

Research

Vietnamese Teachers' and Students' Perceptions of Global English

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Abstract

Recently, recommendations have been made to move beyond the native speaker model as a sole target in English language instruction. However, the orientation for this shift is debatable. Whose English should be the target for instruction in international contexts such as Vietnam? This paper reports a study which documents Vietnamese students' and teachers' views about the kind of English they prefer to learn and teach. The findings show that the students and teachers believe students use English more with non-native speakers (NNS) than with native speakers (NS) outside the classroom, but British and American English tend to be the preferred models, at least in the classroom. There is no simple answer to what kind of English will be useful in Vietnam in the future, though focusing on British and American English in the classroom and encouraging learners to explore other varieties of English outside the classroom can be one suggestion.

The globalization of English has raised questions concerning a potential change of its ownership: Who actually owns English? Whose English must be adopted as the model for international communication? Does speaking and writing good English necessarily entail espousing the norm of the NS, e.g., the British or the American? Is the NS norm still valid? If not, then what norms should be the primary target for English language instruction such as in Vietnam?

For the past decade, recommendations have been made for teachers, learners, and all users of English to move beyond the NS model as the sole target in English language instruction and global communication (Jenkins, 2000, 2006; McKay, 2002; Brutt-Griffler, 2002; Seidlhofer, 2001). However, this shift is debatable. Without deep knowledge of learners' and teachers' motivations, expectations, and aspirations regarding teaching and learning English in specific contexts, it would be challenging to propose any model of English that learners in specific contexts of the world perceive as useful for themselves.

This paper first raises the issue of NS norms as a desired goal for instruction in the international context, then gives a glimpse of English language education in Vietnam. The paper continues to report some findings of a larger study which documents Vietnamese students' and teachers' views about NS norms. Based on the results of the study, some conclusions and recommendations are offered.

Literature Review

The challenged native speaker norm. It has been assumed that effective communication in English involves speaking and writing correctly, precisely, and appropriately within a model set by the ideal NS (Quirk, 1985). However, the use of English has now extended beyond NS-NNS interaction to encompass very extensive NNS-NNS interaction in many international contexts. Only one out of every four users of English in the world is a NS of English (Crystal, 2003), and the vast majority of communication in English does not involve any NSs of the language (Graddol, 1997). Kachru (1992) has classified the varieties of English around the world into three categories: those in the "inner circle," the "outer circle," and the "expanding circle." Studies estimate that both the inner and outer (ESL) circle societies have 375 million users of English and the expanding (EFL) circle has 750 million to one billion (McArthur, 2001).

A number of scholars (Jenkins, 2000, 2006; Byram, 1997; Davies, Hamp-Lyons, & Kemp, 2003; McKay, 2002; Brutt-Griffler, 2002; Seidlhofer, 2001) have questioned the appropriateness and validity of the NS norm. They argue that while English is spoken as the mother tongue language in only a small number of countries such as the USA, the UK, and Australia, it is unreasonable to expect learners of English in vast areas of the world to speak, write, and be judged according to NS conventions. For example, Byram (1997) and Seidlhofer (2001) find the NS model problematic, arguing that this model implies foreign language learners should ignore their social identities and cultural competence in intercultural interaction.

For the past decade, the notions of World Englishes (WE), English as an International Language (EIL), and more recently, English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) have been proposed and discussed in the fields of TESOL and applied linguistics (Jenkins, 2007; Seidlhofer, 2001). While WE and EIL have been generally used as cover terms referring to the use of English in any part of the world, ELF has been recently used to refer to the use of English as a means of communication among people from different language backgrounds (Seidlhofer, 2005). The problem, however, is that EIL, ELF, or WE can be very abstract notions (Tarone, 2004; Matsuda, 2002; Pham, 2006). What is the actual nature of EIL or ELF? What variety of English has truly become international and the preferred model of students, teachers, or those who use it in their specific contexts?

It can be argued that conceptions of the nature of EIL, as well as recommendations for the model of teaching EIL, are often based on the political concerns, assumptions, beliefs, and even feelings of a number of scholars, rather than on data-driven notions informing the perceptions of those involved in teaching and learning English in specific geographic and social settings across the world (Maley, 2009; Timmis, 2002). Although some attempts have been made to take into account the attitudes of teachers and students to ELF in many parts of the world (e.g., Jenkins, 2007), it seems that the scholars who promote EIL tend to promote it for all learners of English, while perhaps lacking a deep understanding of the dynamics of the particular contexts in which the language is used. This, as Taylor (2006) points out, could lead to "a patronizing approach towards learners' and teachers' motivations, expectations, and aspirations about the models they perceive as useful – whether this relates to 'standard' or 'non-standard'" (p. 51). Therefore, investigation into the motivations, expectations, and aspirations of students and teachers regarding learning and teaching English in specific contexts

is imperative before new plans are made for appropriate models of English instruction in particular contexts.

English in Vietnam. Vietnam has a long history of foreign language teaching and learning. As Wright (2002) observes, Vietnam's language education has been directly influenced by its relationships with China, France, Russia, and the US. Since the country opened its doors to the world through an economic reform known as *doi moi* in 1986, English has become more important. For the past twenty years, the need to learn English in Vietnam has been fed by an increasing influx of foreign investment from countries such as Taiwan, Singapore, Hong Kong, Australia, Malaysia, and the European Union; foreign investors expect to use English as the means of communication. In 1994, a decree issued by the Vietnamese Prime Minister stated that all government workers must attain an intermediate level of English proficiency. World Trade Organization (WTO) membership in 2006 has made learning English even more important for Vietnamese people.

Although "Vietnam has never had a well-articulated policy on foreign language teaching or English language education" (Canh, 2007, p. 167), in 2004, the importance of English was further reinforced by a Government Report to the National Assembly, which detailed measures for the implementation of a strategic scheme for foreign language education at the national level (Ministry of Education and Training [MOET], 2006). English is now taught in schools, universities, and evening classes across Vietnam. In the public education system, the main foreign language is English, though other languages such as French and Chinese are also offered. According to MOET statistics (2006), 67% of students in lower secondary schools and 86% in upper secondary schools study English for at least three hours a week. At the tertiary level, English has an even more important role. All tertiary students are required to study a foreign language, regardless of their major. Ninety percent choose to study English (Canh, 2007). Non-major students of English are required to have 200 hours of English over four years. English majors are required to have at least 1,200 hours of English before taking subjects such as English and American literature, British, American, and Australian culture, and linguistics during the last two years of their studies.

English is unquestionably preferred by the majority of Vietnamese students. The role of English as a language of international communication in the country's economic development has also been acknowledged by the government. However, despite the vision of English as an important language for communication, many wonder if English is really used for communication outside the classroom, or if it is just taught like any other academic subject. A study conducted in 1995 with 641 students showed that 71.2% studied English because it was a compulsory exam subject, while 56% studied English for communication with non-Vietnamese (see Do, 2000). Do's study (2000) also found 44.2% preferred British English, 32.6% preferred American English, 15.8% liked Vietnamese English, 4.4% liked Australian English, and 1.3% opted for other varieties of English. This project was conducted fifteen years ago; since then, there has been no updated information.

Research Aim

The research reported in this paper aims to investigate the varieties of English that Vietnamese students and teachers prefer to learn and teach. It particularly aims to answer these questions:

1. What are the main motivations for students learning English in Vietnam?
2. What varieties of English do students perceive as useful?
3. What varieties of English do teachers perceive as useful?

Methodology

Quantitative and qualitative approaches were used for this study. A questionnaire was distributed to 250 students majoring in English at two universities in central Vietnam (Hue and Danang). The students were chosen randomly. Their English levels range from intermediate to advanced. Another questionnaire was given to 80 university teachers who teach English in central Vietnam. The teachers' questionnaire was delivered both online and in hard copies. The questionnaires contained both closed and open-ended questions, and were intended to document respondents' perceptions about their preferred norms of English in terms of pronunciation and grammar. Qualitative methods, including in-depth interviews with focus groups of students and teachers, were also employed. For the quantitative data analysis, SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences) version 16.0 for Windows was employed. The interview data was grouped in themes, which are presented below.

Findings

Motivations for English Learning in Vietnam

It is important to have some idea why students are learning English in Vietnam before investigating what variety of English they prefer. The students in this study were asked to choose the most important factor motivating them to learn English; the results are shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Students' Motivation for Learning English

Motivations	Percent	
a. to find a good or better job	43	<i>n</i> = 250
b. it is a compulsory subject at university/school	25	
c. to communicate with non-Vietnamese speakers	12	
d. to study overseas	12	
e. for entertainment	5	
f. for personal satisfaction	2	
g. other reason, please specify	1	

In focus interviews, many students tended to give general reasons for motivation to learn English such as "I learn English because English has become an international language for communication, and everyone is trying to learn English," "English will give me a better future," or "With English I can speak to anyone from overseas." Some also said that they hoped to study abroad and thus English was important. Others had motivations such as getting a well-paid job. However, while many students said that English would give them a better future as it would in finding a good job, some were doubtful about the benefit of English. For example, one student said:

Everyone says that English is important, but this may be a myth. It may be important in the long run, but for many, it's not important at all because in this town [Hue] many students end up working as shop assistant, receptionist for small hotels, post office clerks which requires a minimum of English skills, or no English at all.

Preferred Varieties of English

Students' voices. Students were surveyed on whether the majority of their use of English outside the classroom was with NSs or NNSs. (For the purposes of the survey, NSs were defined as those who have lived in inner circle countries and have spoken English since they were young children.) The majority said they used English more with NNSs. Table 2 shows the survey results.

Table 2
Use of English Outside the Classroom

Use of English	Frequency (<i>n</i> = 250)	Percent
When I am outside the classroom, I use English more with native speakers.	45	18.0
When I am outside the classroom, I use English more with non-native speakers.	131	52.4
I am not sure if I use English more with native or non-native speakers.	74	29.6
Total	250	100.0

Despite the belief that communication outside the classroom in Vietnam was with NNSs rather than NSs, as shown in Table 3, many respondents preferred to learn the NS norm, with 42.8% strongly agreeing and 45.6% agreeing with the statement "I want to learn the English that native speakers use," while only 12.4% strongly agreed with the statement "I want to learn the kind of English that will help me communicate with non-native speakers all over the world." However, 50% still wanted to learn the English that NNSs use.

Table 3
Students' Perceptions about Native and Nonnative English

Perception	Opinion	Frequency (<i>n</i> = 250)	Percent
I want to learn the English that native speakers use.	disagree	4	1.6
	neutral	25	10.0
	agree	114	45.6
	strongly agree	107	42.8
	Total	250	100.0
I want to learn the kind of English that will help me to communicate with non-native speakers all over the world.	strongly disagree	3	1.2
	disagree	20	8.0
	neutral	71	28.4
	agree	125	50.0
	strongly agree	31	12.4
	Total	250	100.0

Preferred pronunciation. The pronunciation norm that students preferred was examined. As in Timmis's study (2002), students were asked to read a statement by Student A, representing the NS norm, and another statement by Student B, representing tolerance of accented intelligibility in pronunciation (see appendix).

Students were then asked to answer these questions:

- Do you think you could be like Student A or B?
- Do you wish to be like Student A or B?
- Would you prefer to be like Student A or Student B?

Table 4 shows that although only 18.4% thought they could ever be like Student A, 92.8% of the respondents wished they could be like Student A in the future. In contrast, 73.2% thought they could be like Student B, but just 53.2% of them wished to be like Student B. When respondents had to choose one student, 66% preferred Student A, whereas 34% chose Student B (Table 5). This indicates that students, though exposed to standard ELT materials and believing that NS competence is the benchmark of perfection, are aware of other kinds of pronunciation.

Table 4
Students' Views about Native and Non-Native Pronunciation

1. Native-like	Opinion	Frequency (<i>n</i> = 250)	Percent
Students who think they could be like Student A	Yes	46	18.4
	No	137	54.8
	Don't know	67	26.8
	Total	250	100.0
Students who wish to be like Student A	Yes	232	92.8
	No	17	6.8
	Don't know	1	0.4
	Total	250	100.0
2. Nonnative-like	Opinion	Frequency (<i>n</i> = 250)	Percent
Students who think they could be like Student B	Yes	183	73.2
	No	37	14.8
	Don't know	30	12.0
	Total	250	100.0
Students who wish to be like Student B	Yes	133	53.2
	No	78	31.2
	Don't know	39	15.6
	Total	250	100.0

Table 5
Students' Preference of Native and Non-Native Pronunciation

Student A or B Preference	Frequency (<i>n</i> = 250)	Percent
Student A	165	66.0
Student B	85	34.0
Total	250	100.0

Grammar. The grammar students wanted to adopt was also examined. Students were asked to read the following statements made by Student C, representing a “stable and consistent interlanguage” (Willis, 1990, cited in Timmis, 2002, p. 244), Student D, representing control of the written grammar often found in ELT materials, and Student E, representing purely NS control of both formal and informal grammar (see appendix). The students were then asked “Would you prefer to be like Student C, Student D, or Student E?”

The results in section 4 of Table 6 show a similarity to those in Table 4: students preferred to be more native-like and considered this their goal of learning English. Only 18.8% of the students wanted to be like Student C, and just 6.8% wanted to be like Student D. The largest percentage (74.4%) represented those who preferred to be like Student E. This finding is a little different from that in section 2, where 62.8% answered they could be like Student C, and 40.4% responded they could be like Student D. This finding indicates that although students think they would like to use the controlled grammar in materials they are exposed to, consistent with their exposure to inner circle ELT materials most of the time, they still have a strong need to be as competent as NS of the target language.

Table 6
Students' Preference of Grammar

1. Interlanguage use of grammar (Student C)	Opinion	Frequency (<i>n</i> = 250)	Percent
Could be like Student C	Yes	157	62.8
	No	55	22.0
	Don't know	38	15.2
	Total	250	100.0
Wish to be like Student C	Yes	34	13.6
	No	179	71.6
	Don't know	37	14.8
	Total	250	100.0
2. Controlled written grammar found in textbooks (Student D)	Opinion	Frequency (<i>n</i> = 250)	Percent
Could be like Student D	Yes	101	40.4
	No	119	47.6
	Don't know	30	12.0
	Total	250	100.0
Wish to be like Student D	Yes	41	16.4
	No	188	75.2
	Don't know	21	8.4
	Total	250	100.0
3. Native speaker competence in grammar (Student E)	Opinion	Frequency (<i>n</i> = 250)	Percent
Could be like Student E	Yes	109	43.6
	No	96	38.4
	Don't know	45	18.0
	Total	250	100.0
Wish to be like Student E	Yes	199	79.6
	No	28	11.2
	Don't know	23	9.2
	Total	250	100.0
4. Student C, D, or E preference	Opinion	Frequency (<i>n</i> = 250)	Percent
	Student C	47	18.8
	Student D	17	6.8
	Student E	186	74.4
	Total	250	100.0

In focus interviews, many students explained that they wanted to conform to NS norms because it was the model taught in their programs. The purpose of learning was viewed as to successfully adopt or imitate the materials they were exposed to. One student said:

I mean learning English well is my aim... I always try to speak, and write like the native speaker, like in the tape and the textbook we use in class. I think more I sound like them or write like them, the more progress I make.

Many other students said since NS English was the only kind they were exposed to and the only kind in the tests they had to take, they did not see the need to study other varieties. However, some students with experience in using English to communicate with NNSs expressed the need to learn many varieties of English. One student noted:

It would help probably, I meant knowing other Englishes ...I did an interpreting job for one Filipino the other day. He said ['Kæ pita:l] not ['Kæ pitl]. First I did not know what he meant.

Many students also said that they were not confident enough to voice their own ideas about the matter. They thus wanted to rely on teachers to make decisions about the most useful variety of English:

I just don't know, you must help us, teacher. You've traveled a lot, living in many countries. You have lots of experience with foreigners... So you must tell me what English you think will be most beneficial for us.

Teachers' voices. The survey of Vietnamese teachers showed their ultimate goal was to teach students the kind of English that helped them to communicate successfully with both NSs and NNSs. As indicated in Table 7, 92.9% believed that their ultimate goal was to help their students to communicate with both NS and NNS while only 5.4% said that the goal was to help their students to communicate with NSs.

Table 7
Teachers' Ultimate Goals of Teaching

Goals	Frequency (<i>n</i> = 80)	Percent	Valid Percent
Ss can communicate with NS (BE, AE, OzE)	3	3.8	5.4
Ss can communicate with NS and NNS	52	65.0	92.9
Ss can communicate with NNS	1	1.3	1.8
Total	56	70.0	100.0
No response	24	30.0	
Total	80	100.0	

Despite this, 30% were teaching American English, and 25% were teaching British English (Table 8). There were many explanations; the most common was that teaching materials used British or American English. Since ELT materials were the main input in their teaching and the teachers themselves were unfamiliar with other kinds of English, teaching other kinds of English was viewed as infeasible or too challenging.

Table 8
The Variety of English Being Taught

Variety of English	Frequency (<i>n</i> = 80)	Percent
American English	24	30.0
British English	20	25.0
Others	36	45.0
Total	80	100.0

For example, one teacher interviewed said she was well aware of the existence of other varieties of English and believed that they were useful for students to become familiar with or learn. However, she contended that students should explore them independently, given the many constraints in the classroom:

Many graduates told me in their work they communicate with people from Singapore, China, and Hong Kong more often than with people from the US and UK. So I think that students need to learn, or at least, acquaint themselves with the kinds of English used by those people. But I think students need to explore those kinds of English by themselves outside the classroom. In the classroom, we can teach only standard English. We don't have the conditions and ability to teach other kinds of English. We are not familiar with those, and we don't have time to teach all.

Many teachers said that testing also had an impact on their teaching. Although their ultimate purpose is to help students communicate with both NSs and NNSs, the immediate need is to help students to pass a test, whether a final exam or an international test such as TOEIC, IELTS, or TOEFL, to advance academically or in their careers. As these tests evaluate against NS norms, there "was no point to teach other kinds of English" as one teacher commented. This statement was typical among teachers:

I am aware that there are many kinds of English, but I think we teachers should teach one model of English, well, the most popular and most easily understood. I mean British and American English. By mastering this model, they can make themselves well understood in their communication with any of English speakers in the world...native or non-native.

When asked if they envisaged teaching other Englishes, teachers had markedly different views: 13.8% strongly agreed, 50% somewhat agreed, while 19% somewhat disagreed (Table 9).

Table 9
Teachers' Views about the Future

Will you teach other varieties of English someday?	Frequency (<i>n</i> = 80)	Percent	Valid Percent
Somewhat disagree	15	18.8	19.0
Neutral	13	16.3	16.5
Somewhat agree	40	50.0	50.6
Strongly agree	11	13.8	13.9
No response	1	1.3	
Total	80	100.0	100.0

Those who believed that they would teach other Englishes explained that since there would be much more business contact between Vietnamese and people from other ASEAN countries and China than with NS from the inner circle countries, efforts in teaching other Englishes would soon be focused on and realized in Vietnam. Others said that NS norms in the inner circle countries would remain a benchmark and model for instruction no matter who the Vietnamese used English with.

Conclusion

This study is limited in scope. The number of teachers and students participating was relatively small. The study included perceptions of students and teachers in public institutions only; those of students and teachers in private English centers or schools were not studied. It would thus be absurd to assume that the views of the students and teachers recorded above represent the full potential of all students and teachers in Vietnam. Nonetheless, some conclusions can be drawn from the findings that may be relevant to other contexts.

Most Vietnamese students talk about the aim of learning – to achieve a goal set in textbooks and programs, or adopt a model in their materials – rather than about real life communication. Thus, achieving a NS-like model, as revealed in their wish to learn NS pronunciation and grammar, is regarded as an immediate need, since this model can help them pass finals or tests, or complete a program. However, many students are aware that they are more likely to communicate with NNSs than NSs outside the classroom, and thus feel the need to acquaint themselves with other kinds of English.

Vietnamese teachers of English also believe that, outside the classroom, students have more chances to communicate with NNSs than NSs. Teachers thus see the importance of teaching or at least familiarizing their students with other kinds of English. Despite this, teachers say that they are currently solely teaching NS English for many practical reasons. Time constraints, lack of materials promoting varieties used outside the inner circle, and particularly a lack of NNS model based tests prevent teachers from teaching other varieties of English, at least for now, even if some want to.

Seidlhofer (2005) observes that English is used mostly by NNSs in contexts which do not involve any NSs at all, but only the English of NSs is seen by many as the model for adoption. This paradoxical situation is reinforced in Vietnam. While Vietnamese learners and teachers believe that students use more English with NNSs than with NSs outside the classroom, they continue to adopt the NS model in the classroom. This reflects the interesting conflict between what people perceive as real English, meaning “native,” as reflected in exam norms, and what they might realistically need or use after they have fulfilled university foreign language requirements. Similarly, this paradox is revealed in the conflict between the short and long term goals of English instruction in Vietnam. The short term goal is to teach or learn NS norms in the classroom as a requirement to complete a textbook or a program or to succeed in a test, but the long term goal is to acquire English skills to engage in exchanges with non-Vietnamese speakers, many of whom are NNSs.

Based on the findings of the study, we would like to suggest the following for classroom teachers:

- Since the teaching of British and American English is perceived as useful, at least in the classroom, for many reasons, teachers probably need to focus on teaching these varieties. As Maley (2009) points out, teachers can only teach what they are able to teach; it is not useful for teachers to focus on varieties of English for which teaching materials are not yet available.

- While British and American English can be models for instruction, this does not mean that students need to adhere to British and American accents. For teaching and learning English, Vietnamese schools may want to rely on the so-called NS model but it would be desirable for teachers and students to be aware that this is an ideal. Students need to be aware that speaking “standard” English does not always equate to speaking NS English, as there is much intralinguistic variation in any language. Students can be taught to communicate intelligibly with others in the global market.
- It is not feasible to teach all varieties of English in the classroom as teachers usually have long teaching hours, pressures from exams, and limited resources. However, teachers can encourage students to explore other varieties through out-of-class learning opportunities. Apart from exams, students surely have different personal needs; they can thus be encouraged to explore other varieties of English and learn to value, in their own way, the many local, regional, and global norms. This will increase the power for all now that they themselves can freely decide on their preferred kinds of English, no matter whether English is a language to learn at school or a language for communication outside the classroom.

Biodata

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Appendix
Representations of Attitudes

Pronunciation

Student A: I can pronounce English just like a native speaker now. Sometimes people think I am a native speaker.

Student B: I can pronounce English clearly now. Native speakers and non-native speakers understand me wherever I go, but I still have the accent of my country.

Grammar

Student C: I can say everything that I want to say. Native speakers and non-native speakers understand me wherever I go, but I use English my way and sometimes I say things which native speakers think are grammar mistakes.

Student D: I know all the grammar rules I need so that I can say anything I want. I use these rules correctly, but sometimes English people use grammar that isn't in the grammar books and I don't want to learn this.

Student E: I use all the grammar rules that native speakers use, even the informal grammar native speakers use when they speak to each other.