



TEACHERS AS AGENTS OF LINGUISTIC INNOVATION: TEACHERS' VIEWS AND UNDERSTANDING OF VOCABULARY OF BRITISH, AMERICAN, AND SRI LANKAN ENGLISH

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One of the challenging issues that has sparked much debate, as a result of the emergence of World Englishes, is the dilemma: “Which English norms are appropriate for English language teaching and testing?”. This issue becomes increasingly critical in the context in which a growing number of Sri Lankans seek international education and employment; thus, the pressure of being successful in standardised English tests such as IELTS and TOEFL is increasingly important. In accounting for the way teachers respond to this dilemma, this study aimed to examine teachers’ attitudes towards and awareness of the vocabulary of British English, American English, and Sri Lankan English. This study employed a participant selection variant design which involves a questionnaire and individual interviews for a more focused and in-depth investigation of five Sri Lankan ESL teachers’ attitudes towards and awareness of vocabulary of British English, American English, and Sri Lankan English. The results revealed that the teachers hold a middle ground that mediates the attitudes of “orthodox linguists” who uphold linguistic uniformity, and the attitudes of “liberal linguists” who promote the linguistic diversity and creativity of new norms. Particularly, the research findings positioned teachers as potential agents of linguistic innovation, as they yield the ability to either reinforce traditional norms or encourage innovative and inclusive approaches to English language teaching and testing. Moreover, the study revealed the complexity and the changing nature of the teachers’ attitudes due to the influence of personal, interpersonal, sociopolitical, and institutional factors. Moreover, the teachers demonstrated limited awareness regarding the correct recognition of vocabulary of the three varieties. However, they demonstrated some awareness of the plurality of English in the context of globalization and localization. The findings of the study suggest the importance of promoting ways to raise teachers’ awareness to prompt an attitudinal objectivity towards the differences between varieties of English while making learners prepared to navigate both international standards and the evolving landscape of English usage for greater mobility. This study provides insights into future research agendas on evaluating teachers’ acceptability judgements towards not only vocabulary but also phonological and syntactic differences between varieties of English.

Keywords: World Englishes, attitudes, awareness, standardised English tests

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INTRODUCTION

As more Sri Lankans are migrating for studies and employment, there is an increasing pressure to succeed in international language proficiency tests such as IELTS and TOEFL (Simonds et al., 2023). However, the mismatch between international test norms and local linguistic teaching and testing is not sufficiently explored (Karakaş, 2022). Moreover, there is limited research on teachers' opinions regarding appropriate norms for ELT and testing (Young et al., 2016). Accordingly, a focus on teachers' awareness (understanding) of and attitudes (views) towards the vocabulary of the available varieties of English for teaching and testing is highly appropriate, since as emphasised by Fernando (2015), there is even a lesser number of research that attempts to examine attitudes towards vocabulary of different varieties of English. Hence, the present study attempts to examine Sri Lankan ESL teachers' attitudes towards and awareness of vocabulary of the available varieties of English.

Accordingly, this study is conducted to fulfill the following objectives:

1. To analyse what teachers' attitudes are towards British English (BrE), American English (AmE), and Sri Lankan English (SLE) vocabulary.
2. To determine teachers' awareness of BrE, AmE, and SLE vocabulary.

The following research questions are designed to fulfill the objectives of the study:

1. What are teachers' attitudes towards BrE, AmE and SLE vocabulary?
2. To what extent are teachers aware of BrE, AmE, and SLE vocabulary?

In the context of this study, attitudes are identified as variable and emergent evaluative dispositions to a language-related attitude object: vocabulary (Garrett, 2007). Awareness is defined as the ability to correctly recognize the variety to which vocabulary belongs, and the consciousness about the attitude object under evaluation (Parjas & Supraba, 2018).

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted an interpretivist mixed methods research design, with a participant-selection variant design. The first phase involved a questionnaire survey with 29 General English teachers from 6 government schools and 2 semi-government schools in Colombo District selected via convenience sampling. General English teachers who teach 12th and 13th grades were selected, since the identification of differences between BrE, AmE, and SLE is a lesson outcome of Unit 4: 'English as a local and global language' of the General English textbook



(General English: G.C.E. Advanced Level classes, 2017). The questionnaire consisted of an acceptability judgement task where participants rated the acceptability of selected vocabulary items from BrE, AmE, and SLE on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from “Totally unacceptable” to “Totally acceptable,” and a vocabulary identification task, which asked participants to indicate whether they recognized specific vocabulary items as British, American, Sri Lankan, or unknown while the inductive in-depth semi-structured interview explored the participants’ attitudes and awareness in-depth. The questionnaire survey data were analysed by calculating descriptive statistics namely, mean scores (to determine the average level of acceptability for each variety and how many participants correctly identified the origin of each vocabulary item) and standard deviation (to assess the variability in the participants’ responses) with a 95% confidence level for the two questions distinctly, via SPSS. Although descriptive statistics were not intended to generate generalisable claims due to the small sample size, these quantitative results helped identify the general trends in teachers’ attitudes and awareness across the sample and to select five diverse participants. Accordingly, the qualitative phase included semi-structured interviews with five teachers via maximum variation sampling based on the participants’ mean evaluations with the highest, lowest and average mean values on both tasks of BrE, AmE, and SLE vocabulary on the questionnaire. The aim was to select diverse perspectives, and the interview data were analysed manually based on thematic analysis; namely, open coding was used to mark meaningful segments in the data with descriptive codes such as “preference for formality” and axial coding to group similar codes into broader categories such as “contextual acceptability” under themes such as “attitudes related to assessment” in both within-case analysis and cross-case analysis. After analysing both data sets, the results were brought together during the interpretation stage to draw meaningful insights.

Informed consent was obtained from participants for voluntary consent, and the right to withdraw from the study at any point. The confidentiality and anonymity of the identity of the participants were ensured through assigning numerical codes in analyzing and reporting results.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

When the general trends among all 29 participants are considered, on average, teachers evaluated vocabulary from BrE, AmE, and SLE positively suggesting a general openness to vocabulary from all three varieties (See Figure 1). Moreover, the mean score of 21.14 out of 45 indicates partial awareness of vocabulary origins among the 29 participants, and the large standard deviation (5.76) reflects significant variability in accurately identifying the origin of vocabulary items (See Figure 2). These results suggest that while Sri Lankan teachers are increasingly tolerant of vocabulary variation (attitudes), they still experience challenges in accurately identifying the origin of vocabulary items (awareness). The data also reveal considerable diversity in individual responses, justifying the use of maximum variation sampling for the qualitative phase.



	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
NEW_TOTAL	29	154.00	210.00	177.5517	14.38150
Valid N (listwise)	29				

Figure 1: The highest, the lowest and the average score for the acceptability judgement task

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Total_s	29	10	37	21.14	5.761
Valid N (listwise)	29				

Figure 2: The highest, the lowest and the average score for the vocabulary identification task

To explore the patterns above in depth, five participants were selected based on their quantitative scores in both tasks. Their evaluations are presented in Figure 3 along with a detailed interview-based analysis. According to Figure 3, irrespective of the individual differences between the five participants, they demonstrated an overall positive attitude towards vocabulary of all three varieties. When ranked hierarchically, all five participants showed the most positive attitudes towards SLE vocabulary followed by BrE and AmE vocabulary.

Two major themes emerged during the interview data analysis of the five participants; namely, attitudes related to situational structure and interactional structure. The participants made constant reference to “contexts” such as teaching and testing in expressing their attitudes. The majority expressed an overall positive attitude towards BrE, AmE, and SLE vocabulary when teaching English, acknowledging the need to teach or introduce vocabulary of different varieties due to global exposure. Moreover, the majority emphasised the importance of communicative efficiency and test fairness, except two who displayed negative attitudes towards certain vocabulary items such as direct borrowings (mentioned as “Singlish words” by the participants) in SLE. Moreover, the majority also emphasised the prestige of BrE vocabulary as perceived by them, the society and gate-keeping authorities, as the standard for testing in Sri Lanka and international tests. Concerning interactional structures, all the participants generally shared an overall positive attitude towards BrE, AmE, and SLE vocabulary in speaking. However, the majority of participants favoured BrE vocabulary for formal writing tasks while limiting SLE and AmE vocabulary to creative writing.

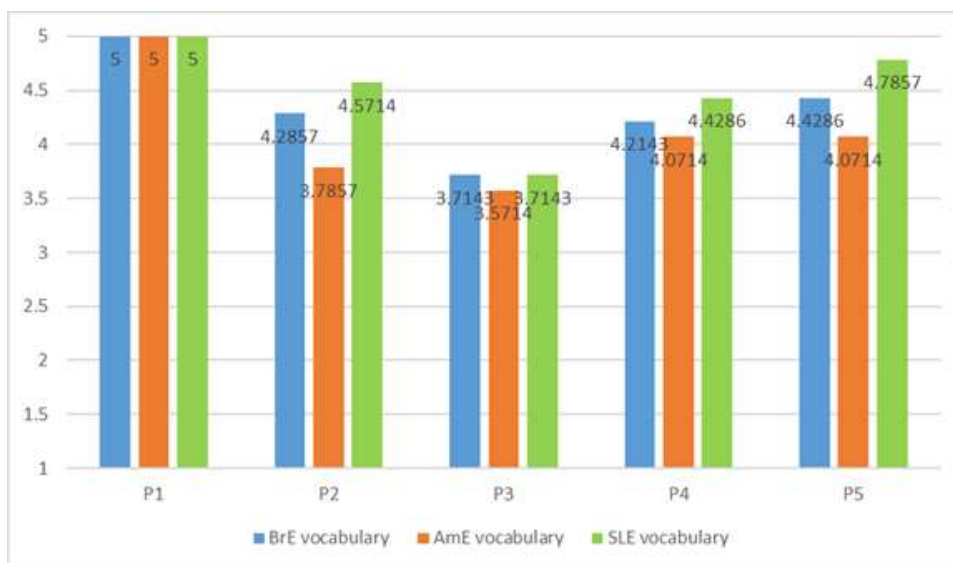


Figure 3: The five participants' mean evaluations of BrE, AmE, and SLE vocabulary

According to the survey results on vocabulary identification task, despite the different degrees of awareness between the five participants, it is apparent that the most correctly identified variety was SLE vocabulary, the second most correctly identified variety was BrE vocabulary and the least correctly identified variety was AmE vocabulary, and in general, the majority of participants did not demonstrate high awareness of the vocabulary differences between the three varieties since the overall correct recognition rates were close to the average frequency. According to the interview data, three key factors influenced their awareness: exposure through explicit learning (teacher training, textbooks, and experience as students) or implicit learning (through media), marked linguistic cues such as morphological features particularly in recognizing SLE words (e.g. borrowings) and formality and usage patterns. Teachers reported a lack of formal training on vocabulary differences and stressed the need for explicit awareness-raising programmes for both students and teachers to help them navigate both local and international test-taking.

The triangulation of quantitative and qualitative findings revealed more similarities than differences in participants' attitudes. The majority shared an overall positive and lenient attitude towards BrE, AmE, and SLE vocabulary as models for ELT and testing in Sri Lanka. This contrasts with previous studies (Medawattegedera & Devendra, 2007) where ESL and EFL teachers favoured SE norms over linguistic diversity. Instead, the present study shows a shifting trend toward greater tolerance, similar to Hamid's and Baldauf's (2013) findings in which the participants demonstrate a more tolerant attitude towards lexical innovations accepting them as varietal features rather than errors. As Kirkpatrick



(2007) suggests, this shift is driven by social and cultural changes, reflected in the attitudinal codes found in the interview responses of the current study like “communicatively efficient” and “culturally distinctive”, which are more intrinsically intertwined with social and cultural meanings. However, discrepancies between questionnaire and interview findings were evident: participants showed more positive attitudes towards SLE in the questionnaire but displayed a biasedness towards BrE in interviews, with attitudes shifting based on teaching, testing, and spoken versus written contexts. According to the interview data analysis, such mixed attitudes could be attributed to social prejudices, unfamiliarity with lexical variations, and institutional pressures (Hamid et al., 2014; Panero, 2016). Moreover, despite initial bias toward BrE under institutional influence, teachers gradually adopted a more critical and accepting stance toward all three varieties during interviews, paralleling the findings of Hamid et al. (2014).

The triangulation of questionnaire and interview findings reveals that teachers’ overall awareness of BrE, AmE, and SLE vocabulary is unsatisfactory, largely due to the lack of explicit instruction on vocabulary differences in educational contexts as expressed by the participants. Although the General English textbook includes a lesson on English varieties, it represents vocabulary differences inadequately, particularly SLE vocabulary, which may contribute to limited awareness. The teachers demonstrated relatively higher awareness towards SLE vocabulary, recognizing it through morphological features, familiarity, and usage. However, misidentifications between SLE, BrE, and AmE vocabulary were common as many identified SLE words as BrE or AmE. Most participants acknowledged the need to learn and accept lexical variations to promote authentic language use and fairness in global and local contexts. Moreover, a participant highlighted the increasing linguistic homogeneity, making it harder to distinguish varieties. These findings, align with Hamid et al. (2014), reflecting an emerging awareness among teachers about the evolving nature of English due to globalization, technological change, and the inherent openness and creativity of the English lexicon where new vocabulary items are spontaneously added to the English lexicon. This evolving openness and awareness suggest that teachers are already facilitating linguistic change as catalysts by recognising, accepting and teaching vocabulary variations, even if not consciously acknowledged as innovation. Accordingly, the results emphasise how teachers’ ability to act as informed innovators depend not only on attitude but also on knowledge. Their situational adaptability, tolerance for vocabulary variations, and reliance on communicative effectiveness over strict correctness represent bottom-up innovations in pedagogical practices. These adaptive behaviours closely align with global discussions in World Englishes, where innovation is not only about creating new forms but also about recognising and legitimising variation (Hamid et al.’s, 2014). This supports Hamid et al.’s (2014) argument that teachers can facilitate the recognition of varied features as acceptable, especially in contexts where institutional policy is slow to adapt, suggesting an emerging bottom-up movement toward pluralistic English language practices as a distinctive feature of linguistic innovation.



CONCLUSIONS

This study explored Sri Lankan ESL teachers' attitudes and awareness regarding BrE, AmE, and SLE vocabulary, revealing a shift towards accepting linguistic diversity while retaining respect for SE norms. Teachers' critical awareness grew during interviews, highlighting the need for reflection-driven professional development. Moreover, the study highlights that the academic debates regarding the dilemma: "Which English norms are appropriate for ELT and testing?" should actively involve teachers who are micro-level agents in influencing and executing language policies. The findings of this study suggest that Sri Lankan ESL teachers are not merely passive transmitters of prescriptive language norms, but rather are becoming active agents of linguistic innovation through their evolving acceptance and awareness of lexical variations. Moreover, the study provides implications for designing textbooks and composing dictionaries which need to adequately represent the differences and uniqueness of norms between varieties of English. Future research can analyse other linguistic features such as syntax with broader samples and the fairness and inclusivity of standard English test evaluation criteria.

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