Norms and variation in English language teaching

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According to the English subject curricula of the 1970s and 80s, English language teaching (ELT) in Norway was to be based on the native speaker norm. This meant, for example, that students were expected to learn a standard form of British or American English pronunciation. Today, however, the curriculum no longer mentions any standard for teaching and learning English. This may pose a challenge to teachers as some form of benchmark is needed for teaching and assessment. In this chapter, Henrik Bøhn and Thomas Hansen discuss the question of standards for teaching and learning English and how teachers may handle this issue in the classroom.

The question of target language and target culture in ELT

A central idea in foreign language teaching has traditionally been that students should learn to communicate in the *target language*. Intended communication partners in this traditional approach have typically been first language speakers, and the ideal goal of instruction is for students to achieve (near-)native competence. Consequently, it has been seen as relevant to use the linguistic and cultural, or linguacultural, norms of the target culture as reference points in instruction and assessment. In other

words, the native speaker has been regarded as the norm for instruction and learning. In the case of English Language Teaching (ELT), this norm has historically been associated with British and American English, the language varieties of the two most "important" countries in the English-speaking world. The subject curriculum that came into effect in Norway in 1987, for example, stipulated that students "should [learn to use] a standard form of British or American" pronunciation (Simensen, 2014, p. 10, authors' translation).

However, as English has now become a truly global language, it is difficult to defend the position that ELT in a country like Norway should be based solely on British and American linguacultural norms. For example, there are indications that most communication exchanges in English today are taking place without any native speaker being involved (Crystal, 2003, 2016). Curriculum developers in Norway have long since realized this, and the *English subject curriculum* in LK20 no longer makes references to any language norm for teaching and learning. Instead it stresses the role of English as a means for communication in local and global settings and the importance of *inter*cultural understanding (Utdannings-direktoratet, 2019).

Such a shift in focus poses challenges in the classroom, as some kind of standard or model is required for teaching and assessment, particularly in terms of linguistic features such as pronunciation and grammar (see for example Harlen, 2012). Learners need guidelines for knowing how to develop their language competence, and teachers need criteria for assessing it. So, if the native speaker norm is dispensed with, what kind of standard should teachers use as a model? This is a question which has been passionately discussed in the ELT community since the turn of the millennium (see Simensen, 2014).

In the present chapter, this question will be treated in some detail. Firstly, a brief historical overview of the development of English internationally will be given. Then some criticism against the native speaker norm will be presented. This will be followed by a closer look at what the current English subject curriculum says with regard to standards for learning language and culture. Finally, some practical suggestions for how to deal with this issue in the classroom will be presented.

From British English to English as a universal language

The special role of British English and American English in ELT can be explained in terms of the powerful positions of Britain and the USA internationally in the 19th and 20th centuries. The initial spread of English globally went hand in hand with the growth of the British empire from the 1700s onwards. After World War II, the extension of American economic, political and military influence around the world further increased the importance of English. Moreover, as ELT began to take hold in foreign language teaching in European countries in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the grammars, dictionaries and phonological reference works that were used had been largely developed by British linguists and based on British English norms (see for example Howatt, 2004). In addition, the notion that ELT should be based on the linguacultural norms of the target community meant that British English became the natural choice of standard. Subsequently, American English became equally important as a reference point in English classrooms.

The extensive spread of English internationally in the 20th century meant that English came to be used in a number of new ways, and for different purposes, than was previously the case. The Indian linguist Braj Kachru (1985) has created a model representing the spread of English internationally. This model identifies three major groups of English speakers. The first group belongs to what he calls the "Inner circle" and consists of those who speak English as their *first language*. These are speakers residing in, for example, Australia, the UK and the USA. Kachru calls the countries in this circle "norm providing", as they have typically provided speaker norms for English users outside the inner circle.

The second group has been labelled "Outer circle" and is mainly made up of citizens of the former British colonies, such as Ghana, India and Kenya, who speak English as an official or *second language*. Since many of the speakers in these countries have different first languages, English is often used as a common language of communication within their countries. Moreover, many of these speakers no longer depend on British or American or other inner circle norms, but have developed, or are in the process of developing, their own rules for how to use English. Kachru therefore calls these countries "norm developing".

Finally, there is the group which Kachru labels "Expanding circle", which consists of speakers in, for example, China, Norway and Russia, who speak English as a *foreign language*. In these countries English has no official status, speakers normally do not use English for internal communication, and speakers largely depend on the norms of the inner circle varieties. Consequently, Kachru has labelled the countries here "norm dependent", since they depend on the norms of the Inner circle, in particular. Figure 22.1 gives an overview of the model.
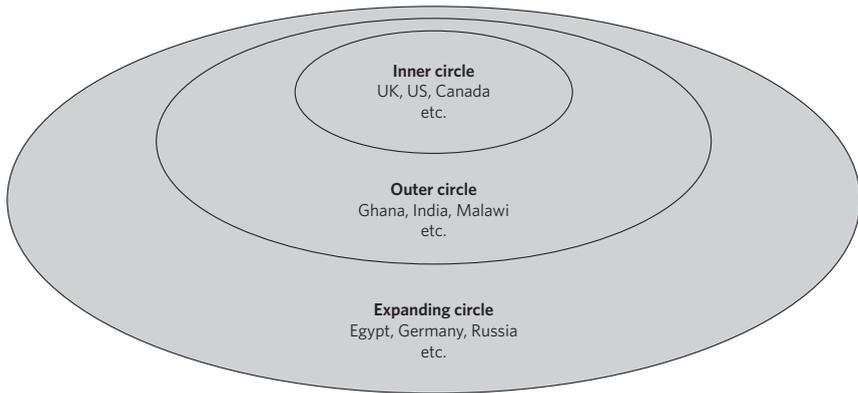

Figure 22.1 Kachru's concentric circles of English.

Kachru's model presents a neat overview of how English is spoken around the world, but it has not been without its critics. The British linguist David Graddol (2006), for example, has noted that the boundaries between the circles are not clear-cut, and that there are a number of speakers in the outer circle who are more proficient than many speakers in the inner circle. Similarly, he writes, there is an increasing number of language users in the expanding circle who are becoming more like second language users in the sense that their proficiency is good and that they are using English to communicate even in local contexts. Still, the model gives us a useful starting point for understanding the complexities of how English is used around the world today, and what kind of norms may be relevant for different speakers in different settings. It clearly shows that English today is much more than just British English, American English and other first language varieties. Actually, the speakers in the outer and expanding circles now

far outnumber speakers in the inner circle. The figures for the numbers of different speakers are not certain, but evidence suggests that there are more than three times as many non-native speakers of English as there are native speakers in the world today (Crystal, 2003, 2016). In other words, English has become a truly universal language, used by a great number of different speakers, in a multitude of different contexts, and for a variety of different purposes.

Criticism against the native speaker norm

As English became ever more global in the latter half of the 20th century, an increasing number of scholars started to criticize the native speaker norm (for example Byram, 1997; Cook, 1999; Kramsch, 1998). The objections against this norm can be summarized in the following three main arguments:

(i)   It is very difficult for most foreign language learners to achieve native-speaker proficiency.
(ii) Native-speaker proficiency is the wrong kind of competence.
(iii) English does not "belong" to native speakers; foreign language learners have the right to use English in their own way.

The first argument is *linguistic* and rests, among other things, on research which shows that foreign language learners are rarely able to achieve a native speaker accent. Unless they start learning the foreign language at a very young age, learners will most probably always come across as "foreigners" (see Munro & Derwing, 2011). One may therefore ask why they should spend a lot of energy on trying to "sound native".

The second argument is partly linguistic and partly cultural, and also relates to notions of identity and the purpose of learning English. As for the *linguistic* aspects of native-speaker proficiency, there is evidence that learners do not need to come across as a native speaker in order to be understood. For example, research on pronunciation and intelligibility indicates that a strong foreign accent does not automatically lead to loss of meaning (Munro & Derwing, 2011). In other words, a Norwegian learner who speaks with a Norwegian-English accent may not necessarily be dif-

ficult to understand for a foreign interlocutor. However, as will be discussed later, this depends on what kinds of "mistakes" the speaker makes. In this sense, one may say that native-speaker proficiency is the wrong kind of competence, since the overall purpose in international communication is to understand and to be understood, not to come across as native speakers (Seidlhofer, 2011).

When it comes to the *cultural* aspects of language learning, critics have argued that focusing on the cultural norms of the native-speaker culture also gives the wrong kind of competence (for example Kramsch, 1998; Byram 1997). This relates to several issues. First of all, one may ask which native speaker variety should serve as a language model in the first place. Not only are there many English first language varieties (such as Australian, British and Irish), but also within each variety native speakers are very heterogeneous, marked by their regional, ethnic, social, educational and other types of background. It is therefore problematic to choose one or two varieties as the ideal model. Secondly, as was mentioned above, English has now become a genuinely global language, where most interactions are probably taking place between non-native speakers. This relates to the third argument on the list above: English does not "belong" to native speakers, it can be – and indeed *is* – used by non-native speakers in their own ways and for their own purposes (Widdowson, 1994). Consequently, there is little reason why learners should adopt the cultural norms of, say, British English or Australian English speakers. Rather, what speakers need is to be able to interact appropriately with people of different cultural backgrounds. Or, as the *English subject curriculum* points out, an important objective of the subject English in Norway is to "develop the students' intercultural understanding of different mindsets, ways of living and communication patterns" (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2019, authors' translation). No specific society or cultural area is mentioned here. For a more detailed discussion of intercultural understanding and intercultural competence, see chapter 5 in the book.

Related to the previous point is the realization that language use is also a matter of attitudes and identity. As for *attitudes* towards accents, research has shown that Norwegian students experience that Southern British English (which is more or less the same as Received Pronunciation,

or RP) signals intelligence and formality. There are also indications that British English variants are associated with prestige, or "class". American English variants, on the other hand, are more often associated with informality and social attractiveness (see Rindal, 2010). In terms of their own accent, many Norwegian students seem to aim for either an American or a British English accent (Rindal, 2016). However, according to Ulrikke Rindal and Caroline Piercy (2013), students are not always consistent in terms of what they aim for, and how they actually speak. Students who favour an American English accent may mix British and American pronunciation, and students who prefer British English may include a number of American English features in their speech production. Still, their attitudes towards the different varieties will often influence their own choice of accent.

As for the *identity* aspect of pronunciation, it is widely accepted that accent and identity are closely related. In foreign language learning, this means that when we try to imitate first language speakers, we somehow try to "take on" their identity. However, this is undesirable to many foreign English users, as they do not want to come across as native speakers. For instance, there is evidence that a number of Norwegian students do not want to sound British or American, but aim for a Norwegian-English accent (Rindal, 2016). In this respect, they want to retain parts of their Norwegian first language identity. Therefore, the argument goes, there is no point in forcing them, since research has shown – as mentioned above – that they may be understood anyway.

Alternatives to the native speaker norm: English as a lingua franca

One influential approach to global English communication which has impacted the discussion on speaker norms, is English as a lingua franca (ELF). ELF can be defined as "English as it is used as a contact language among speakers from different first languages" (Jenkins, 2015a). The above-mentioned criticisms against the native speaker norm are frequently articulated within this ELF approach. As Barbara Seidlhofer (2011), one of the "founders" of this approach, puts it:

> For non-native ELF speakers, being able to use the language like native speakers and without traces of the L1 [first language] is increasingly perceived as unnecessary, unrealistic, and, at least by some, as positively undesirable.
>
> (p. 50)

According to Seidlhofer (2011), what is important in ELF is how speakers "negotiate what is interactionally relevant, accommodate to each other, make creative use of their diverse linguistic repertoires, and cooperate in the co- or re-construction of the 'English' that they learnt" (p. 23). In this process English users exploit a number of different strategies and verbal (and non-verbal) resources in order to get their meaning across. The results of this are sometimes language forms which may be very different from standard (native-speaker) English. For instance, research on ELF communication has shown instances of speakers using words and constructions such as "to pronunciate" (rather than *pronounce*),"examinate" (rather than *examine*) and "people which I would trust" (rather than *people who I would trust*). According to Seidlhofer (2011), such words and phrases may be regarded as creative and appropriate ways to use language to communicate, rather than as language errors (pp. 102–109).

More specifically, research on language forms made by non-native speakers in ELF have typically centred on two issues: (i) lexical and grammatical features that do not normally cause misunderstandings; and (ii) pronunciation features that are important for intelligibility. As for the first point, *lexical and grammatical features*, studies have found that the following language forms are typical of non-native English users:

- using uncountable nouns as countable, for example *information**s***, *fund-ing**s***, *software**s***;
- loss of 3rd person –*s* in present simple tense, for example *she suggest*;
- merging of who and which, for example a paper **who** will be published;
- use of all-purpose question tags, for example *isn't it* instead of *shouldn't they*;
- use of greater explicitness, for example *how long **time** will you stay here*;
- non-standard use of morphemes, for example *boring**dom***, *discrimin**iza-tion***, *level**ize***.

(Adapted from Jenkins, 2015b, p. 54)

As can be seen from this list, these are all language forms which would be regarded as incorrect in standard English. However, in ELF interactions, they are viewed as potentially appropriate ways of communicating.

The other feature focused on in ELF research, namely *pronunciation* and intelligibility, has led to the identification of a set of "core" aspects that are vital for comprehension. These aspects, referred to as the *Lingua Franca Core* (LFC), are features that learners are advised to focus on in order to make themselves understood. The main features of the LFC are:

- consonant sounds, except /θ/, /ð/ and dark /l/;
- vowel length contrasts, for example the ability to distinguish the vowels /iː/ and /ɪ/;
- not deleting sounds in the beginning and in the middle of words;
- nuclear (sentence) stress;
- the vowel /ɜː/ (as in RP *girl*).

(Adapted from Jenkins, 2009, pp. 12-13)

As the list above shows, some pronunciation features are crucial for intelligibility, whereas others are not, such as /θ/ and /ð/. This is interesting in view of the fact that English textbooks in Norway sometimes single out /θ/ and /ð/ as important for Norwegian learners (see chapter 15 in the book). A reason for this may be that these sounds are not found in Norwegian, which means that some learners struggle to pronounce them. Nevertheless, from an ELF point of view, it is worth asking why a teacher should spend a lot of time on the difference between *thanks* and *tanks* or *then* and *den* if it is not very important for comprehensibility. Two other features which are found not to be important for understanding are intonation and word stress (for example "DEvelop" rather than "deVElop"). Consequently, according to Jenkins (2009), they do not need to be focused on in pronunciation pedagogy either.

The advocates of English as a lingua franca point out that the language features listed above are meant specifically for ELF communication. In more traditional native-speaker focused English teaching, where the purpose is primarily to communicate with native speakers, it can be relevant to stick to the native speaker norm (Jenkins et al., 2011). What is interesting, however, is that some scholars have regarded the list of features presented above as

attempts to develop an alternative standard to the traditional native speaker norm. But this was not the intention, according to Jennifer Jenkins. The *Lingua Franca Core*, for example, was only meant to be a set of suggestions for learners to help them to speak in a more comprehensible way (Jenkins, 2015).

Two other points are interesting in this connection. The first one relates to the difficulty of completely "doing away with" the native speaker norm. Even though ELF scholars generally find the native speaker norm inappropriate, they admit that it is difficult to disregard all features of native speaker standards (see Seidlhofer, 2011). The *Lingua Franca Core*, for instance, is based on the pronunciation standards General American and Received Pronunciation. Consequently, when learners are advised to pronounce the vowel in *bird* as /ɜː/, they are in fact being asked to use a native speaker pronunciation feature.

The other point relates to the fact that more recent ELF research has moved away from language features that may be important for understanding (such as the *Lingua Franca Core*) and has started focusing more on the diversity, hybridity, and variability that takes place when speakers of different first languages communicate in English (see Jenkins, 2015). Important key words in such communication are *appropriateness*, which means finding appropriate ways of speaking and writing, and *accommodation*, which means the ability to adapt one's language to the interlocutor(s). The question remains, however: Which guidelines should teachers follow when they teach and assess student performance in the ELT classroom in Norway? Could the suggestions for which language features to concentrate on, made by scholars like Seidlhofer and Jenkins, replace the native speaker norm? This issue needs to be discussed in relation to the stipulations made in the *English subject curriculum*. First, however, a brief examination of what the curriculum says with regard to standards and speaker models will be made.

Standards, speaker models and the *English subject curriculum*

The *English subject curriculum* (LK20) emphasizes the intercultural nature of English, specifying that students should learn how to communicate with others "independent of their cultural and language background" (Utdan-

ningsdirektoratet, 2019, authors' translation). It says very little about choice of speaker model, but in the competence aims after Year 10, it stipulates that students are to "follow the rules of orthography, word inflection, syntax and text structure". Similarly, it says that students are to "follow patterns of pronunciation". As can be seen from the first quote, students are to follow *rules* for writing, but no specific standard is mentioned. As for the second quote, students are to follow *patterns* of pronunciation, but there is no clarification as to what kind of pattern is meant. Consequently, it may be difficult to know what kind of standard to apply when teaching and assessing English in the Norwegian context, especially when it comes to pronunciation.

Possible ways of dealing with the question of language standards in ELT

As mentioned in the introduction, the question of models or standards in ELT has traditionally related both to the linguistic and the cultural aspects of instruction and assessment. As for the *cultural aspects* of ELT, there is a growing realization that the teaching of literature and culture related only to one or two target cultures does not fully prepare students for communication and interaction in a global world. Since there are so many cultures, both within and across nations, language users' outlook needs to be broadened. What students seem to need is to be able to deal with a multitude of different perspectives, values, identities and communication styles. One way of doing this is to develop learners' intercultural competence, as was mentioned above, in order to prepare them for appropriate communication tailored to the individual situation and interlocutor.

Concerning the *language-related aspects* of ELT, the lack of explicit linguistic standards in the Norwegian curriculum poses some challenges for teachers and learners, particularly regarding pronunciation. For example, in view of the discussion on EFL above, should teachers refrain from commenting on students' pronunciation when they say /hedeɪʃ/ rather than /hedeɪk/ for *headache*, or /triː/ rather than /θriː/ for *three*? Or, should they accept forms such as "pronunciate", "examinate" or "people *which* I trust" in a written task? The answers to these questions depend on a number of factors, such as the purpose of the specific communication situation, the

genre of the task, whether the focus is on oral or written language, individual learner characteristics, and so on. When dealing with such questions, it may be a good idea to distinguish between oral and written skills.

Suggested guidelines for dealing with oral skills

As pointed out in chapter 15 in the book, a good starting point for working with oral communication is to focus on fluency and intelligibility. *Fluency* means that teachers help students develop a smooth flow of speech without too many pauses and hesitation. This is first of all related to vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation. As for vocabulary, no specific English norm is needed, since the goal is for students to develop as broad a vocabulary as possible. When it comes to grammar, a suitable place to start is to stick to one or two native speaker standards as *models*. In a Norwegian classroom context, where the curriculum mentions the ability to "express oneself … using *idiomatic expressions*" (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2019, italics added, authors' translation), it seems safer to adhere to, say, American or Australian standard English grammar, than the suggestions mentioned by Seidlhofer, above. This does not mean that students have to follow these standards in all respects when they speak English, but that they use them as guidelines. Here it is also important to point out that learners should not be "corrected" unduly when speaking, as this may restrict their determination to speak, and thus to develop their fluency. Lastly, when it comes to pronunciation, the notion of intelligibility should be considered. As this point is comprehensively treated in chapter 15 in the book, it will only briefly be touched upon here.

A focus on *intelligibility*, then, chiefly means that teachers base their criteria for teaching and assessing pronunciation on research showing which pronunciation features that are important for understanding. As the list of core aspects (the *Lingua Franca Core*) cited above suggests, teachers can concentrate on elements such as consonant sounds, except /θ/ and /ð/, vowel length contrasts, such as the difference between *peach* and *pitch*, and sentence stress (see chapter 15 in the book for more detail). Other features, such as intonation, weak forms and assimilation, may be less important (Jenkins, 2009).

However, there is evidence that many learners actually do want to model their spoken production on native speakers (see for example Rindal, 2016). Consequently, teachers should be prepared to help these learners achieve that goal. Yet, there is little justification in the *English subject curriculum* for insisting that all students should aim for a native speaker accent. This needs to be kept in mind when developing criteria for final assessment. It is very difficult to justify the claim that a student would have to speak like an American or a Briton in order to get a *6* in the oral exam. A candidate who has excellent vocabulary, flawless grammar, very good fluency and so on may still be awarded the top grade even if his or her Norwegian accent shines through.

An additional point regarding pronunciation in ELT is that teachers always need to consider different factors, such as individual learner characteristics, the purpose of the communication or learning situation, intended interlocutors and so on. In this respect, the notions of *appropriateness* and *accommodation*, mentioned above, are key principles for suitable language behaviour. Rather than native speaker perfection, then, a focus on intelligibility, fluency and the students' ability to adapt to the situation and the interlocutor, is a better starting point for developing learners' English oral skills. These aspects can also serve as principal guidelines for assessing performance, both formatively and summatively. Students who aim for a native speaker accent should of course have the chance to do that, and teachers can provide resources in the form of authentic audio material, online pronunciation guides, learner's dictionaries and so on. Teachers should also be prepared to supervise these learners to help them improve further. Yet, the main focus should be on general communication skills and the ability for students to interact appropriately in different settings (for further reading, see chapter 15 in the book).

Suggested guidelines for dealing with written skills

In terms of *writing* instruction and assessment, many of the points mentioned under oral skills also apply here. As the basic skill relating to written proficiency in the *English subject curriculum* states, a major concern

in the development of writing abilities is to enable students to "express ideas and meaning in a comprehensible and purposeful way in different types of texts" (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2019, authors' translation). Again, this emphasizes the students' ability to tailor their communication to each specific situation that they encounter. However, this does not mean that accuracy, or grammatically correct language use, is irrelevant. As was touched upon above, the curriculum also specifies that students need to adhere to language rules and to express themselves in idiomatic English. All the same, the failure to mention which language norm these language skills are to be modelled on makes it difficult for teachers to know which standard to use.

From a pragmatic point of view, it may be appropriate to use Standard written British English, or Standard written American English, as a basis when teaching written communication in English (see for example Hasselgård et al., 2012). These two varieties are very well described in grammars and learning materials, and they have so many features in common that they are not likely to confuse many learners. There is also a long tradition in Norway of using these varieties, which means that teachers, learners, and the general public are very well acquainted with them. Moreover, they are much used internationally in both professional and non-professional settings, which speaks in favour of their usefulness.

That said, it is important to note that the use of these standards does not mean that one cannot include references to other standards, if relevant. Also, as students are to be able to use English in various settings and for various purposes, they *should* be made familiar with non-standard varieties and how they are, or can be, used in different contexts. Flexibility and the ability to accommodate are important. Still, in a school context, it can be pedagogically sound to take Standard English usage as a starting point.

As for the assessment of written proficiency, this, of course, depends on the purpose of the writing and the genre. When working, for example, with memes, tweets or other types of informal, electronic texts, it may be very appropriate for students to use informal language, slang, abbreviations and even ungrammatical forms. In more formal texts, however, a phrase like "people which" should not be accepted, and students need to be made aware of the more correct, standard form.

Concluding remarks

The question of norms, standards, models, and guidelines in ELT is a difficult one. In today's global community, where English is used more outside than inside the "inner circle", and where appropriate communication is typically the ultimate goal, there is little point in expecting students to speak and write like native speakers. However, some reference points are needed in language education, and the rejection of the native speaker norm in many ELT contexts has left the question open as to which standard should be used. The *English subject curriculum* reflects this uncertainty. A possible solution to this problem is to use some form of native speaker standard as a *starting point* and a *model* for teaching and assessment, but with a clear understanding that the purpose and the situation of the communication situation should always decide how strictly one needs to stick to the model. Generally, it may be a good idea to focus more on a native speaker standard in formal written communication, whereas intelligibility may be a better focal point in most forms of oral communication.

Reflection questions

1. To what extent were you expected by your English teachers to approximate a native speaker accent when you learnt English in school?
2. What are the advantages and disadvantages of using the native speaker norm as a basis for English language teaching (ELT)?
3. Why has the intelligibility principle gained ground in ELT in later years?
4. How can you be good role models to your students in terms of pronunciation?
5. What kind of pronunciation features would you focus on in the English language classroom? Is it necessary to correct students who say /tɪŋk/ rather than /θɪŋk/, /fɑst/ rather that /fɜ:(r)st/, /lɪv/ rather than /li:v/ and /ˈdevələp/ rather than /dɪˈveləp/?

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