



From Received Pronunciation to Global Adaptability: Examining Language Education Trends in Russian Universities

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Abstract

For decades, Russian higher education institutions have favoured British English, particularly Received Pronunciation (RP), as the academic standard. Adhering to these norms, they often overlook the importance of exposing students to a variety of accents, mistakenly viewing deviations from RP as academically inferior. This approach limits students' ability to master English comprehensively for global communication as the contemporary reality of English requires a more expansive and inclusive pedagogy. This study investigates the alignment between English instruction preferences of students and faculty members at the Russian Presidential Academy of National Economy and Public Administration (RANEPA) in Moscow. It explores the reasons behind teachers' adherence to British pronunciation, analyses students' emerging needs, and questions the effectiveness of an RP-centric approach in fostering global communication skills. The survey collected responses from students at various academic levels and faculty members through an anonymous questionnaire featuring multiple-choice and open-ended questions. Results reveal a significant divergence between students' preferences and teachers' instructional focus. Most students learn English to interact with both native and non-native speakers and are aware of major English varieties. While students' preferred pronunciation models vary, faculty members predominantly favour British English, particularly RP, as the instructional standard. The study concludes that students display a pragmatic and open-minded approach, desiring exposure to various English accents. This contrasts with teachers' preference for British English, which may hinder effective communication and cultural understanding. The study recommends a more inclusive approach in language instruction, exposing students to diverse English accents to better prepare them for global communication.

Keywords: accents, globalisation, lingua franca, language proficiency, linguistic diversity

1. Introduction

In many countries, including Russia, English language educators often favour teaching the British accent, specifically emphasising Received Pronunciation (RP) as the singular norm and standard of English proficiency. This preference is rooted in the longstanding belief that RP represents the gold standard of English, prompting educators to focus heavily on its instruction and strive for near-native proficiency. Such an inclination mirrors broader societal attitudes towards language and identity, associating mastery of RP with cultural refinement and professional success.

However, this focus on a single accent not only limits linguistic diversity within the classroom but also perpetuates harmful stereotypes and biases concerning language proficiency and cultural authenticity. Moreover, it is crucial to recognise that students themselves often have a keen interest in exploring and learning different accents, driven by exposure to various English accents through media and global communication platforms.

1.1 Linguistic perspectives on Standard English

In light of these dynamics, questions arise about what truly defines Standard English. Is it solely synonymous with RP, or does it encompass a broader range of accents and dialects? One framework that provides valuable insights into the diversity of English varieties worldwide is Kachru's Circles. Kachru (1985) categorised English usage into three concentric circles: the Inner Circle, the Outer Circle, and the Expanding Circle. The Inner Circle includes countries where English is the primary language, such as the UK, US, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. In these nations, Standard English, often associated with British or American English norms, serves as the benchmark for linguistic correctness. The Outer Circle comprises nations like India, Nigeria, Singapore, and others where English serves as a second language alongside indigenous ones. The Expanding Circle encompasses regions where English is learnt as a foreign language, such as China, Japan, Russia, and many European countries. In these contexts, English is primarily a tool for international communication, adapted to local needs and cultures.

According to Jenkins (2009, A), defining Standard English poses challenges not only in its global application but also within the Inner Circle context. Crystal (2003) emphasises that speakers in the Outer and Expanding Circles of English usage greatly surpass those in the Inner Circle. While precise figures are uncertain, evidence indicates that there are over three times as many non-native speakers of English as there are native speakers in the world today. Additionally, Crystal notes that a significant portion of English communication exchanges occur without any native speakers being involved.

Trudgill (1999) suggests that Standard English is just one variant among the many regional and social dialects that exist within the broader spectrum of English. Despite lacking the status of a separate language, Standard English plays a pivotal role in education systems across English-speaking nations, where it is taught to both native speakers and non-native learners alike and is often considered the benchmark for proficiency in English language learning.

Strevens (1985) argues that Standard English embodies the grammar and vocabulary associated with educated usage of the language, while Crystal (1995) defines it as a minority variety distinguished primarily by its vocabulary, grammar, and orthography. Despite its minority status, Standard English carries significant prestige and is widely understood, serving as a marker of social status and education.

Trudgill asserts that Standard English is distinct from accent, and most British linguists agree that Standard English has nothing to do with pronunciation. In Britain, Received Pronunciation

(RP) stands out as a prestigious accent associated with upper-class backgrounds, yet it does not exclusively represent Standard English. While many RP speakers also employ Standard English, not all Standard English speakers use RP. Approximately 9%-12% of the British population speaks Standard English with regional accents. Although Standard English speakers typically exhibit milder regional accents, variations are still present. Internationally, Standard English speakers are found across English-speaking countries, each with their own accents, whether they be Scottish, American, or from New Zealand. Thus, while RP serves as a standardised accent, it does not equate to Standard English itself.

According to Jenkins (2009, B), there is no universally accepted 'standard' accent; rather, there are prestige accents like RP and GA, alongside stigmatised accents. She highlights that the RP accent, once deemed the British-English standard, is now spoken by only a minority of British natives. Most English speakers use accents influenced by their regional or social backgrounds, challenging the notion of RP as the 'standard.' Instead, 'standard' refers to a perceived level of pronunciation superiority, although this standardisation lacks linguistic measurability. Additionally, Jenkins (2009, C) contends that RP usage has declined, particularly among younger British generations.

McArthur (2002) suggests that because British English teachers have predominantly spoken with RP accents or have modified their accents to RP, students have been led to believe that RP represents the standard accent of educated British English. However, RP has always been a minority accent, associated with specific social classes, and spoken by a very small percentage of the UK population, likely never exceeding 3%.

Macaulay (1988) argues that the focus on Received Pronunciation (RP) as the model accent for British English might not be the most practical or inclusive approach. Instead of fixating on the accent of a privileged minority, he suggests that linguists, phoneticians, and educators should prioritise the speech patterns of the broader population. Trudgill (2002) also questions why there is such a significant emphasis on teaching Received Pronunciation (RP) to non-native speakers, considering it a minority accent.

According to Munro and Derwing (2011), acquiring a native speaker accent in a foreign language is a rare achievement for language learners, particularly if they commence their language acquisition process at an older age. The authors argue that learners do not necessarily need to mimic a native speaker's accent to ensure they are understood; rather, intelligibility is what matters. Despite possessing a noticeable foreign accent, learners can still convey meaning effectively. This highlights that pronunciation disparities do not necessarily impede comprehension.

However, the obsession with RP persists even today. Many non-native speaker (NNS) learners and teachers of English associate British English with RP. This reinforces the belief that RP is superior while non-native English accents are inferior.

Despite educational institutions' declared focus on British English, or less commonly, American English, the reality seems different. Recently, scholars have provided strong evidence for the emergence of Russian English, a distinct variety with unique phonetic, semantic, lexical, and grammatical features (Proshina, 2016). Researchers contend that this variety is prevalent even among educated Russian speakers of English and should be recognised within the expanding circle of World Englishes.

It is important to note that Russian teachers of English are not alone in their preference for British English. Research indicates that educators in other countries also tend to favour this particular variety, demonstrating a monocentric approach (Tizzano & Rauer, 2019). This preference does not accurately represent the diverse nature of contemporary English.

Modiano (1999) suggests that strict adherence to a British English (BrE) standard in English language education may hinder the learning process for students who do not wish to adopt a British accent or solely focus on British vocabulary, grammar, and style, especially among non-native students. Considering various factors in English language studies, such as the ongoing influence of American English on global language patterns, becomes crucial. This influence presents challenges for both non-native and some native speakers in maintaining consistency in using a single variety of English. Modiano argues that the standard should reflect how proficient speakers naturally use the language, regardless of their identity.

He introduced the concept of English as an International Language (EIL), recognising English as a global means of communication among speakers from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Unlike traditional approaches like English as a Foreign Language (EFL) or English as a Second Language (ESL), EIL acknowledges English's widespread use as a medium of international communication among speakers with varying levels of proficiency and cultural backgrounds. Modiano's circles represent different groups of English speakers and their language features, including speakers of American English (AmE), British English (BrE), other major varieties, local varieties (e.g., Indian English), and foreign language speakers. Each group is characterised by three types of language ability. The outermost part of each circle contains features unique to that speech community, considered esoteric and specific to their usage. Between the outer area and the "common core," there are features transitioning in international acceptance or usage. The "core" represents features widely used and understood by the majority of native and competent non-native English speakers.

1.2 The lingua franca approach for international communication

Seidlhofer (2009) argues that appropriateness in language use is determined by the norms of behaviour within a particular context rather than adherence to native speaker standards. While standards are necessary in language pedagogy, they should not automatically default to native speaker norms. Instead, pedagogic standards should be reevaluated in light of the changing landscape of English as a lingua franca (ELF).

She suggests that when teaching English for international communication, the focus should primarily be on teaching features that are crucial for international intelligibility (Seidlhofer, 2005). These features are essential for both the production and reception of English in international settings. On the other hand, features that do not significantly impact intelligibility, especially those considered 'non-native,' may not need to be emphasised in production teaching. Instead, valuable teaching time can be allocated to more general language awareness and communication strategies, which may be more beneficial for learners.

Advocates for the lingua franca approach encourage a global perspective on English and emphasise practicality and functionality in communication over achieving native-like proficiency. In this approach, learners prioritise effective communication, focusing on clarity and understanding rather than perfect pronunciation or adherence to a specific accent. Critics of the lingua franca approach may argue that prioritising communication over grammatical accuracy could lead to learners developing habits that deviate from standard English usage. This, in turn, could potentially hinder their ability to communicate effectively in formal or academic settings where strict adherence to grammatical rules is expected. However, the lingua franca approach does not necessarily involve simplifying grammar; rather, it emphasises effective communication in international settings where English serves as a common language among speakers with diverse native languages. While adjustments in pronunciation or vocabulary might be made to facilitate mutual understanding, grammar retains its importance as a crucial aspect of clear communication. In terms of pronunciation Jenkins (2009, C)

identifies certain norms and possible deviations in English pronunciation that do not compromise intelligibility. According to her research, there are core features crucial for effective communication in English, which encompass essential aspects of speech production while acknowledging variations across different English varieties. These core features include all consonant sounds except for the voiced and voiceless "th" sounds (/ð/ and /θ/) and the dark "l" sound. Jenkins also emphasises the importance of distinguishing between different vowel lengths, as this distinction is essential for conveying meaning and ensuring clarity in speech. Moreover, the core features discourage the omission of consonant sounds, particularly at the beginning and within words. Proper stress placement on the most important syllable within a word or phrase is also highlighted as essential for natural and effective communication. Additionally, Jenkins underscores the significance of mastering stress patterns to accurately and confidently convey meaning.

While these core features provide a solid foundation for pronunciation proficiency, Jenkins acknowledges the existence of non-core features that reflect variations in English pronunciation. These non-core features include distinctions in vowel quality, alterations in consonant clusters, and aspects of connected speech such as elision and assimilation.

2. Purpose of the study

The research aimed to explore the perceptions of both students and teachers regarding the standard of pronunciation to be taught at the university level. Specifically, it investigated whether a preferred standard exists, students' preferences for the ideal pronunciation model for university instruction, and the reasons behind these preferences. Additionally, the study analysed teachers' perceptions of the preferred accent for instructional purposes. Ultimately, its objective was to evaluate whether teachers' preferences in pronunciation teaching align with the needs and preferences of the students.

3. Methodology

To gather the necessary insights, a survey was administered at the Russian Presidential Academy of National Economy and Public Administration (RANEPA) in Moscow. Participants included first, second, and third-year students, as well as master's programme students and faculty members. The survey was structured as a questionnaire distributed via a link, allowing participants to complete it anonymously at their convenience. It included multiple-choice and open-ended questions to assess the alignment of teachers' beliefs with students' aspirations and to analyse the validity of these assumptions.

4. Results

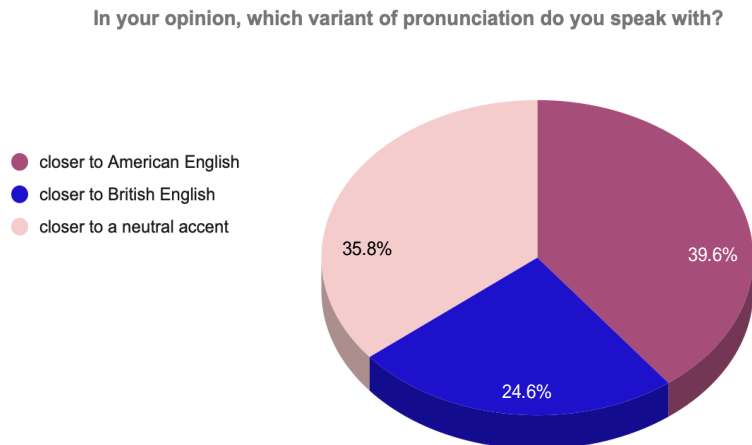
A total of 106 responses were received from the students, comprising 55 from first-year students, 30 from second-year students, 14 from third-year students, and 7 from the master's programme, along with 28 responses from faculty members.

When asked about the purpose of learning English, the majority of the students (80%) stated it was for the ability to interact with both native and non-native speakers, while 17% highlighted the importance of enhancing career opportunities.

Approximately 74% of the respondents were aware of the major varieties of English, such as British, American, Canadian, and Australian.

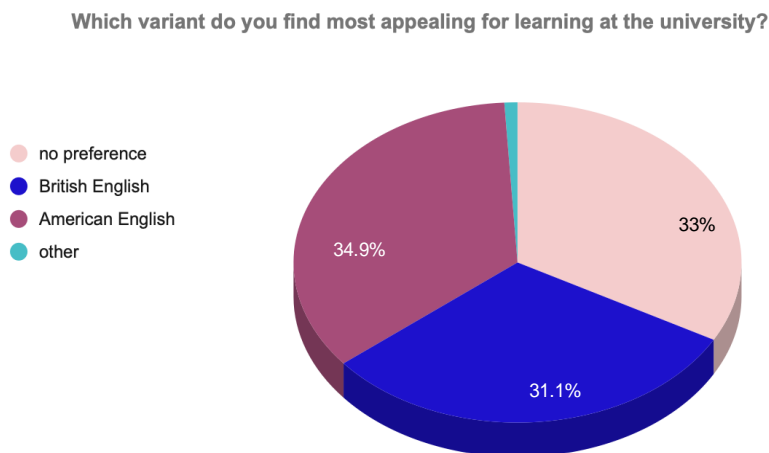
When asked about which variant they speak (Fig. 1), approximately 40% of the respondents stated they were closer to American English, 25% closer to British English, and around 36% were unable to identify their variant.

Figure 1: Student perceptions of their own English accents



In response to the question about which variant they find most appealing to be taught at the university (British, American, other, or no preferences at all) (Fig. 2), around 35% chose American English, 31% opted for British English, and 33% stated they had no preference.

Figure 2: Students' preferred university accent



When asked to elaborate on the reasons behind their choice, students who favoured the American variant mentioned several factors. Firstly, they noted that the majority of international content, including films, podcasts, and other media, is produced in American English. Additionally, there is greater exposure to speakers with American pronunciation on social media platforms. Many students emphasised that American English is widely spoken, increasing the likelihood of being properly understood if they speak with an American accent. Furthermore, some mentioned that American English is perceived as easier and more common among non-native speakers. Others highlighted the importance of learning American pronunciation as it opens up opportunities to work for international companies, given the widespread use of American English in global business contexts.

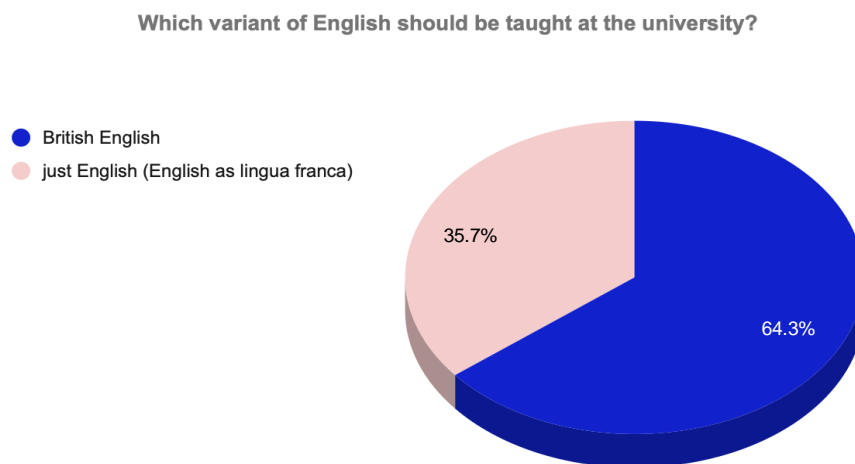
Those who chose British English highlighted its beauty and elegance, emphasising its authenticity and correctness. Respondents favouring British English mentioned that they have

held these perceptions since school, where they were taught British English rather than American English. They expressed the opinion that American English contains more contractions, making the pronunciation less appealing to them. Additionally, some associate American English with a conversational variant, while they view British English as more formal.

When asked about the necessity of exposure to various accents, approximately 71% of the students answered affirmatively, while 13% expressed doubts and 16% were unsure.

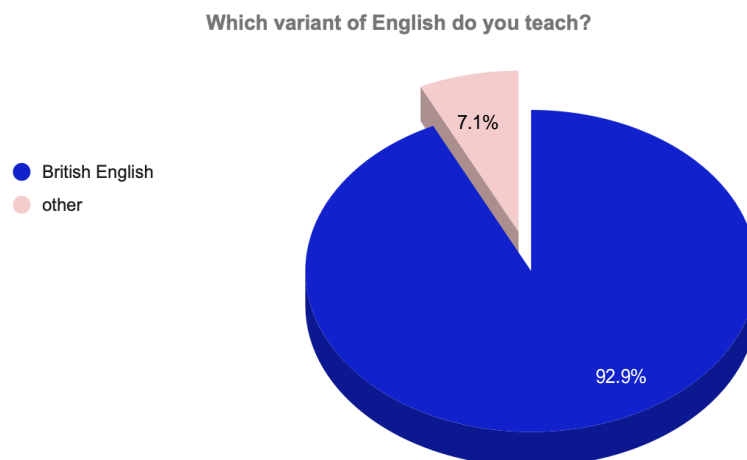
When teachers were asked which variant should be taught at the university (Fig. 3), the majority (64%) opted for British English, with around 36% stating no particular preference — favouring the lingua franca instead.

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When asked about the variant they teach (Fig. 4), approximately 93% stated they teach British English, 7% chose the 'other' option, and no respondents selected American English.

Figure 4: Teachers' views on the accent they teach



Teachers cited several reasons for their preference for British English. Firstly, it is widely regarded as the standard, imbued with a sense of classiness, and historically upheld as the academic norm across global institutions. Moreover, some mentioned that it serves as the language of international business and holds official status in over 50 countries. American English is often viewed as secondary to British English in educational contexts. Some teachers pointed out that the coursebooks they use are from British publishers. Others mentioned their own proficiency in British English. Additionally, the demand for British English among students was highlighted.

Approximately 39% of the teachers emphasised the necessity of teaching RP, while 14% disagreed, and 46% were unsure whether RP is their preferred accent in teaching.

Regarding the importance of exposing students to different accents, only 14% stated it as paramount. 50% acknowledged its importance but considered it a lower priority, while around 36% did not deem it crucial.

Moreover, according to the research, not all educators are tolerant of their students using variants other than British English. Around 26% admitted that they do not always allow their students to use alternative pronunciations.

In response to the question regarding their attitude towards the lingua franca approach, approximately 57% answered positively, with 32% not being able to give an answer and 11% responding negatively.

5. Conclusion

Based on the findings, unlike their teachers, students appear to demonstrate a more pragmatic and sensible approach when assessing pronunciation realities. Their expressed desire for exposure to various accents suggests a broader, more open-minded stance towards language learning. In contrast, teachers tend to exhibit a strong preference for only one variant of English, specifically British English, disregarding other varieties, which displays a more rigid mindset in their approach to language instruction. This preference may potentially create a barrier to effective communication and cultural understanding, as it may limit exposure to alternative accents for their students. This aligns with Modiano's (1999) argument that strict adherence to British English may hinder students' overall language learning experience.

The emphasis on teaching Received Pronunciation (RP) among a significant percentage of teachers suggests a lingering perception of its dominance, despite evolving linguistic trends and attitudes towards accent variation. Jenkins (2009, A) and Seidlhofer (2005) have highlighted the need for incorporating a variety of English accents in teaching to reflect the global use of English more accurately. Trudgill's (2002) assertion that Standard English is independent of accent supports the argument that an exclusive focus on RP is misplaced. Similarly, Macaulay (1988) argues that focusing on RP as the model accent for British English might not be the most practical or inclusive approach. RP, although prestigious, represents only a minority of British speakers and does not encompass the full range of Standard English.

The study's findings resonate with Stevens' (1985) argument that Standard English should embody the grammar and vocabulary associated with educated usage rather than a specific accent. Crystal (1995) also notes that Standard English, despite being a minority variety, is distinguished by its vocabulary, grammar, and orthography, not pronunciation. According to Munro and Derwing (2011), achieving a native speaker accent is rare for language learners, especially those starting later in life. They emphasise that intelligibility, rather than mimicking a native accent, is crucial for effective communication. This supports the study's conclusion

that students do not need to adhere strictly to RP to be understood and can benefit from exposure to various accents.

The discrepancy between teacher emphasis on British English and student preferences for accent variation underscores the need for more inclusive pedagogical approaches. It is important to recognise that British English cannot be regarded as the sole norm, dismissing other variants such as American English or other varieties. Educators should consider integrating diverse accents into language instruction to better mirror the linguistic realities of modern society. Furthermore, the acknowledgment by some educators that they do not always permit students to use alternative pronunciations suggests a potential lack of tolerance for accent variation in the classroom. This stands in contrast to students' enthusiasm for acquainting themselves with various accents, indicating a disconnect between teacher and student perspectives on language learning.

Although the majority of teachers admitted they embraced the lingua franca approach, the aforementioned conclusions suggest otherwise. Studies such as those by Modiano (1999), Seidlhofer (2005), and Jenkins (2009, A) have long advocated for a shift in language teaching to prioritise intelligibility and real-world communication over strict adherence to native speaker norms. The findings of this study reinforce these calls for a more flexible and inclusive approach to pronunciation teaching that aligns with the dynamic and diverse nature of English usage worldwide.

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