There is a sketch from the BBC One Scotland comedy programme *Burnistoun* where two men get stuck in a voice-activated lift because, as one of the men points out, voice-activated lifts ‘don’t do Scottish accents’. Again and again the lift fails to understand their requests, responding to their increasingly desperate utterances of ‘Eleven’ with a weary, English-accented, ‘Could you please repeat that?’

**“Talking about learning English, a Russian musician comments to his Argentinian interlocutor that ‘when I studied English in the high school, we had teachers from New Zealand, and they tried to show us a really British accent’. A British accent? By New Zealanders? In Russia?”**

The comedy is as much a comment on those of us watching the sketch, as it is on the insecurities and prejudices of the two Scotsmen. This is intentional. What is not intentional is the window the sketch gives us onto the ‘single-accent’ approach to teaching spoken English.

The lift, unable to deal with an accent different from its own, fails to communicate with its occupants. Similarly, where English is a lingua franca, speakers unable to deal with different accents, will fail to communicate with their interlocutors. In today’s globalised world, this is a serious problem. But it isn’t a problem because, as a profession, we ‘don’t do Scottish accents’. It’s a problem because, as a profession, we barely do accents at all.

**Standard language and attitudes to (non-)standard accents**

Implicit in English language teaching in many parts of the world is the idea that learners need to acquire, or nearly acquire, a standard accent. Until recently this was either RP (Received Pronunciation) or GA (General American), although today, with the spread of ELT, goals for learners also include standard Australian or New Zealand accents.

How one single accent becomes a country’s standard or prestige accent at the expense of all others, and how these other accents become ‘demoted’ to non-standard, or regional, accents, is beyond the scope of this article. But such has been the power of RP and GA in the UK and the US, respectively, that the teaching of English to speakers of other languages is now deeply permeated with the idea of desirable and undesirable accents.

The Polish phonetician, Jolanta Spyra-Kozłowska (2015), for example, rejects non-standard accents as models for learning English on the grounds that they ‘are restricted to specific groups of users (regional or social) and are
often unintelligible to other speakers of English’ (p30). She claims this despite the fact that a recent study (Call Care, 2013) described the Manchester accent as ‘one of the most desirable and friendly accents in the UK’, before going on to say that ‘Geordies and Scottish people also have a “nice sounding” regional accent which has a positive public perception and is ideal in customer facing roles’.

Not unnaturally, when ideas like Spyra-Kozłowska’s are given backing by universities and other academic or research institutions, they filter down into secondary and primary education, and are taken on by teachers as the norm. On arriving at his new post, for example, one teacher in Holland was so impressed by the near-native pronunciation of his colleagues that he spent hours working on his RP accent every week in order to attain a more native-like pronunciation (Hermans, 2015).

Despite the fact that by his own admission he failed to achieve his goal, the high desirability of an RP accent in his own mind coloured his thoughts as to what was appropriate for his secondary school learners.

‘I know that most course materials developed to help students learn English as a foreign language present sample materials based on Received Pronunciation and General American English. Geographical and cultural issues may influence the choice for teaching RP or GA. However, I do not see the point in teaching South African English pronunciation outside South Africa or an Australian accent outside Australia, even if it’s only meant for receptive purposes. I don’t see the point in forcing my students to study in order to understand English with a mild or heavy Scottish accent.’ (Hermans 2014: 45)

Sadly, this insistence on a ‘single-accent’ approach misses the point, which is that ‘even if it’s only for receptive purposes’, users of English today do need to be able to understand South African, Australian or Scottish accents, together with a growing host of non-native speaker accents, unless, that is, they are happy to get ‘stuck in the lift’ whenever English is operating as a lingua franca.

Why use a single-accent approach?

The argument in favour of a single-accent approach can be summed up as:

1. It can be difficult to understand people’s non-standard NS and NNS accents.
2. A standard NS accent is easier to understand than a non-standard accent, NS or NNS.
3. If everyone spoke with a standard NS accent, we would all understand each other.
4. Let’s get all of our learners to speak with the same standard NS accent.

The problem with this approach is that, quite apart from the dubious validity of the second statement, the reality of ELT is that despite teachers’ best efforts over the last 50 years, learners repeatedly fail to achieve a standard English accent. Moreover, if we opt to use a single, standard, native speaker accent as a model, RP or GA, we create a real problem for teachers in Dublin or Edinburgh, Durban or Wellington.

Would an Irish- or Scottish-born teacher of English be comfortable using an RP accent as a model in class? And how would this come across to learners who every day outside the classroom hear anything but RP? The unsustainable nature of such an approach is made clear, I think, in a recording from Teaching the Pronunciation of English as a Lingua Franca (Walker, 2010: CD Track 3). Talking about learning English, a Russian musician comments to his Argentinian interlocutor that ‘when I studied English in the high school, we had teachers from New Zealand, and they tried to show us a really British accent’. A British accent? By New Zealanders? In Russia?
The reality today is that the more we encounter English being used as a lingua franca, and the more we access the diversely-accented world of native speaker Englishes, the greater the number of accents we come across. This is inevitable, and because of this inevitability, we do our learners a disservice if we promote the idea that a single-accent approach will serve their needs. Such an approach, regardless of the target accent chosen, fails to acknowledge how languages work.

In essence:
- Nothing in linguistics supports the idea that certain accents are inherently more intelligible than others.
- An increasing amount of data suggests that NS accents are not necessarily the most intelligible in ELF interactions.
- As professional actors know, it takes hours and hours to perfect a specific accent, and unlike our Dutch colleague, most learners have neither the time nor the motivation to do this.
- The choice of a single, ‘correct’ accent disempowers teachers who don’t have this accent (i.e. the vast majority of NNS and NS teachers).
- Insistence on a single accent confuses accent and intelligibility, which are not the same thing.
- A single-accent approach ignores accent-identity issues.

**Accent and identity**

Our identities are strongly linked to our accents, even though the link may be at deeply subconscious levels. Because of this, most learners, when asked directly, insist that they want to sound like a native speaker. The Russian (F) and Argentinian (E) speakers in Track 3 of the CD that accompanies *Teaching the Pronunciation of English as a Lingua Franca* (Walker, 2010) begin their conversation about learning English by saying that they would be pleased if people thought that they were British or American. However, as their conversation developed, they find themselves less certain of their original claim, and ended by admitting that they would not like to lose their NNS accent, since it is part of their identity.

They both conclude that their identity is tied up with their accent and that they don’t want to lose their (non-native) accents in English. With a single-accent approach this option is not available to them. The goal is a (near-)native speaker accent, RP or GA. In contrast, a multi-accented, ELF approach greatly reduces any conflict between accent and identity, since it allows ELF users to indicate their first-language identity through their second-language accent without significant loss in intelligibility.

**“The idea that learners should all aim to have the same accent is usually met with approval, but this then develops into a discussion as to which accent this should be.”**

A key question with respect to accent and identity is why a Russian talking to an Argentinian in English would want to be perceived as coming from the UK or US. Similarly, as a delegate at the United Nations, why would you want your accent to tell your colleague(s) that you were British or American, when in fact you represent France, Germany, Iran or North Korea?

**Multi-accent approaches**

The alternative to the single-accent approach is to accept speakers’ different accents, and to prepare them as speaker-listeners to understand and be understood by their different-accented interlocutors. That is to say, that instead of classwork focusing on learners approximating to one accent, it should aim instead at learners achieving intelligibility, which is perfectly possible through a vast range of accents.

It is true that non-native speaker accents in English generate all sorts of reactions, many of which are negative, many of which have little to do with rational judgements of a speaker’s intelligibility, and most of which are made by native speakers. Prejudice towards other people’s accent is a human condition; Richard Cauldwell (2013a) put this very succinctly when he suggests that ‘every accent will have – somewhere – a social group which has a prejudice about it’ (p210). However, as he also points out, all accents ‘… are legitimate ways of speaking English’ (p188). Moreover, he stresses, ‘we all have accents – no one is accent free – and our accents give a flavour or a colour to the sound substance of speech which learners have to acclimatise themselves to’ (p159). (My emphasis)

In short:
- Accents exist, are multiple, and will not disappear.
- Prejudice against accents, standard and non-standard, native speaker and non-native speaker, also exists.
- Accent and intelligibility are not the same thing.
- Accent and identity are inextricably linked.
- Learners need to be made aware of the above issues.

**Working with attitudes to accents**

Given how dominant the idea of a single correct accent is, an early step when preparing learners to deal with different accents is to get them to think about the widespread nature of accents and accent prejudice. In a training session I
did with teachers in Spain, for example, I asked the group to complete the questionnaire in Figure 1.

They had no problems in answering and discussing Points 1 to 3, but when it came to Point 4, and the attribution of positive and negative qualities to accents, they were reluctant to continue. It was wrong, they told me, to associate any quality, good or bad, to any given accent. However, they went on to admit, they realised that they were all guilty of doing this.

This sort of discussion needs delicate handling and will be easier to lead with groups that share the same L1, and with L1s that are rich in accent variation. Moreover, an activity in which individuals in a group can come face-to-face with their own accent prejudices can generate tensions and discomfort. But well handled, such a discussion should help learners to see that it is only natural that English is spoken with different accents, and that all accents of English are valid as long as they are intelligible. At this point the two Cauldwell quotes could be introduced as a conclusion to the discussion.

An alternative approach to stimulating a discussion on accents and accent prejudice would be to use a questionnaire designed to reveal learners’ existing beliefs about accents in English. Figure 2 shows a very simple questionnaire that I have used on different occasions.

As before, students find the first three points relatively straightforward. The idea that learners should all aim to have the same accent is usually met with approval, but this then develops into a discussion as to which accent this should be (Point 2). Preferences for and against a standard British or American accent then inevitably arise, with the American accent winning increasingly with younger learners, in my experience. Point 3 often generates a torrent of anecdotes and reminisences in my own classes. Almost everyone can remember a situation in which the person least understood in an ELF setting was the native speaker, and it is at this point that it is useful to bring out the contradiction between the group’s answers to Points 1 and 2, and their real-life experience with regard to Point 3.

Point 4 is a summary of comments made by leading members of the ELT profession on blogs or in e-list discussions, and may need some explaining. It is important, for example, to tease out what lies behind ‘bad’ in ‘a bad accent’, and to help learners to see that when we use words like ‘bad’, ‘heavy’, ‘strong’ or ‘marked’, we are being subjective, and can even be qualifying an accent in this way in order to discredit the arguments of the

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**Figure 1. Accents in your own language**

2. Which two Spanish accents do you like best?
3. Which accent do you like least?
4. Look at the following adjectives.
   - educated
   - competent
   - authoritative
   - unfriendly
   - unreliable
   - humorous
   - intelligent
   - hard-working
   - ambitious
   Which three adjectives do you associate most with each of the accents below? Andalucía, Aragon, Catalonia, Madrid, Argentina, Cuba
5. Share your answers with your colleagues.

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**Figure 2. Accents in English**

a. Look at the following statements about learners’ accents in English. On a mark scale from 1 (Totally agree) to 5 (Totally disagree), decide how you feel about each statement.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Mark</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. We should all learn to speak English with the same accent.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>2. The best accent for students to imitate is an RP (BBC) English accent.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. It’s easier to understand native speakers than non-native speakers of English.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. A bad accent is like wearing shabby clothes to a job interview – it gives the wrong first impression.</td>
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b. Now get into groups and compare your answers with your colleagues. If you have a different mark, try to persuade them to think like you.
“... instead of classwork focusing on learners approximating to one accent, it should aim instead at learners achieving intelligibility, which is perfectly possible through a vast range of accents.”

person speaking. In general, though, the discussion, which can very easily end up in L1, is enlightening for all involved, and successfully raises awareness as to the reality of accent, attitude and identity.

Should the lift improve its voice recognition software or should the Scotsmen learn to speak ‘properly’? Your answer to this question will determine whether you take a single- or a multiple-accented approach to pronunciation, speaking and listening. If you opt for a single-accent approach, there are abundant materials available for you from ELT publishers around the world. If you choose an ELF approach, the resources are currently far fewer, so in my next article I’ll be looking at how to help learners to deal receptively and productively with the ‘non-standard’ accents they are destined to meet in the real world of English as a lingua franca.

References and further reading

Burnistoun. Available online at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SjO1BX2LgE (or alternatively just put the words eleven and lift into a search engine)


Robin Walker is a freelance teacher, teacher educator and materials writer. A former vice-president of TESOL-SPAIN, he was until recently the editor of Speak Out!, the newsletter of the IATEFL Pronunciation SIG. He is the author of Teaching the Pronunciation of English as a Lingua Franca, an OUP teachers’ handbook, as well as of numerous articles on ELT. Many of these can be downloaded from www.englishglobalcom.com, and Robin can be contacted by email at robin@englishglobalcom.com.

Next issue

Teaching English for Specific Purposes

As the level of general English continues to rise in many countries, more and more specialised courses are required to suit a wide range of disciplines. General English teachers are often asked to teach on these courses.

■ How easy is it to teach an ESP course without knowledge of the specific area?
■ Is ESP simply a long list of vocabulary added to a general English course?
■ Do ESP learners need a solid grounding in general English first?
■ Do ESP learners actually know the specialised vocabulary but not all the little grammar words?
■ Is a trained pilot the best person to teach English to pilots or a trained teacher?
■ Doesn’t everyone have a specific purpose when learning English?

Future issues

We are always keen to get articles from new writers in different parts of the world. Look at the topics below and contact Robert.mclarty@pavpub.com if you would like to contribute. Don’t forget to send the idea first before we commission you to write. Deadlines for finished articles in brackets.

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