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Mind your accent

By Zahid Ali

THE English language is spoken almost all over the world, by people of most nationalities. However, with so many people using the language, one could question its proper use. There are many different versions of the language based on the accent used when speaking it. Controversy resounds about how it should be spoken, and used to teach.

A study “Language Learners’ Perceptions of Accent” done by Jules Scales, Ann Wennestrom, Dara Richard and Sui Hui Wu (2006) was designed to understand which form of the English accent would be most beneficial for the use of teaching. In the light of the Article mentioned above, one could reflect and think as to what accent the students of Pakistan should work on.

Indeed, as a teacher, it becomes challenging for one to decide what is best for the students learning the language: accent or comprehensibility. According to Swinton, & Agopsowicz (1987) many languages do not have inherent phonetics available in their alphabet to pronounce or accent the sounds of English language; they become unable to adopt the accent of inner circle accent. For instance, the Arabs do not have “P” sound in their alphabet, so they pronounce ‘Pakistan’ as ‘Bakistan’. Similarly, in the Indian accent: the sounds of ‘th’ in words like ‘think’ or ‘theme’ and ‘th’ in words like ‘there’ or ‘this’ are not available in most of the South Asian languages, such as Hindi, Urdu, Pushtu etc. As there are many phonetics that are absent in most of the languages, they are left with little choice. They therefore have to copy the native accent with perfection unless they are taught it at an early age or due to living major part of one’s life in one of the native accent speaking countries. Since there are a great variety of accents for speaking English, native accent can be difficult to be a model accent for the whole English speaking world.

Having found absence of Indian accent in recorded voice in a study on the English language, which included most Asian countries, it can be said that the accent perception was taken as a complex task. The gathered data showed that the goal of two-thirds of the learners was to sound like native English speakers; however almost 71% of them were unable to correctly identify the native accent. Also one student living in the US for years could not identify the American accent.

The findings of the study suggest that listening comprehension was a priority among the English learners. They tended to prefer an accent more if they found it easy to understand. Being a teacher who teaches in government school in Sindh, I imply and assume that the students think

that comprehensibility should be the aim. If a student can him/herself understand surely that is enough in 90 % cases since their routine interaction happens with the local people, not with foreigners.

Since one model for the accent communication can not work, a mechanism has to be devised that promotes diversity of accents worldwide for comprehensibility, communication and flexibility of intercourse. Hence school authorities should respect diversity in accents for school leaving students in Pakistan if such situations demand.