

## **Why Should They?**

**November 2022 – Volume 26, Number 3**

<https://doi.org/10.55593/ej.26103a26>

### **Brian Tomlinson**

Materials Development Association (MATSDA)

<brianjohntomlinson@gmail.com>

Why should a learner of English in Pontianak have to learn to speak the English spoken by a well-educated native speaker of English in Cambridge? And why should a learner of English in Lima be corrected for not speaking English like the East Coast American teaching her? And most importantly why should a learner of English in Paris fail his examination because he speaks French English with a strong but internationally intelligible accent?

As I said in Tomlinson (2021, p. 641):

All over the world, learners of English are being tested on a variety of English they do not and never will speak. They are being tested on British English or American English and not on the Singapore English or Brazilian English or the International English that they speak. These learners are also being assessed on their ability to do what they are unlikely to need to do and they are not being tested on their ability to do what they are likely to need to do.

The problem is that the assumption that so-called standard varieties of English are the only correct and acceptable varieties still persists. It still persists in the attitudes and products of language planners, curriculum developers, materials developers and assessors. And therefore it still persists in the attitudes and work of publishers, teachers and teacher trainers. And sadly it still persists in the minds and aspirations of learners of English throughout the world, who can communicate successfully with other speakers of English from their country and from other countries around the world and yet feel (and are told) that their English is inadequate because it does not match the native speaker models they are instructed to emulate.

What is a native speaker anyway? There are so many varieties used by first language speakers of English and many of them differ dramatically from the others. How similar is Texan English to Australian English, Geordie to New Zealand English, Scouse to South African English? And which variety should language learners emulate? Surely what matters is that for a variety of English to be acceptable it should be mutually intelligible with other varieties of English and that its users can communicate effectively with users of other varieties both regionally and internationally.

I am a native speaker of English from Lancashire in the north of England and yet I was told by my English teacher at school that I would need to have elocution lessons to learn

to speak RP if I was to succeed in a teaching or academic career. I refused and was turned down by the BBC and by the British Council when I applied for posts with them and many years later I was turned down for a post at a university in Hong Kong because I did not speak with an RP accent. Yet I have taught, trained teachers and lectured in English in Nigeria, Zambia, Vanuatu, Indonesia, Japan, Singapore, Oman and Malaysia and I have given conference presentations in English in over seventy countries. In doing so I have communicated in English with speakers of very many different varieties of English. In most cases I have understood them and they have understood me. Too often though I have been given undue esteem and respect simply because I am a native speaker and they are not. That is something I would like to see come to an end and be replaced by equal respect for speakers of any variety who can communicate effectively.

I am not advocating teaching learners a specific variety of English. What I am advocating is gradually exposing learners to multiple differing varieties both native and non-native and providing multiple opportunities for learners to communicate purposefully and meaningfully in English with interactants from their own communities, from neighbouring countries and from around the world. I am also advocating assessing learners not on their ability to mimic a native speaker of English but on their communicative capabilities and their facilitating skills (e.g. accommodation, clarification, exemplification).

For full details of what I am advocating for the learning and assessment of English as a second language see Tomlinson (2006; 2021). It could all be summed up though with the recommendation that learners be prepared for the reality of post-course use of English by providing them in the classroom with rich and authentic experience of a variety of Englishes (including their own) and of opportunities for interaction with users of them.

## About the Author

**Brian Tomlinson** is President of MATSDA, a Visiting Professor at the University of Liverpool and a TESOL Professor at Anaheim University. He has worked in nine countries (as well as giving presentations in over seventy) and has recently co-authored with Hitomi Masuhara *The Complete Guide to the Theory and Practice of Materials Development for Language Learning* and *SLA Applied: Connecting Theory and Practice*. ORCID ID: 0000-0001-6717-5444

## To Cite this Article

Tomlinson, B. (2022). Why Should They? *Teaching English as a Second Language Electronic Journal (TESL-EJ)*, 26 (3). <https://doi.org/10.55593/ej.26103a26>

## References

- Tomlinson, B. (2006). A multi-dimensional response to teaching English for the world. In R. Rubdy & M. Saraceni (eds.), *English in the World: Global Rules, Global Roles* (pp. 130-150). Continuum.
- Tomlinson, B. (2021). Which test of English and why? In A. Kirkpatrick (ed.), *The Routledge Handbook of World Englishes* (2<sup>nd</sup> edn, pp. 641-658). Routledge.

Copyright of articles rests with the authors. Please cite TESL-EJ appropriately.