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Good English and Linguistic Tolerance in Teacher Language: perspective from a Dutch EFL

Teacher

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The pedagogic model for EFL teaching in the Netherlands has, for a long time, been based on the British English model, as in many other European countries. But whereas Europe mainly uses British English (henceforth BE) as a starting point (Isabel González Cruz & Jesús Vera Cazorla, 2008) (Dalton-Puffer, Kaltenboeck, & Smit, 1997) (Pilus, 2013), specifically the Received Pronunciation variety (RP), many South American countries have instead adopted the Northern American variety as their basic model for teaching English, specifically General American (henceforth GA) Judging from my own experience as an English teacher in the Netherlands, and having had teaching jobs at four different schools for intermediate vocational education and secondary education, I have noticed that students and teachers alike, as well as parents, attach great value to British English as the ‘good’ and ‘correct’ variety of English being

taught in schools. For a host of reasons, it would be interesting to gain more insight into why people seem to react so strongly, sometimes even emotionally, if another variety, for example, GA, is proposed as a basic teaching model. In this essay it will be my aim to provide a brief analysis of EFL attitudes towards RP and GA in the Netherlands, my own perspective on these attitudes as an EFL teacher based in the Netherlands and how I feel EFL in the Netherlands can be made richer for students if we were to embrace open-mindedness more. Anecdotal evidence drawn from the author's own experience will be used to illustrate some of the attitudes encountered in the English classroom in the Netherlands.

In the 1980s one of my former college teachers had just moved from California to the city of Tilburg, the Netherlands. She was an English literature major and had obtained several teaching qualifications. With over 15 years of teaching experience, both in secondary education and community colleges, she knew that getting a job would perhaps be a challenge only because she needed some getting used to a brand-new culture, with people, she soon noticed, who generally tended to be somewhat 'in your face'. Moreover, she had learnt from her husband's cousin, who was a Dutch native, that the Dutch greatly valued being taught English by native speakers. And so she sent out her resumes to local Dutch schools. After several months, she had managed to get invited by a couple of schools, but in each case the headmaster decided not to hire. When she asked what the reasons were for not choosing her, she was rather opaquely informed that her profile and track record did not match with the school's requirements. In other cases, she was told that it was because of her limited command of Dutch, which to some extent seemed to make sense, although she wondered: wasn't one of her acquaintances, a British woman, barely capable of communicating in Dutch at all, a respected English teacher at a Dutch high school as well? In

the end, she managed to get hired for a part-time teaching job some 30 miles from where she lived.

The anecdote above provides but a glimpse of Dutch people's attitudes towards the English used in EFL classrooms. But despite its anecdotal nature, it illustrates how British English has long been the standard model for English language teaching in the Netherlands. Today still, in EFL classroom situations in the Netherlands, RP is mainly promoted as the 'good' and sometimes even 'only' way to speak English. American varieties are often vilified, vulgarized or simply denied as a form of English in its own right. Drawing from my own experience as an English teacher, I remember several occasions on which I had to defend my own preference for using a rhotic, Northern-American accent against colleagues who vociferously proposed that my 'practices' would inevitably result in the downfall of 'good' English language teaching. Interestingly, when asking to back up their claims, I found that their arguments turned out to be rather diverse. Some proposed that RP served as a better model because the Netherlands are eurocentric with respect to trade relations and commerce. Others simply proposed that RP was generally deemed more 'correct' than American English, or that all textbooks were already based on British English, so therefore would it not just be easier to 'simply' change my accent? Yet by other arguments it was implied that using different pronunciation models were bound to thoroughly confuse students and have a negative impact on their speaking skills, which I found odd, because as far as I knew American sitcoms and films were all I used to watch when in secondary education, and it still makes up for the majority of media consumed by present-day students – including myself. When the lion's share of input being American English, and an English teacher trying to un-teach you 'cookie' and having you say 'biscuit' instead for one or two hours a week, how more confusing could things get? Another

argument that I was presented with was by one of my senior colleagues, a teacher of Dutch, telling me that he felt deeply offended that I was teaching *his* students American English as this would be tantamount to him teaching his students Flemish Dutch rather than Standard Dutch. The last discussion I had regarding my accent took place only very recently, with one of my senior colleagues, who had been tasked with co-assessing my pedagogic skills as an English teacher. She herself is a British native with a for most RP-oriented non-native English teachers highly desirable East-Midlands accent. She came up to me and told me she had been asked to sit together with one of the school's senior managers and staff managers. Together they had discussed my classroom management techniques, rapport with students and other tasks that I carried out. In the end, their conclusion was that my rapport with students was excellent, I employed creative problem-solving strategies and was very engaged with students helping them to achieve the best results. One minor detail and point of attention though, she said, was my American accent. "At this school we teach British English".

To explain and analyse the observed importance attached to an RP teaching model, mainly in terms of pronunciation, a good jumping off point in my opinion would be to take a look at the linguistic input students get from television, the internet and videogames. I think it safe to conclude that most input – from TV and video games anyway -- is based on American English, and therefore Dutch people may often tend to associate Northern American accents (henceforth NAA) with violence or a less civilized culture, although I would like to express myself tentatively here since to the best of my knowledge I do not know of any research explicitly confirming this. But whereas NAA can be heard on the majority of Dutch commercial networks, Dutch people's access to RP is in most cases restricted to BBC 1, 2, 3 and 4, which are publically funded. The amount of violence displayed in East Enders or Doctor Who, strikes

me as relatively low compared to what can be seen in the average Hollywood blockbuster. This may have led Dutch people, when it comes to civilized behaviour, to sympathise more with British accents. Another possible explanation may be found in the ideas we have with regard to tradition. The UK is generally considered to be very tradition-oriented, for example with regard to their royal family, politics and the Eurosceptic stubbornness, which Dutch people perhaps both seem to admire and resent at the same time, whereas in these respects it would be much more difficult for a Dutch person to identify with US, and consequently possibly with a NAA. All of this, may have had a tremendous influence on how people's opinions on the concept of 'good' English, and inevitably the English that should be taught in schools, evolved and came to be what it is today.

Research done within the EFL classroom provides us with different angles and insights into how people look upon the 'good' language that ought to be taught at schools. (Pilus, 2013) (Dalton-Puffer, Kaltenboeck, & Smit, 1997) (Isabel González Cruz & Jesús Vera Cazorla, 2008) point towards EFL learners' preferences for British English in Europe. Explanations range from learners being typically more familiar with the RP accent. However, circularity seems to be at play here since one cannot deny the influence of teacher authority and them acting as role models for EFL learners in selecting their variety of preference. When taking into consideration that in the Netherlands most students, outside of the classroom, must almost beyond doubt be more familiar with American English, then familiarity being of influence on their choice for RP would make little sense. Alternatively, to avoid the question of which variety would suit the EFL classroom best, suggestions have been done to transform the EFL classroom into an ELF one. That is, English as a Lingua Franca, which would be based on a construct form of global English based on some of the ELF learners' own intuitions of English word and phrase building. For

example, in ELF one could encounter pluralised forms of uncountable nouns that would not readily occur in standard native English, such as ‘advices’, ‘feedbacks’, and ‘informations’ (Jenkins, 2012). From my perspective as an English teacher, however, I have always felt that it would be easier to motivate students to model their own English on a variety that is readily available through the media, internet, movies, TV, et cetera. Turning back to the original discussion, how attitudes towards the GA and RP accents have resulted in RP being prescribed as the EFL model, even despite teachers speaking GA in classrooms now, some research has indicated that the influence this has on students’ accents is only limited (Suter, 2006). As a teacher I personally feel then feel that when people hear my accent, they will automatically assume I also teach GA to my students, which is not the case. In this respect I admire the ELF idea of teaching English, and I greatly value the idea of there being a linguistic open-mindedness toward any kind of accent. I feel that teaching tolerance should be embedded in language teaching, by pointing out the multiplicity of accents and varieties out there; by teaching them that, although it is convenient and practical for the sake of language learning only, there is more out there than just RP, GA and other varieties.

In conclusion, my goal was to give a brief analysis of attitudes in Dutch EFL situations and EFL abroad with regard to the model that is used for teaching: GA or RP. Despite of attitudes in Dutch EFL tending towards RP, it is my hope that in the future, schools, students and fellow teachers will become more open-minded towards allowing different varieties of English, which will hopefully offer them more insightful look into our globalising world.

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