Received Pronunciation (RP):
Should it remain the prominent accent in the teaching of English as a foreign or second language?

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Abstract

Received Pronunciation is a prestige British accent that was widely used amongst the educated elite and became the standardized national accent in the first half of the 20th century. However, it has fallen out of favor in many social circles and is only spoken by 3% of the population.

This paper discusses the topic of Received Pronunciation and attempts to answer questions such as, "How is RP regarded in today's society?", "Is it time to replace it in the language classroom?", "If so, what are the alternatives?", and, "What are the arguments for and against RP's continued use?" This is achieved through a combination of theoretical research from linguistic experts, and research carried out by the author.

My data collection for this project takes the form of a survey which is distributed to my ESL colleagues working in schools, colleges and universities in Japan. A survey is chosen as not to influence the decisions of the contributors, and closed questions are used to simplify data analysis and make it less ambiguous.

The results of the completed surveys are compiled and presented in bar charts. Each bar chart relates to one of the survey questions. These charts are used to provide valid data that is used to find conclusions.

Finally, I evaluate the results of the data collection and provide arguments for and against the continued use of RP, along with some suggestions on future approaches to spoken English in the ESL classroom.

Introduction: 1) Definitions

There have been numerous attempts to clearly and adequately define Received Pronunciation, even the term itself is disputed. "It is (also) interesting to observe that the 1997 English Pronouncing Dictionary published by Cambridge University Press abandoned the label RP in favour of BBC English even though the latter is not unproblematic..." (Wardhaugh2002: 46) Due to even the use of the term

BBC English/Pronunciation declining in applicability I have decided to stick with the use of Received Pronunciation throughout this paper, hereafter referred to as RP.

Some have gone to great lengths to define RP, with varying degrees of success, however, I believe the following quotes are two of the better attempts due to their simplicity and that they touch on all the key points which this paper is concerned with.

> "A pronunciation of British English, originally based on the speech of the upper class of south eastern England and characteristic of the English spoken at public schools and at Oxford and Cambridge Universities. Until recently it was the standard form of English used in British Broadcasting." (The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language quoted on www. yaelf.com/rp.shtml)
>
> " Pronunciation of standard British English based on the speech of educated speakers of southern British English... the type of pronunciation often recommended as a model for foreign learners." (www.yaelf.com/rp.shtml)

It is the last comment from the second quote that we will be analysing in greater detail throughout this paper.

Introduction: 2) Background

RP is a prestige accent which was originally founded in the south east of England, but actually can be found anywhere in the country as it is not regionally, but socially and educationally, determined. In the 19th Century it came to symbolise a person's place within society as so clearly represented when public schools and highly regarded universities adopted as a standardised accent. These young men would go on to high positions within the military and civil service, thereby giving RP connotations of authority and power. By the 1920s RP's acceptance as the most widely understood non-regional accent allowed it to be adopted by the BBC (British Broadcasting Corporation) which in turn led to the term 'BBC Pronunciation', as

mentioned earlier. Since its emergence RP has been referred to as 'BBC English', 'Public School English', and 'The Queen's English', which have all contributed to confusion and disagreement amongst scholars and learners alike. Essentially they are all one in the same, although 'Public School English' is often regarded as an extreme form, sometimes referred to as 'Ultra RP' or 'Conservative RP'. This is in stark contrast to 'Modern RP' as used in ESL/EFL today. We will now look at some of these variations of RP and changes in attitude towards it in recent years.

Introduction: 3) The Status of RP Today

The RP we refer to today in regards to teaching English as a second or foreign language is modern RP and is a much subtler variant of that heard on the BBC in the 1950s or used by public school boys of that time, it has inherently changed to suit the times. Some establishments still use it in its "pure" form, such as the Royal Family, Parliament, the Church of England, and the High Courts. As reiterated here:

> "In the present day we may, however, recognise a received pronunciation all over the country.... It may be especially considered as the educated pronunciation of the metropolis, of the court, the pulpit, and the bar." (Ellis 1869: 23)

Ellis's point may still be relevant but today only 3 percent of the population of Britain still actually use RP.

From the 1920s onwards RP was adopted by those mentioned above and elitist attitudes and connotations developed to the point that those who spoke RP may look unfavourably or make unjustified judgements on those who did not. RP became synonymous with high standards of education and a favourable social background, and all those in authority or power were expected to use it. However, these attitudes started to change when Harold Wilson became Prime Minister in the 1960s. He had a strong regional Yorkshire accent which he used to his advantage to appeal to the working class voters that his party (Labour Party) represented.

Nowadays, 'Marked RP' or 'Ultra RP', as it is sometimes called, is considered

an exaggerated form of pronunciation that has negative connotations such as elitism and snobbery. Peter Trudgill explains,

> "experiments in Britain have shown that speakers using an RP speaking guise are generally regarded as more intelligent and more educated, but less friendly and less likeable, than the same speakers using a local-accent-speaking guise." (2000: 194/5)

He goes on to state,

> "RP speakers may be perceived, as soon as they start speaking, haughty and unfriendly by non-RP speakers unless or until they are able to demonstrate the contrary." (195)

Due to these negative connotations and seemingly out-dated way of speaking, adaptation has occurred across the board. For example, Public School students now maintain their regional accent to some extent or use a mild form of estuary English; the Royal Family has slightly adapted its speech in order that it may seem more acceptable, although it is still rather archaic; and a pure form of RP can now only be heard on the news whereas in all other forms of broadcasting regional accents have replaced RP in order to be more representative of the people and change with the times.

Despite all this, RP continues to be used on a wide scale as it is largely accepted as the standardised accent for the teaching of English to foreigners. This is done in order to obtain the highest level of comprehension in the classroom and to avoid confusion by the inclusion of limitless variants of the British English. This has proven successful because although only 3 percent of British English speakers actually use RP, it is used abroad in a far wider context so that non-native speakers of English may communicate and understand one another, and effectively do business on a global scale with English being the lingua franca. It is the continued use of RP for this purpose to which we will now focus our attention.

Aim

When discussing the topic of RP there are many questions to be answered. Therefore, I will attempt to answer questions such as, "Is RP in danger of decline in the language classroom?", "Is it time to replace it?", "If so, what are the alternatives?", and "What are the arguments for and against RP's continued use?" This will hopefully be achieved through a mixture of theoretical research based on the opinions of linguistic scholars, and a survey directed towards my fellow teachers in order to gather information based on their opinions and to discover how aware they are of the subject matter. I will use the results of my survey to either support or oppose Jennifer Jenkins's view. My own opinions and views will be included to give balance to my argument.

Rationale

The reason behind RP being my choice for an independent research project came about when I recorded my voice for a listening test for my HS students. I listened intriguingly at the vast differences in pronunciation between myself and the other teacher, who hails from Hull in the North East of England. This heightened my curiosity of differing accents amongst my peers and got me wondering, firstly, do these varying accents, some more regional than others, affect student's comprehension; secondly, to what

extent do they maintain their regional accents when teaching; and thirdly, are the students actually aware of these differences. I discovered, from casually chatting to the students that they were , on the whole, unaware of the regional accents and certainly couldn't distinguish between them, but when asked the simple question, "Which teacher(s) do you feel are the easiest to understand?" – the results proved most interesting. Majority of the students chose the same two teachers, one of whom being myself, both of us possessing a pronunciation much closer to standardised form rather than a regional accent. It was because of these casual conversations with my students that I decided to start researching this topic of accents in more detail,

especially the use of RP. Therefore, when choosing a topic for my research project, the answer came to me naturally.

Procedure

My data collection for this project took the form of a survey as I thought this would be the easiest way to collect as much information as possible in a relatively short time. I designed a simple survey with 6 closed questions in order to make data analysis simpler and to avoid inconveniencing my peers with open-ended questions, which would be time consuming for them and troublesome to compile for me.

I attached my survey to an email that I sent to both my managers asking them to kindly distribute the surveys to amongst the British English staff. Although, there are quite a few British English teachers working for my perspective companies, the feedback was minimal due either to busy schedules or a lack of knowledge of the subject matter. I carefully evaluated the answers from the 10 people who completed my survey, and thus the justification for the first question on my survey. I will not compile this data, it was purely as a test of their knowledge.

From the 10 completed surveys, the data will be compiled and presented in bar charts. Hopefully, the close-ended questions, each with a specific target, will clearly provide valid data to include in my conclusion.

Data Analysis: Section 1

The first section of my survey gave 5 statements associated with RP and I wanted to see if there was any agreement amongst the respondents as to the order of applicability. Although all the statements were valid, one or two should have been slightly more prominent than the others, thus creating a pattern. The results provided a wide-range of opinions but 7 out of 10 respondents did place statement 2 (Please refer to Appendix A) as one of the top two. This was in compliance with my presumptions in which I predicted statement 2 to hold the highest level of applicability.

I later discovered that although the respondents didn't seek guidance in each other and that they did complete their surveys independently, most of them did have to do a web search to discover the meaning and definition of RP. Thus their choices were probably influenced by their research and not totally based upon personal opinion or knowledge.

Data Analysis: Section 2

This section was based on the statement, "All ESL/EFL teachers should be required to use RP in the language classroom." Appendix B Bar Chart 1 represents data connected to this statement and clearly indicates the level of agreement or disagreement with this statement. From the four possible choices 5 out of 10 of the respondents chose Statement D – "I totally disagree and think it is old-fashioned and impractical." I was surprised by these results and had expected either Statement B or C to be the most popular choice. I thought the teachers would have least acknowledged the obvious advantages standardisation brings even if they felt this particular form of standardisation was inappropriate or impractical. More will be said on this point in due course.

Data Analysis: Section 3

After handing out my survey I realised that this particular question needed rephrasing as it presented a mistruth and thus confused a couple of the respondents, resulting in an incomplete survey in one case. I would therefore like to rephrase the question in order to present a more accurate picture that reads as follows:
"Why do you think RP has predominately become the standard accent in the teaching of English as a foreign or second language?"
As can clearly be seen from Appendix B Bar Chart 2, 'Intelligibility' gained the largest percentage of votes with 40%, which was exactly what I had expected. This is also closely connected to Statement E 'Standardisation' which received 20% of the votes. Through standardisation a higher percentage of intelligibility can be

achieved both in the classroom when learning with a native speaker of English, and outside the classroom when putting language into practice with non-native speakers. This led me to believe that is isn't standardisation that my fellow teachers oppose but the form of standardisation applied.

Data Analysis: Section 4

This section refers to adjustments in speech when used in the language class-room to optimise clarity and comprehension. The data collection for this question unequivocally shows that all the teachers surveyed adjust their speech to some degree either consciously or unconsciously, once again proving that they believe some form of standardisation to be preferable over the use of regional accents. The most popular choice here was B – Unconsciously, as a habit of teaching. From the teachers I spoke to after collecting the surveys, the consensus seems to be that they would not know how to imitate an RP accent and that they only try to consciously, or otherwise, alter their regional accent to maximise intelligibility amongst their students.

Data Analysis: Section 5

This section refers to the possible disadvantages that could be encountered if learners were subjected to a non-RP accent. Bar Chart 4 presents a clear majority in favour of the idea that no significant disadvantages would be encountered. Quite frankly, these results were staggering as I had expected a majority in favour of unin-telligibility, especially because the respondents had previously stated in Section 4 that a standardised accent would be preferable to a regional one.

I could only assume their choices were influenced by their understanding of RP and what was being referred to in this question. I later asked them about this and all but one understood the question to be referring to 'Marked RP' rather than the diluted 'Modern RP', which is a moderate form of the one synonymous with public schools and BBC English of the 1940s and 50s. I explained that the form of RP being referred to in conjunction with TEFL/TESL is a mixture of Modern RP

and estuary English, producing a much subtler accent than that used previously. In light of this new information they agreed unintelligibility among other non-native speakers would be the more likely choice from those made available due to the fact that modern RP is the standard by which majority of students learn.

The misunderstanding of Q5. once again highlights the lack of knowledge that some English teachers in Japan have in regard to this subject matter.

Data Analysis: Section 6

The final question was, "If RP were to be replaced, what should we replace it with?" Appendix B Bar Chart 5 shows an 80% favourability for a subtler standardisation which involves a greater move towards a combination of estuary English and RP. This would allow elements of regional accents to be maintained, if not slightly suppressed or softened in order to maximise clarity among learners.

This far outweighed the support of regional pronunciation at 20% or using non-native speaker pronunciation that obtained 0% of the votes. This is in stark contrast to Jennifer Jenkins' views, but there are reasons for this, which will be explained and analysed in my conclusion.

Conclusion

The results of my survey leads us to the question, "What role does RP have to play in the continued teaching of English as a second or foreign language?" There are some who believe it to be out-dated due to imperialistic and elitist connotations, and impractical due to the percentage of British people who actually still use it. This maybe so, but if we are to replace it, what should we replace it with? Jennifer Jenkins' believes the model of pronunciation should be based on international intelligibility – which means a standard that other non-native speakers can easily comprehend because, after all, non-native speakers spend majority of their time conversing with other non-native speakers, as in the case of India. This is an interesting point countered by Honey who states,

"schools should provide students with advantages. One of these is to be 'well-spoken' well-spokeness being 'an attribute of human dignity'. 'Whether we like it or not, the ability to handle one of the most widely acceptable accents has become an important indicator of an individual's ability to control the world around them'." (Honey '89 quoted in Wardhaugh 2002: 348)

He goes on to say that people are empowered and greatly advantaged by the ability to effectively master RP and Standard English.

Although I understand Jennifer Jenkins's views I'm not entirely convinced, equally I appreciate Honey's view on RP but the way he presents his argument gives the impression he feels RP to be superior to non-RP accents. Although I am in favour of the continued use of RP due to my bias, as I, myself, use an accent which is similar to modern RP, and the benefits it has brought me and my fellow users of RP, I don't want others to confuse this with the belief that a non-RP accent is in someway inferior or 'wrong'.

There are those who favour RP, others who would prefer a less marked regional accent to be adopted, and yet others who would go as far as suggesting students use their local non-native accent. This was the last question I posed to those I surveyed, and once RP had been clarified, they voted heavily in favour of a subtler standardisation over regional or non-native accents.

I choose a subtler form of RP because I'm aware that certain RP pronounced words can be difficult for learners to distinguish. One such example comes from the fact that RP is a non-rhotic accent, which means 'r' is not pronounced unless immediately followed by a vowel. Although there are several defining trends of RP, I have decided to use only one to illustrate my point, this being the notoriously difficult broad 'a' in words like bath and grass, that is voiced in RP but not in non-RP pronunciation.

Many students find the non-RP form much easier to distinguish whereas the RP form can be confused with similar sounding words. Due to this I realise that a moderation of RP is needed, which can be achieved by diluting it with a regional

accent. On the other hand, there are those including 2 of my respondents, who believe the adoption of a regional accent is the way forward. I cannot agree with this because it raises the problem that RP set out to avoid in the first place – variants of accent, the differentiation between them and the difficulty of choosing one or learning all. The problems here lead me to believe there is only one alternative that has a solid argument to support it – the adoption of a non-native accent.

I entirely understand Jennifer Jenkins's view that a non-native speaker accent is the future of ESL/EFL pronunciation because her argument is based upon intelligibility among non-native speakers, as reiterated by Bryan Jenner who tried to determine, "what all native speakers of all varieties have in common which enables them to communicate effectively with native speakers." If the answer to this were realised, then it could be adapted to help non-native speakers of English. The result of thorough research into this subject matter is LFC (Lingua Franca Core), which is a list of priority areas that all students must be competent in. This would then allow any non-native speaker to be understood by another.

This in theory sounds practical, if a little difficult to implement, as it would avoid problems resulting from non-native teachers' pronunciation causing more harm than good, or non-native speakers of varying nationalities, finding each other unintelligible. It is a new form of standardisation for a world where there are 4 times as many non-native speakers of English than native speakers. However, I feel there are aspects of English teaching, such as correct pronunciation, lexical appropriateness, the flexibility of grammatical use, and the introduction of idioms, phrasal verbs and slang, that cannot be achieved by a non-native speaker no matter what their level of fluency may be. In some cases it could be argued that a non-native speaker who has studied English linguistics at a renowned centre of learning maybe more grammatically proficient than a non-native speaker, but I do not believe they would be able to convey their grammatical knowledge as clearly and stimulatingly as a native speaker. I believe it is here, in the application and explanation, that a native speaker has the advantage. Furthermore, until the LFC can be implemented effectively, and non-native speakers are trained in how to do so, I believe the status quo would be a more likely solution for the immediate future.

From the results of my survey I can confidentially assume majority of my respondents would favour LFC in light of this new information as their answers indicate a disfavour of RP, although not so much modern RP; a high regard for the chosen standardisation being intelligible; and agreement that a form of standardisation is the best way forward. I feel that if they were asked to answer Q6. again but this time with the inclusion of LFC, they would most likely opt for this choice over RP. LFC is in effect a combination of choices B and C – a subtler standardisation & non-native speaker pronunciation.

At the end of the day, whether you are in favour of the emergence of LFC or the continued use of RP, it is the learner who should have the final say. If a learner chooses to learn RP in order to acquire native speaker pronunciation and thereby reap the obvious advantages that come with this, or LFC to obtain a greater level of intelligibility among other non-native speakers of English, whilst maintaining their national identity, this is surely their prerogative.

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Appendix A: An Example of the Survey

Received Pronunciation (RP): A Survey for Teachers

1) What is your understanding of Received Pronunciation?

(Please number these statements from 1 to 5 according to applicability)

A. A regional accent that obtained national recognition for "pure" pronunciation.

B. An accent with social and educational connotations.

C. The accepted, standardised British accent used in the teaching of English as a Second or Foreign Language.

D. An accent of a by-gone era associated with the BBC, British theatre and film, and all things quintessentially English.

E. An accent considered more intelligible than regional ones.

2) How much do you agree with the statement, "All ESL/EFL teachers should be required to use RP in the language classroom."

(Please circle ONE of the following)

A. I totally agree.

B. I agree but I have reservations about its authenticity.

C. I understand its prominence, but favour other accents.

D. I totally disagree and think it is old-fashioned and impractical.

3) Why do you think RP has been selected as the standard accent in the language classroom?

(Please circle ONE of the following)

A. Intelligibility.

B. Social and educational connotations.

C. Nationally elected by the Academy.

D. Learners are unaware of the alternatives or cannot differentiate between RP and regional accents.

E. To maintain a standard amongst non-native English speakers of English.

4) To what degree do you adjust your speech in the language classroom to optimise clarity and comprehension?

(Please circle ONE of the following)

A. Consciously, to maximise comprehension.

B. Unconsciously, as a habit of teaching.

C. Consciously, but to a lesser degree.

D. I never adjust my speech. I use my full regional accent.

5) What level of disadvantage could your students encounter if subjected to non-RP?

(Please tick any relevant statements)

A. Unintelligibility by other non-native speakers.

B. Discrimination in business and educational circles.

C. Mild amusement when conversing with native speakers.

    D. No significant disadvantages.

    E. No disadvantages, in fact RP would be more of a disadvantage amongst non-native speakers.

6) If RP was to be replaced, what should we replace it with?

(Please circle ONE of the following)

    A. Regional pronunciation.

    B. A subtler standardisation.

   C. Non-native speaker pronunciation.

Appendix B: Bar Charts

Bar Chart 1: Q2. All ESL/EFL teachers should be required to use RP in the language classroom

    A. I totally agree.

    B. I agree but I have reservations about its authenticity.

    C. I understand its prominence, but favour other accents.

   D. I totally disagree and think it is old-fashioned and impractical.
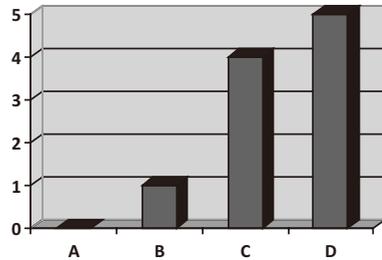
Bar Chart 2: Q3. Why do you think RP has been selected as the standard accent in the language classroom?

    A. Intelligibility.

    B. Social and educational connotations.

    C. Nationally elected.

    D. Unawareness.

    E. Standardisation.
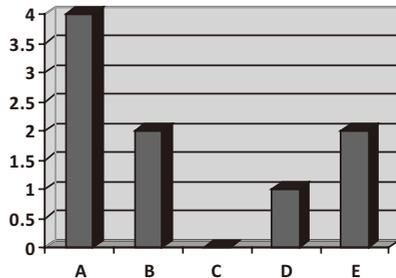
Bar Chart 3: Q4. To what degree do you adjust your speech in the language classroom.

    A. Consciously

    B. Unconsciously

    C. Consciously, but to a lesser degree

    D. I never adjust my speech
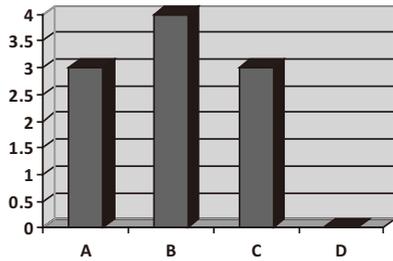
Bar Chart 4: Q5. What level of disadvantage could your students encounter if subjected to non-RP?

    A. Unintelligibility

    B. Discrimination

    C. Mild amusement

    D. No significant disadvantages

    E. RP would be more of a disadvantage
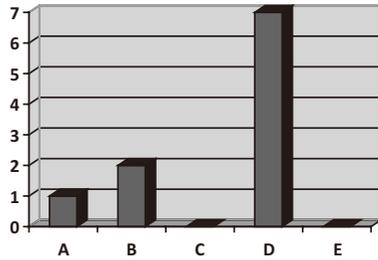
Bar Chart 5: Q6. If RP was to be replaced, what should we replace it with?

    A. Regional pronunciation

    B. A subtler standardisation

    C. Non-native speaker pronunciation