life have influenced in some way or another the way I speak now. I remember how my secondary school teacher who taught us English would speak. Her pronunciation represented closely ... that of the RP model. She seldom spoke in slang and neither did she use colloquial English whilst teaching us. In fact, most of my subject teachers, with the exception of maths, home economics and physical education, rarely used Singlish in their lessons. It seemed that there was this need to project a ‘proper’ use of the English language. There were usually no mistakes in their grammatical structure and syntax.

As trainee teachers at NIE, these students also attend courses that are designed to develop fluency in speech and writing as well as appropriate discourse. The Use of English in the Classroom course looks at correct forms in oral communication and in writing.

Comments of the trainee teachers reflect quite clearly the goals of the Singapore educational system — that English is for international intelligibility, that Singapore is a city state and therefore must set and maintain international norms and standards (1). On the other hand these trainee teachers are also aware of the sociolinguistic setting of Singlish, that it will be used as a mark of identity and solidarity and that efforts to abolish it are unlikely to be successful. Variation in the English is for informal situations, gaining wide acceptance, are likely to reflect more features in daily use.

Discussion
The results show that there is no significant difference between the responses in the various groups of students (the two sections A and B) which prompts us to conclude that the two groups reflect more is to some extent very prescriptive notions towards language teaching and classroom language and show acceptance of the norms and standards as stated in the 1990s English Language Syllabus and English Language Curriculum, the School Scheme of Work. The responses of trainee teachers reflect to some extent very prescriptive notions towards language teaching and classroom language and show acceptance of the norms and standards as stated in the 1990s English Language Syllabus and English Language Curriculum, the School Scheme of Work.

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the English of Singapore is being explored and exploited in the creation of typical sitcoms over the local media. The use of a local variety in this context is gaining wider acceptance and as viewership increases more such programmes are likely to be produced.

Discussion and conclusions
The results of the various methodologies used in this study do not conflict in any significant way. In general it can be said that they complement each other. The matched-guise experiments provide evidence of general attitudes towards the various pronunciation models. The observation of students' performance on the two sections of an oral test give more specific information concerning which pronunciation features appear to be regarded as more 'correct' and more formal. The opinions expressed in the questionnaire and stated in the essays reflect more explicitly their attitudes towards the appropriateness of various features in different contexts, in particular in the classroom.

The general picture which emerges is that an accent which makes most of the distinctions common to most native speaker accents is desirable in formal contexts but that local features are acceptable and even valued in less formal contexts. As to the exact nature of the accent deemed appropriate in formal contexts, one which maintains some degree of local flavour is preferred to one which appears totally non-Singaporean. To the extent that non-local features are used, it appears that while the older generation regards British RP as the only acceptable model, at least some members of the younger generation may view American features as more 'natural'. This is no doubt due to their extensive exposure to American accents through the media.

In terms of appropriacy for the classroom, when asked explicitly, both older and younger respondents maintained that standard English was the only appropriate model.

In conclusion, though the results of the different methods employed in this study do not conflict, they do provide rather different foci. Since attitudes, though very important for educational and language planning, are difficult to assess, it is probably wise in attitude studies to employ a variety of methods. These should probably include (1) evaluation by subjects of speakers employing the features under consideration (as in the matched-guise technique), (2) observation of variation in the use of these features by the subjects under different conditions of formality and (3) explicit elicitation of opinions, either...
through fixed-choice questionnaires, open-ended questioning or, preferably, both.

Note
1 The debate on norms, standards and codification is discussed by Pakir (1994:106): 'Teachers, known by their very profession for conservative attitudes to new forms, may not feel inclined to make the distinction between what is to be tolerated as a feature of NYE (New Variety of English) and what is to be untaught as an unintelligible deviant.' Pakir goes on to say that teachers can either become uncertain in handling norms outside of their immediate reach or remain in blissful ignorance of the difference between the officially sanctioned exonomative standard and the variety in which they typically express themselves. This survey in fact provides evidence that teachers are very certain. Regarding the place of standard English, its functions, status etc, the appropriateness of Singlish for a different set of functions, there is very little uncertainty amongst our trainee teachers.

References
Attitudes towards models of English pronunciation among Singaporean teachers

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