English Pronunciation and Accent: Challenges from the Perspectives of Pre-service Teachers in India

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Abstract

Teaching English has witnessed a cross-border job market in many countries. The study was a mixed method using a literature review, investigating job advertisement websites, and surveying pre-service teaching enrolled in the course of bachelor's degree of education and master's degree of education at Arunachal University of Studies. There were 64 participants in the survey. The study found that there is discrimination against non-native English-speaking teachers in the job market. Non-native English teachers faced multiple challenges such as overcrowded class sizes, lack of motivation, lack of confidence by teachers themselves, and unequal salaries for the same job. In the English skill area, Indian students have associated with heavier accents. This could be improved by using better teaching methods, using authentic learning material, focusing on accent and pronuncial training, and employing native English teachers as well. This finding could be useful for institutions to improve Indian students' English language skills.

Keywords: English, pronunciation, accent, non-native speaker

Introduction

English, serving as a global language, finds extensive application in various domains such as business, entertainment, the internet, and academic pursuits. Users of English are categorized into native and non-native speakers. Native English-speaking countries, where English is the primary language, include the United Kingdom, the United States of America, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and Ireland. Despite English being one of the official languages in South Africa and widely spoken, it is not the native language for the majority.

Beyond these nations, several countries use English as an official language, and speakers from these regions are labeled differently based on their English accents. Examples of English varieties include Hinglish in India and Singlish in Singapore. The terms Native English Speaker (NES) and Non-Native English Speaker gained prominence, leading to discrimination in the English teaching job market against non-native English-speaking teachers (Ponce & Emmanuell, 2020; Wahyuningsih et al., 2023).

Job opportunities have also been influenced by English varieties. Around 2004-2006, there was a significant growth in Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) call centers in India. However, the industry experienced a decline, partially attributed to a language gap, particularly the heavy Indian accent, which was not well-received by customers (Arun, 2013).

Being classified as native or non-native has emerged as a significant factor in the recruitment of English teachers. English, a prominent subject in academic curricula worldwide, has become a thriving $63 billion industry in 2020 (Bentley, 2022). The demand for native English-speaking teachers has been consistently rising, evident in the 250,000 English teaching jobs tailored for native speakers, as reported by the International TEFL Academy in 2021-2022. Teaching English, particularly in Asian countries like Thailand, Cambodia,

Vietnam, Taiwan, South Korea, Japan, and China, is a sought-after profession among native English speakers, often involving travel.

The terms "Native-Speaker" and "Non-native speaker" have become commonplace in job advertisements, especially in countries where English is not the native language. A review of the first 50 teaching job advertisements on www.ajarn.com on September 29, 2023, revealed that 45 ads specified a requirement for a native English speaker, three for Filipino nationality, one for Korean nationality, and only one for non-native English speakers.

Discussions surrounding native and non-native English speakers have persisted for years, resulting in the identification of advantages and disadvantages associated with each group. Instances of preferential treatment for native English speakers in high-level teacher recruitment have been documented, such as the recruitment of four hundred native English teachers in secondary schools in Hong Kong in 1998 (Luk, 2001).

Countries like South Korea and Japan exhibit a preference for English teachers from specific native-speaking countries, with visa requirements tied to English-speaking backgrounds. In Japan, the government mandates that foreign English teachers hold a Bachelor's degree or higher from an accredited institution and be native speakers or complete their education in an English-speaking country (Paxton, 2014). Taiwan, similarly, prefers native English speakers, but non-native speakers with a high level of English proficiency and a TESOL certification can also find opportunities (Teach English in Taiwan: Requirements, Salary, Jobs, 2023; Nicolaiciuc, 2019).

The emphasis on native English speakers as a key criterion is noticeable in Southeast and East Asian countries, where specific nationalities are often preferred for English teaching roles. This preference extends to visa allocation, creating instances of job discrimination against non-native English-speaking teachers, as evident in various job advertisements.

In 2020, India generated 6.91 million bachelor's degrees, surpassing the projected 1.998 million bachelor's degrees expected to be produced in the USA during the same period (Rathore, 2023; ThinkImpact Report, 2021). Despite the substantial number of graduates in India, there is a limited availability of teaching opportunities for Indians abroad. Quora's search engine indicates that over 100,000 Indian teachers are employed in the United States, and according to Global Immigration Services GetGIS, more than 50,000 Indian teachers are working in the United Arab Emirates alone. However, this figure remains relatively small considering India's extensive graduate population.

English, as an official language in India, is a major subject taught in schools, with an estimated 194 million English speakers in the country (Oliver, 2019, April 30). Despite the widespread use of English in Indian education and the significant number of graduates, there is minimal scope for Indian graduates to engage in English language teaching abroad. This study aims to explore the reasons behind the limited involvement of Indian teachers in English language teaching, despite English being an official language and widely utilized in the Indian education system.

The present study tried to understand reasons why second language and foreign language learners encounter this nonnative marking mostly due to accent and pronunciation, and how it could be improved from the views of pre-service Indian teachers.

Objectives
1. To find non-native speakers' difficulty in acquiring the native-like English language.
2. To find reasons for heavy accents by non-native English speakers.

Challenges Encountered by Non-Native English Teachers

An exploration by Nurul Hasanah and Pratiwi Tri Utami at Hiroshima University in Japan delved into the emerging obstacles faced by English teachers hailing from non-native English-speaking countries (non-NESCs) such as China, Japan, Thailand, Senegal, Mongolia, Cambodia, and Laos (Hasanah & Utami, 2019). The difficulties confronting non-native English teachers encompass insufficient learning materials, large class sizes, diminished student motivation, and a lack of support programs. These challenges extend to linguistic issues, such as accent-related hurdles, sociopolitical challenges rooted in racial factors, and hiring difficulties tied to economic considerations (Huo, 2020). Non-native English teachers grapple with linguistic challenges encompassing grammar, sentence structure, word formation, comprehension, and expressive skills in English (Kekana & Montle, 2023).

Additional hurdles include a lack of training, limited familiarity with teaching methodologies, technological unfamiliarity, inadequate professional development opportunities, resource and facility deficiencies, and time constraints (Songbatumis, 2017). Challenges persist in terms of insufficient teaching materials, professional assistance, learner motivation, and the absence of a writing study module in medical colleges (Eligindi & Hoque, 2022). Teachers encounter difficulties in staying abreast of language changes, determining the appropriate English variety to teach, navigating cultural disparities, and addressing pronunciation issues (Irimiea, 2016). Other obstacles encompass limited language proficiency, adherence to curriculum and policies, a dearth of motivation, and managing large class sizes (Lestari, 2021). Non-native English teachers face issues linked to dependence on rote learning, attitudes, pronunciation, and grammar (AlAamri, 2013). Most notably, attitudes toward non-native English teachers often demotivate them, manifested in lower salaries, discriminatory practices, and the impact of the "NES/NNES dichotomy" concept (Dumlao & Mengorio, 2019).

Methodology

Method

The study was mixed methods of quantitative and qualitative methods including opinion feedback from a survey among the university students and written feedback. It was a descriptive survey method and the feedback was analyzed and interpreted and shown with Piechart.

Population and sample

The population of the study was university students enrolled in pre-service teacher training courses. A total of N=64 pre-service teachers enrolled in the course Bachelor's Degree of Education (B.Ed.) and Master's Degree of Education (M.Ed.) for the academic session 2021-2023 participated in the online survey. All the participants were non-native English speakers and English is their Second Language (ESL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL).

The present study investigated the current issues and challenges for native English teachers filtering out them during the recruitment process, and how to improve the language proficiency who want to be English language teachers. The challenges of non-native English teachers were the accent and pronunciation of the English language.

An online questionnaire was used to collect data for this study using Google Forms. 64 respondents were constituting 23.4% male and 76.6% female. Among the respondents, 62.5% registered in B.Ed., and the remaining 37.5% were from M.Ed. courses. The respondents have learned English for many years, 62.5% of the respondents have learned English for more than 15 years, 17.2% have learned 10-15 years, and 20.3% of them have learned English for 5-10

years. Most of the respondents use English as a second language (85.9%) and 14.1% of the respondents use English as a third language.

Three questions were asked of the respondents. For objective 1. To find non-native speakers' difficulty in acquiring the native-like English language, respondents were asked "Which English is easier to you?" and " Rate the level of difficulty of native English to understand in communication". For objective 2. To find reasons for heavy accents by non-native English speakers, respondents selected predetermined answers from multiple choice as well as written feedback.

Most of the respondents encountered difficulty understanding native English. Limited exposure to native English is one of the reasons for the difficulty of the English language among non-native English speakers. Over ninety percent of the learners feel Indian English is easier to understand. It could be interpreted that 92.2% face difficulty in understanding native English shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Respondents Expressing Difficulty to Native English and Indian English Shown in Percentage.


Which English is easier to you?
64 responses

- Native English
- Indian English

92.2%

7.8%
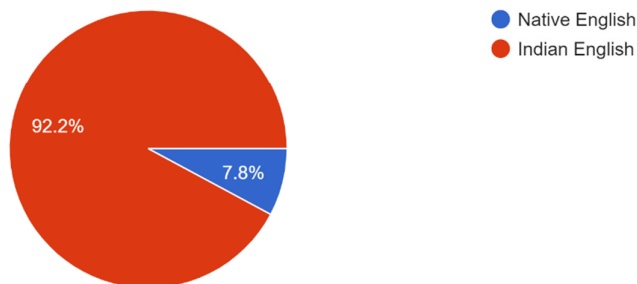
The respondents were also asked about the level of difficulty of native English. Most of the respondents encountered a medium level of difficulty in understanding the native English speaker's English (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Respondents' View on Difficulty of Native Speakers' English.

Rate the level of difficulty of Native English to understand in communication.
64 responses

- Easy
- Medium
- Difficult
- Very difficult

17.2%

65.6%

10.9%
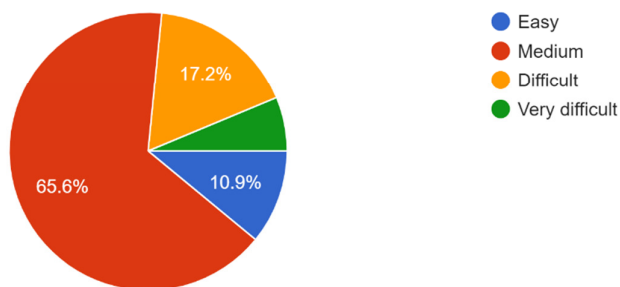
The respondents were asked the reasons why Indian English is different from native English. Different opinions were given that 42.2% are because of a lack of authentic learning materials, 37.5% of respondents expressed that teachers do not teach correct pronunciation and 20.2% believed that students do not work hard to learn English well.

For objective 2. To find reasons for heavy accents by non-native English speakers, 42.2% pointed out their views due to a lack of authentic teaching resources which was related to audio, video, and quality materials to help learners' accent and pronunciation. Another 37.5% pointed out the problems of pronunciation to teachers who could not teach English pronunciation properly (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Reason for Different Indian Accents from Native English Speakers Expressed by Respondents. Respondents Are Shown in Percentage.

Why Indian English is different from native speakers' English?
64 responses

- Authentic teaching resources are not available.
- Teachers do not teach correct pronunciation.
- Students have not tried hard.
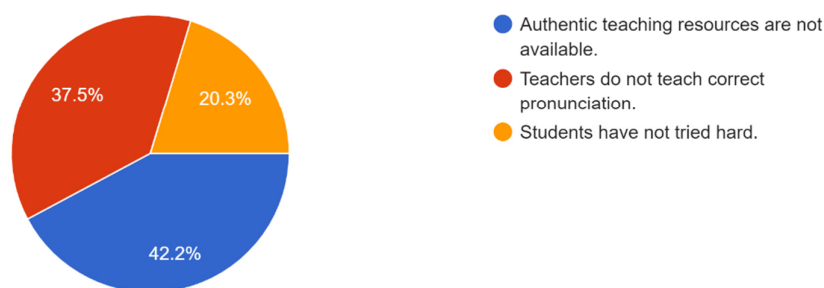
By analyzing the contents of the written feedback, the most common issues of Indian students were related to pronunciation and accent. The respondents mentioned 10 times the importance of teaching correct pronunciation. They also mentioned eight times the importance of teaching English to Native English speakers communicative English with authentic learning materials. They also mentioned five times about the importance of teaching phonetics. Another area of focus was on the communicative approach to English language teaching which was mentioned five times. Some respondents also mentioned the importance of language laboratory which is basically non-existence in a true sense in English language teaching in the Indian context. Improving teaching style and using learning resources such as movies and songs were also suggested to improve the English accent of Indian students.

Findings

Indian students learning English have challenges that impact heavy accents in the English language. Over 89% of Indian students faced difficulty from medium to very difficult levels to understand the native English speaker's language. Such difficulty in native English was associated with different reasons that 42.2% of respondents felt a lack of authentic learning materials during learning English, 37.5% of respondents expressed that teachers do not teach correct pronunciation and 20.2% believed that students do not work hard to learn English well.

Discussion

There are mixed feelings on the effectiveness of language learning with native and non-native English teachers. Learners feel positive feelings towards native speakers (Butler, 2007). Ghane & Razmi's (2023) study found that language fluency increases when students learn with

native English speakers, but language accuracy increases when students learn with non-native English speakers.

In the current study, respondents suggested employing native English speakers for effective communication. Non-native English-speaking teachers also faced numerous challenges such as lack of motivation, overcrowded classrooms, lack of resources, lack of confidence in communicative language, and unequal payment of salary. Regarding challenges faced by Indian students for categorically heavy accents in the English language, there is the possibility to improve by improving learning materials, and teaching methods, focusing on phonetics, pronunciation, language laboratory and even employing skilled native English teachers as well. Despite, the benefit of employing native English speakers as English language teachers, issuing visas for foreign English teachers is not feasible with the current law in India.

Conclusion

The study concluded that there is difficulty of native English speakers' language to Indian students. The challenges faced by Indian students were due to a lack of authentic learning material, and a lack of focus on accent and pronunciation, which could be improved through teaching methods and practices.

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