
Variation not deviation: Encouraging tolerance of English diversity in ELT

Webinar handout

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Our current situation

English today is used internationally as a common language or lingua franca, allowing people from different parts of the world to communicate with one another with greater ease. Yet despite this, many English language coursebooks, teaching materials and audio recordings continue to offer students access only to models of prestige native English speakers, such as those with Standard Southern British accent (also known as Received Pronunciation/RP) and General American English accents. This can have consequences for students' perception and production of English, as well as to their beliefs about diverse English accents.

What are some of these consequences?

- Lack of exposure to other accents of English can have a cognitive cost – it can take longer to identify and understand any new and unfamiliar sounds we hear.
- These unfamiliar sounds can lead to communication breakdowns, especially when we don't expect them.
- Difficulties understanding and frequent communication breakdowns can lead to communication anxiety and a reduction in confidence when interacting with others.
- Over time, this situation can lead students to develop negative beliefs about new and unfamiliar accents of English.

Solutions?

We can help our students to overcome these difficulties by integrating diverse Englishes into our lessons and normalising discussions of accent diversity wherever possible. Here's an example of how this could be integrated in a simple way:

1. In a listening activity, you hear the speaker using the word 'water'. Replay this section of the audio, asking your students to listen again and tell you if this pronunciation is the same as yours, and why/ not.
2. Invite students to tell you if they know of any other pronunciations of 'water'. This could include differences in its stressed vowel sound, the pronunciation of the <t> or the final <r>, all of which can change depending on where a speaker is from. If students are unsure of its variations, you can always ask them to check <https://youglish.com/> observing the pronunciation in speakers from different countries.
3. Ask students if they find any of these pronunciations easier to understand or clearer. If they say 'yes', do they know why this is? Often, the pronunciation that is most familiar to them will be the easiest to understand. The opposite will be true for unfamiliar varieties.
4. Finish the conversation by assuring students that each of these different pronunciations are acceptable and that there is no single 'correct' form of English.

Resources to try

If you want to expose your students to more varieties of English, why not try using some of the following in your lessons:

- If you work in EAP, consider **The 3-minute thesis competition** on YouTube. This is a competition held all over the world where postgraduate students summarise their research into a 3-minute presentation. There are speakers from many different countries and lots of accent diversity.
- If you want resources for General English, consider <https://ello.org/video/> (1-minute English where students from all over the world talk about a subject for 1 minute). These could be used in class or asynchronously for a homework activity.
- **My English Voice** on YouTube also contains short videos of international English speakers talking on a variety of topics.
- If you want to analyse and compare the sounds produced by diverse English speakers, consider **The Speech Accent Archive** (<https://accent.gmu.edu/>), **IDEA** (The International Dialects of English website (<https://www.dialectsarchive.com/>), or **Dynamic Dialects**, which allows you to cross reference the vowels produced by different speakers from all over the world (<https://dynamicdialects.ac.uk/accent-chart/>).

A recording of Gemma's webinar can be watched here:

<https://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/news-and-events/webinars/webinars-teachers/pronunciation-our-classrooms-mini-event>