

Unity through Linguistic Diversity: A Buddhist-Informed Analysis of Pronunciation Belief, Intelligibility, and Native-Speaker Ideologies among Sri Lankan University Undergraduates

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Introduction

International communication has experienced an important transformation because of the unparalleled global expansion of English. English is at present frequently used by multilingual speakers in a diversity of linguistic, cultural, and geographic backgrounds, and English was once supposed to be the language of its native speakers. Therefore, research in World Englishes, English as a Lingua Franca (ELF), and current pronunciation teaching has started to challenge the traditional belief that native-speaker pronunciation is the best model for fruitful language education. Consistent with current research, imitating British or American accents is not as significant for effective communication as intelligibility, comprehensibility, and interactional capability. Nevertheless, in many educational organisations, native-speaker pronunciation still holds substantial symbolic value, affecting students' goals, attitudes, and confidence in their capability to communicate.

Sri Lanka is an important background for investigating these problems. Since Sri Lankan English has been recognised as a legitimate established variant in World Englishes, English serves as a language of higher education, professional growth, and international connection. Despite this identification, exonormative principles are often still prioritised in educational performance and assessment schemes, leading students to connect linguistic proficiency with native-speaker norms. As a result, many students face problems in balancing the protection of their linguistic uniqueness and conforming to native-speaker norms, often leading to pronunciation anxiety, diminished confidence, and reduced motivation to interact.

This research situates this language phenomenon in the setting of the conference theme, Unity in Diversity: Buddhist Philosophy in Pre-Oriental Humanity. Buddhist philosophy provides an ethical basis that turns language variation into a foundation of mutual understanding rather than viewing it as an obstacle to connection. Rather than hierarchical linguistic standards, principles

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such as dependent origination (*paṭiccasamuppāda*), non-attachment (*anupādāna*), compassion (*karuṇā*), Right Speech (*sammā vācā*), and the Middle Way (*majjhimā paṭipadā*) promote communication based on respect, interdependence, and ethical responsibility. According to this viewpoint, unity is attained through mutual intelligibility among speakers representing various linguistic identities rather than linguistic equality. Therefore, this research explores the beliefs of Sri Lankan university undergraduates about English pronunciation, intelligibility, native-speaker standards, and Sri Lankan English. The results are presented using specific Buddhist philosophical principles that encourage inclusive and equitable communication.

Objectives

The objectives of this research are as follows.

- To observe Sri Lankan university undergraduates' beliefs about English pronunciation, intelligibility, native-speaker pronunciation standards, and Sri Lankan English as a legitimate variety of English.
- To examine the educational, social, and cultural features that shape learners' pronunciation beliefs and their influence on communicative confidence and pronunciation anxiety.
- To interpret pronunciation beliefs of learners through selected Buddhist philosophical principles, particularly dependent origination, non-attachment, compassion, and the Middle Way, in relation to the conference theme of Unity in Diversity.
- To suggest an inclusive pronunciation pedagogy informed by English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) and Buddhist philosophy that promotes unity through linguistic diversity, mutual intelligibility, and respect for linguistic identity.

Methodology

The research uses a mixed-method research design that comprises quantitative and qualitative practices to gain a thorough grasp of learner beliefs. Participants were undergraduates at a Sri Lankan university enrolled in degree programs in English. The research was conducted following ethical guidelines, and participation was entirely voluntary.

A structured questionnaire was provided to one hundred and eighty undergraduates from various academic years and language backgrounds as part of the quantitative data. The questionnaire contained five-point Likert-scale items

arranged around three main scopes: confidence and anxiety related to spoken English, attitudes toward intelligibility-oriented pronunciation, and perceptions regarding native-speaker pronunciation. The tool was formed by drawing on current research on English pronunciation, World Englishes, and ELF along with well-established learner-belief contexts.

For semi-structured interviews, twenty undergraduates were selected through a purposive sampling method to enhance the quantitative data. Learners' ideas about proper pronunciation, classroom pronunciation techniques, attitudes toward Sri Lankan English, teacher feedback, and expectations for academic and professional communication were all investigated during the interviews. Descriptive statistics were utilised to evaluate quantitative data, whereas thematic analysis using iterative coding techniques was used to examine qualitative data. The interpretative depth and believability of the findings were improved by data triangulation.

Buddhist philosophy was utilised as an interpretative framework to observe the educational and linguistic findings within the larger conference theme, rather than as an empirical variable.

Results

The results demonstrate that learners simultaneously accepted intelligibility and native-speaker pronunciation as desirable goals, exemplifying the coexistence of many and occasionally contradictory ideas. Since participants connected native-like speaking to academic success, professional proficiency, worldwide recognition, intelligence, and social status, British and American pronunciation continued to be highly appreciated. Native-speaker pronunciation was understood by many respondents as a symbol of superior language skills and higher social mobility.

Despite this preference, undergraduates approved even more strongly of the view that the most valuable goal of oral communication was intelligibility. The majority of undergraduates appreciated that being understood by others is more significant for real communication than imitating the accents of native speakers. Participants decided that multilingual speakers are gradually using English as a global communication instrument, making communicative competence more important than accent conformity.

The results also exhibited a strong correlation between undergraduates' emotional experiences and native-speaker-oriented opinions. Undergraduates who had a strong desire to speak like native speakers reported feeling more self-conscious, having more pronunciation anxiety, and having less confidence when

speaking. Because of their regional accents, many were anxious about receiving unfavourable feedback from classmates, teachers, and potential employers. Despite sufficient language proficiency, these doubts often limited classroom engagement.

Four main themes appeared from the qualitative investigation. First, pronunciation by native speakers helped as symbolic capital related to employment, intelligence, professionalism, and status. Second, undergraduates' knowledge of English as a global language was reflected in the realistic and achievable communicative goal of intelligibility. Third, pronunciation norms were greatly influenced by teacher feedback and classroom assessment procedures, especially when accent copying was prioritised above successful communication. Finally, graduates' opinions on Sri Lankan English were conflicted. Many questioned its validity in formal academic and professional situations, even if they acknowledged its legitimacy in casual communication.

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings reveal how educational experiences, institutional practices, media representations, career aspirations, and postcolonial language ideologies all contribute to the social construction of pronunciation beliefs among Sri Lankan university undergraduates. Learners must balance two opposing viewpoints: the practical understanding that intelligibility is the main prerequisite for effective international communication and the symbolic value associated with native-speaker pronunciation.

These findings are in line with the theme of the conference, Unity in Diversity. According to Buddhist thought, real unity is attained by recognising the interconnectedness of people within varied societies rather than by eliminating variety. The theory of dependent co-origination (*paṭiccasamuppāda*) establishes how speakers, listeners, linguistic background, and mutual willingness to negotiate meaning all work together to generate communication. Therefore, more than just the speaker has responsibility for effective communication.

Likewise, strict commitment to native-speaker pronunciation as the sole model of language competence is challenged by the Buddhist precept of non-attachment. Learners are encouraged to undervalue their own linguistic identities and reinforce inherited linguistic hierarchies when they become too attached to a particular pronunciation model. With a non-attached viewpoint, students can strive for intelligibility without viewing their regional accents as defects that need to be fixed.

The Middle Way offers a suitable pedagogical foundation by avoiding two opposing extremes: unquestioning imitation of native-speaker pronunciation and complete neglect of pronunciation teaching. Instead, pronunciation teaching should prioritise intelligibility, comprehensibility, and interactional competence while respecting learners' linguistic identities. Such an approach supports communicative effectiveness without demanding accent conformity.

Moreover, the ethical obligations of educators and students are emphasised by Buddhist ideals of compassion and Right Speech. Pronunciation instruction should foster encouraging learning conditions where constructive criticism fosters self-assurance rather than fear. Additionally, rather than favouring native-speaker accents, assessment procedures should encourage communicative competence. This process promotes inclusive classrooms that view language variety as a teaching asset rather than a communication weakness.

Finally, the study concludes that pronunciation teaching in Sri Lankan universities ought to shift away from conventional native-speaker models and toward an intelligibility-focused strategy influenced by Buddhist philosophy and English as a Lingua Franca. World Englishes, accent variety, and helpful pronunciation evaluation should all be included in teacher education programs. Furthermore, learners ought to be inspired to value Sri Lankan English as a valid variety that contributes to international English communication. In line with the Buddhist concept of unity based on variety, compassion, and respect for one another, such improvements would enhance students' confidence in their ability to communicate, validate their linguistic identities, and foster a more comprehensive interpretation of English.

Keywords - Unity in Diversity, Buddhist Philosophy, English Pronunciation, English as a Lingua Franca, Intelligibility

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