Examining the effect of listening training in understanding English varieties

Supervisor Tatsuya Taguchi
2130607 Noriko Hasegawa

1 Introduction

“What types of English should we understand and learn?” The question of this kind may be posed by students in the classroom. My answer would be “as many varieties of English as you can.” This is partly due to the fact that English nowadays is regarded as “World Language” and many people the world over speak different types of English. Furthermore, my experience told me the value of English varieties. During the study abroad period, I interacted many people, each of who spoke different types of English. This was also the case with language school teachers who were from several countries such as Spain, Hungary and Italy. These experiences made me strongly feel that my English skills dramatically improved and made me believe that we should understand and learn not only English spoken by native speakers of English but also English spoken by non-native speakers of English, that is “English varieties.” The idea of English varieties will be important in the school setting in Japan. For example, dealing with only one native English in the classroom may cause learners not to be tolerant towards English varieties. Furthermore, although both of native and non-native English should be treated equally, irrational prejudice will occur. It ends in totally misunderstanding of English varieties due to the school.

Having considered these situations, it can be presumed that the adoption of English varieties to lessons has a great possibility to acquire English skills in efficient way also in Japan.

2 Literature Review

There are many types of English over the world and Kachru (1997) classifies them roughly into three groups. The first is “Inner Circle varieties of English,” which is spoken as a mother tongue. Countries of this group include America, United Kingdom, Canada and Australia. The second is “Outer Circle varieties of English.” Nations which belong to this group includes countries that English plays a great role as a second language, for example, India, Singapore and Philippines. The final group is “Expanding Circle varieties of English.” Countries for this group involve those nations which recognize the importance of English as an international language and learn it as a foreign language, for example, China, Thailand and Russia. These classifications further allows English speakers to be grouped into two—native English speaker group (from the inner circle) and non-native speaker group.

Despite the fact that the three groups treat “English,” people in general display different attitudes towards English of each group. For example, Japanese learners were more favourable towards Inner Circle varieties of English than (outer or) Expanding Circle varieties of English (e.g., Chiba et al. 1995). Even among English of the inner circle, there is preference. Matsura, Chiba, and Fujieda (1999) shows that American English is favoured and McKenzie (2008) found that speakers of US English are preferred, followed by the speakers of UK varieties. These results indicate that learners preferred native accented English in general and believe the idea that nativelike English and pronunciation especially is the best to learn. The learners may regard a nativelike accent simply as prestigious thing.

The biased preference of native English may cause some problems. For example, Giles and Coupland’s study (as cited in McKenzie, 2008) cleared that the degree of accentedness may affect listener evaluations, with ratings less favourable the more heavily-accented the speaker sounded. In fact, most teachers do not want learners to underestimate their proficiency of English because of the intonation. However, what is to be noted here is there
are no specific evidence that non-native accent is inferior to native accent. Therefore, these views on strong preference over native accents may be questioned.
Shimizu (2011) claims that it is not a good idea to set the goal to become a nativelike speaker without particular reasons. Several researchers argue the necessity of learning English varieties. For example, Deterding (2005) highlights the importance that students are exposed to a few selected standard varieties of English speech only. Clarke and Garrett (2004) argue that prolonged exposure to different accents helps learners better comprehend the language in general. Moreover, some researches showed the strength of non-standard accents such as the feeling of familiarity with teachers who speak non-native accent. (Ballard and Winke 2017). In line with this, it is possible that dealing with English varieties enable learners to improve their English skills. However, little study has been done to prove the effectiveness of English varieties in Japan in that many of researches focused on only native speakers. Therefore, it is high time for Japanese English education decided what English varieties are suitable for learning as a model of English.

3 Methods
The subjects for this study will be approximately 40-50 university students. In this study, three types of research instruments will be utilised—questionnaire, training material and listening test. The questionnaire will be designed based on previous studies (e.g., Matsuura et al, 1999; McKenzie, 2008) in order to obtain background of participants and the listening test will be created based on several sources such as books and internet websites. Training materials with various types of English pronunciation will be prepared for listening training. Data collection will take the following procedures. Firstly, participants will fill in the questionnaire and take a first listening test composed with sound materials of native and nonnative English speakers. Secondly, they will be divided into three groups to receive different sound trainings. One group will be trained with only sound by native English speakers. Another will be with only sound by nonnative English speakers. The other will be with the combination of sound of native and nonnative English speakers. Finally, after the listening training, they will be tested to see how much they improve their listening abilities. The training period will last for about one month.

4 References