

Towards an inclusive standard Sri Lankan English for ELT in Sri Lanka: Identifying and validating phonological features of Sri Lankan English of Tamil speakers

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Introduction

This paper reports on a study that investigates the views of teachers of English in the Northern Province on the unique phonological features of Jaffna English, a variety of Sri Lankan English (SLE) that has its own unique syntactic, morphological as well as phonological features (Selvadurai 1983, Saravanapava Iyer 2001, Sivapalan, Ramanan and Thiruvarangan 2010). The main research area of this paper is World Englishes in the context of English language teaching (ELT), focusing on variation within SLE phonology.

This paper will first discuss the current issues in ELT in Sri Lanka that underscore the study. It will then discuss the relevance of existing studies of SLE pronunciation in an ELT context. Next, it will describe the methodology of the present study. Following the presentation of its findings and discussion, the paper will conclude with a consideration of the study's significance, its limitations, and suggest directions for further research. While this study is limited to the segmental features of pronunciation, this paper uses the terms "pronunciation" and "phonology" interchangeably to mean the way in which sounds are produced in a language.

A local standard for teaching speech

In the last few years, new directions in language teaching policy such as the English as a Life Skill programme have renewed the focus on speaking skills in primary and secondary education in Sri Lanka. This focus is heightened by the plans to introduce the testing of speaking and listening skills at the O/Levels in 2015. With the need to teach and test these skills, pronunciation has once again entered the ELT discourse in Sri Lanka. In this regard, most decision makers of English education were in general agreement that Standard SLE should be the pedagogical model to promote speaking skills among Sri Lankan students. The need to adopt a Sri Lankan standard that is of relevance to our students, and the explicit call to reject the former, exocentric model, British Standard English (SBE), can be considered one of the significant debates in SLE and ELT in recent years.

Teaching pronunciation

The teaching of pronunciation, along with the teaching of speaking skills in the English language classroom has traditionally been a much neglected area in Sri Lanka. Much of the focus of the secondary school curriculum has been on reading and writing, with the national O/Level English examination limited to testing these two skills.

As Suresh Canagarajah observes in a special issue on pronunciation of the *TESOL Quarterly*, pronunciation is probably one of the most problematic areas of ELT:

“Pronunciation is perhaps the linguistic feature most open to judgment. As a surface structure phenomenon that is most noticeable, one's accent easily evokes people's biases. For the same reason, pronunciation has been the most prescriptively taught aspect of language instruction. Pedagogies for accent reduction have bordered on the pathological.”
(Canagarajah 2005: 365)

Even though the teaching of pronunciation has been more or less ignored in the ELT curriculum in Sri Lanka, attitudes towards pronunciation, particularly towards some of the segmental features of SLE phonology, have been similarly prescriptive and judgmental both inside as well as outside the ELT classroom.

Studies in SLE phonology

The selection of a local model for pronunciation renewed interest in existing SLE pronunciation studies. Descriptions of SLE phonological features have mostly consisted of deviation studies, i.e. describing the features of SLE speech as they differ from SBE pronunciation (Gunsekera 2005, Fernando 1982, Fernando 1985, Meyler 2007).

Variation in SLE phonology has often been described as the difference between the speech of two significant groups, the proficient, first language speakers of SLE and the less proficient, infrequent speakers (Fernando 1982, Fernando 1985, Gunsekera 2005), which has led to the identification of two main varieties, standard and non-standard SLE, which primarily defines its

variation in terms of its phonology (Gunesekera 2005). The identification of standard and non-standard varieties is of significance in an ELT context, as it provides a basis for identifying distinct usages that can be accepted as 'correct', as well as those considered 'errors' in the classroom.

At the same time, studies on SLE phonology are not without limitations. Primarily, the description of Standard SSLE pronunciation describes a small, even shrinking group of speakers of SLE as an L1, as the majority of SLE speakers now speak English as a second language (Gunesekera 2005). Thus, the features as well as the group described as standard SLE speakers has been contested (Fernando 2008, Liyanage 2010, Thiruvarangan 2012). Fernando and Liyanage point out that features that used to be considered non-standard are widely used by proficient speakers. For example, Fernando (2008) states that the distinctive non SSLE closed mid back vowel which contrasts with the SSLE open mid back vowel is now widely used by prominent and powerful members of the SLE speaking community. Through a survey of a pronunciation feature often described as non-standard among senior academics in the University of Ruhuna, Liyanage (2010) found out that the initial vowel sound /ae/ in words such as *assist*, *advice* and *admit* are widely used, and thus questions its label of non-standardness. Thiruvarangan (2010) problematizes the label of non-standardness that, according to him, undermines the functions of SLE among non-elite speakers. These studies thus underscore the need to update the description of SSLE in a more inclusive manner due to the changing nature of speakers.

SLE descriptions have also been accused of a "majority bias" (Gunesekera 2006: 41). While most of the existing studies of SSLE phonology document the influence of Sinhala, the dominant language of the country and the first language of the majority of SLE speakers, several unique features that are the result of the influence of Tamil are unrecorded in these descriptions. Sivapalan, Ramanan and Thiruvarangan (2010) criticize this, stating that "SSLE has failed to accommodate some common phonological features of the English language used in Jaffna". In a study of the unique phonological, morphological and syntactic features of Jaffna English, they emphasize the need to understand the biases of SLE "from a regional point of view", and "to highlight the influence of Tamil on the English language used by Jaffna." The study points out that while some phonological features are shared by both groups, there are several distinctive features that are unique to speakers of Tamil as a L1 that have hitherto not been included in the descriptions of SLE.

In view of the compulsory national-level examinations that propose to test speech in the near future, an understanding of the regional variation in SLE phonology is crucial in teaching and assessment. While the study by Sivapalan et al (2010) presents several unique features of Jaffna English phonology, it is uncertain whether all these features are accepted as correct in a teaching-learning context by the proficient users of the variety. This is reflected in descriptions of SLE as well, in which researchers have included certain features that are generally considered incorrect by proficient and habitual speakers of the variety.

Since the inception of the “English as a Life Skill” programme to teach and test speaking skills at secondary school level, many teachers and teacher trainers have reported that while teachers generally accept SLE as a pedagogical model, there is confusion among practitioners as to what is correct and incorrect within the variety. The perception of correctness, particularly by those engaged in the teaching process, has a significant bearing on what is ultimately taught in the classroom. Thus, teachers’ views are extremely significant in the context of teaching and assessing spoken language at a national level. However, no studies have taken into account ELT practitioners’ views on SLE pronunciation. The voices of regional teachers located outside Colombo, especially those who speak Tamil as a first language, are particularly unheard in SLE and ELT research.

Aim of the study

Given the current need described above, and the limitations in the existing studies of SLE pronunciation, this study aimed to investigate the views of teachers of English in the Northern Province on some of the phonological features of Jaffna English. Through the means of a survey, the study attempted to gain an initial understanding of their acceptance of the unique features of Tamil in SLE phonology, as well as their views on how frequently they occur in the speech of their students.

Methodology

The study consisted of a questionnaire survey. A total 47 teachers working in the Northern Province participated in the study. All the participants spoke Tamil as a first language, and worked with Tamil speaking children in schools or university in the Northern Province. Their teaching qualifications ranged from pre-qualification to Mphil, as in-service teacher trainees from the Palaly Teacher Training College also took part in the study. Their classroom teaching experience ranged from less than one year to 34 years.

Ten pronunciation features of individual words were selected on the basis of previous research (Sivapalan, Ramanan and Thiruvarangan 2010, Karunakaran 2006). In addition, the co-researcher’s awareness as an experienced teacher of English working exclusively in the Northern province also confirmed them. The features are as follows.

1. Dropping of [d] and [t] sounds of consonant clusters in words such as *driver* and *train*:
/raiuə/ and /reɪ n/
2. Insertion of [ɪ] to reduce consonant clusters such as /ɪ sku:l/, /ɪ stop/ /fɪ lɪ m/, /pɪ let/, /sɪ lɪ k/, and /kɪ lɪ p/ for *school*, *stop*, *film*, *plate*, *silk*, and *clip*
3. [f] replaced by [p] : saying /pæn/ for *fan*, /pɪ l/ for *fill*, /pri:/ for *free*
4. [h] replaced by [k] : saying /kɔ spɪ təl/ for *hospital*, /kau/ for *how*
5. [g] replaced by [k]: saying /kə:ls/ for *girls*, /kla:s/ for *glass*, /bɪ kɪ n/ for *begin*
6. [dʒ] replaced by [j]: saying /yæ:m/ for *jam*, /yæk/ for *Jack*

7. [b] replaced by [v]: saying/ ʊ e:v ɪ / for *baby*, / ʊ aɪ sɪ kəl/ for *bicycle*, / ʊ a:tru:m/ for *bathroom*, /ælv əm/ for *album*.
8. [b] replaced by [p]: saying /po:t/ for *board*, /pʌ tə:r/ for *butter*, /pʌlp/ for *bulb*
9. [d] replaced by [t]: saying /tans/ for *dance*, /tɪ sh/ for *dish*, /tɪ ki:/ for *dickey*, /tɪ saɪ n/ for *design* and /kɔ :tɪ yal/ for *cordial*, /ka:t/ for *card*, /ka:tpo:t/ for *cardboard*,
10. Articulation of final [r] in words such as *car*, *butter*, *cancer*: /ka:r/, /bʌ tər/, /kænsər/

As Sivapalan et al (2010) point out, no. 2 and 3 in the list above are common to other speakers of SLE as well, while the rest of the features can be said to be unique to SLE influenced by Tamil phonology.

These features were presented to the participants in a questionnaire, as a questionnaire survey was considered the most feasible and efficient method to obtain this information. As Dörnyei (2007) points out, questionnaires are easy to administer, familiar to teachers and are suitable to obtain initial impressions on the topic. Simplified IPA symbols were used to transcribe the pronunciation of words. Two prompts on each pronunciation feature were included in order to find out the participants' views on the extent to which the feature exists among their students, and their views on its correctness. An open-ended question at the end of the questionnaire was also included to elicit the participants' views on pronunciation.

Findings and discussion

47 completed questionnaires were obtained, and the responses were analysed quantitatively. Table 1 below presents the results of the number of participants who heard each feature either very frequently or somewhat frequently among their students:

Table 1: Percentage of teachers who frequently hear the phonological features among their studentss

No	Phonological feature	%
1	Dropping of [d] and [t] sounds of consonant clusters in words such as <i>driver</i> and <i>train</i> : /raɪvə/ and /reɪ n/	64
2	Insertion of [ɪ] to reduce consonant clusters such as /ɪ sku:l/, /ɪ stop/ /fɪ lɪ m/, /pɪ let/, /sɪ lɪ k/, and /kɪ lɪ p/ for <i>school</i> , <i>stop</i> , <i>film</i> , <i>plate</i> , <i>silk</i> , and <i>clip</i>	68
3	[f] replaced by [p] : saying /pæn/ for <i>fan</i> , /pɪ l/ for <i>fill</i> , /pri:/ for <i>free</i>	60
4	[h] replaced by [k] : saying /kɔ spɪ təl/ for <i>hospital</i> , /kau/ for <i>how</i>	60
5	[g] replaced by [k]: saying /kə:ls/ for <i>girls</i> , /kla:s/ for <i>glass</i> , /bɪ kɪ n/ for <i>begin</i>	62
6	[dʒ] replaced by [j]: saying /yæ:m/ for <i>jam</i> , /yæk/ for <i>Jack</i>	60
7	[b] replaced by [v]: saying/ ʊ e:v ɪ / for <i>baby</i> , / ʊ aɪ sɪ kəl/ for <i>bicycle</i> , / ʊ a:tru:m/ for <i>bathroom</i> , /ælv əm/ for <i>album</i>	39
8	[b] replaced by [p]: saying /po:t/ for <i>board</i> , /pʌ tə:r/ for <i>butter</i> , /pʌlp/ for <i>bulb</i>	40

9	[d] replaced by [t]: saying /tans/ for <i>dance</i> , /tɪ sh/ for <i>dish</i> , /tɪ ki:/ for <i>dickey</i> , /tɪ saɪ n/ for <i>design</i> and /kɔ :tɪ yal/ for <i>cordial</i> , /ka:t/ for <i>card</i> , /ka:tpo:t/ for <i>cardboard</i>	32
10	Articulation of final [r] in words such as <i>car</i> , <i>butter</i> , <i>cancer</i> : /ca:r/, /bʌ tər/, /kænsər/	55

According to this table, with the exception of three features (no.s 7, 8 and 9) more than half the participants hear these features either somewhat frequently or very frequently among their students. While the most frequently heard feature was reported to be no. 2, the insertion of the vowel [ɪ] to reduce consonant clusters, the least frequently heard feature reported was no. 9, the replacement of [t] with [d].

Table 2 below presents the percentages of the participants who consider these features to be either serious or minor errors.

Table 2: Percentage of teachers who consider the features to be errors

No	Phonological feature	A serious error	A minor error
1	Dropping of [d] and [t] sounds of consonant clusters in words such as <i>driver</i> and <i>train</i> : /raɪvə/ and /reɪ n/	66	28
2	Insertion of [ɪ] to reduce consonant clusters such as /ɪ sku:l/, /ɪ stop/ /fɪ lɪ m/, /pɪ let/, /sɪ lɪ k/, and /kɪ lɪ p/ for <i>school</i> , <i>stop</i> , <i>film</i> , <i>plate</i> , <i>silk</i> , and <i>clip</i>	62	23
3	[f] replaced by [p] : saying /pæn/ for <i>fan</i> , /pɪ l/ for <i>fill</i> , /pri:/ for <i>free</i>	67	26
4	[h] replaced by [k] : saying /kɔ spɪ təl/ for <i>hospital</i> , /kau/ for <i>how</i>	57	25
5	[g] replaced by [k]: saying /kə:ls/ for <i>girls</i> , /kla:s/ for <i>glass</i> , /bɪ kɪ n/ for <i>begin</i>	57	30
6	[dʒ] replaced by [j]: saying /yæ:m/ for <i>jam</i> , /yæk/ for <i>Jack</i>	40	34
7	[b] replaced by [v] : saying /v e:v ɪ / for <i>baby</i> , /v aɪ sɪ kəl/ for <i>bicycle</i> , /v a:tru:m/ for <i>bathroom</i> , /ælv əm/ for <i>album</i> .	60	27
8	[b] replaced by [p]: saying /po:t/ for <i>board</i> , /pʌ tər/ for <i>butter</i> , /pʌlp/ for <i>bulb</i>	59	26
9	[d] replaced by [t]: saying /tans/ for <i>dance</i> , /tɪ sh/ for <i>dish</i> , /tɪ ki:/ for <i>dickey</i> , /tɪ saɪ n/ for <i>design</i> and /kɔ :tɪ yal/ for <i>cordial</i> , /ka:t/ for <i>card</i> , /ka:tpo:t/ for <i>cardboard</i>	74	19
10	Articulation of final [r] in words such as <i>car</i> , <i>butter</i> , <i>cancer</i> : /ca:r/, /bʌ tər/, /kænsər/	24	33

According to Table 2, over 50% of the participants considered eight of the phonological features to be serious errors. Feature no. 9, the replacement of [d] with [t], was considered a serious error by the largest percentage of the sample at 74%. The replacement of [f] with [p]

and the dropping of [d] and [t] in initial consonant clusters were considered a serious error by 67% and 66% of the participants respectively, suggesting that these features were considered least acceptable by the group.

Only 24% of the participants considering the articulation of [r] in the final position a serious error, which suggests that over 75% of the sample considered this feature to be correct or a minor error. With over half of the participants considering the replacement of [dʒ] with [j], as either correct or a minor error, and with 40% of the participants identifying this as a serious error, the attitude towards the acceptability of this feature remains less clear.

Table 3 presents the frequently heard features synthesized with those considered errors by the participants.

Table 3: The frequency of each feature synthesised with the participants' views on their correctness

	Phonological feature	Freq %	Serious Error %	Minor Error %
1	Insertion of [ɪ] to reduce consonant clusters such as /ɪ sku:l/, /ɪ stɒp/ /fɪ li m/, /pɪ let/, /sɪ li k/, and /kɪ li p/ for <i>school, stop, film, plate, silk, and clip</i>	68	62	23
2	Dropping of [d] and [t] sounds of consonant clusters in words such as <i>driver</i> and <i>train</i> : /raɪuəl/ and /reɪ n/	64	66	28
3	[g] replaced by [k]: saying /kə:ls/ for <i>girls</i> , /kla:s/ for <i>glass</i> , /bɪ kɪ n/ for <i>begin</i>	62	57	30
4	[f] replaced by [p] : saying /pæn/ for <i>fan</i> , /pɪ l/ for <i>fill</i> , /pri:/ for <i>free</i>	60	67	26
5	[h] replaced by [k] : saying /kɔ spɪ təl/ for <i>hospital</i> , /kau/ for <i>how</i>	60	57	25
6	[dʒ] replaced by [j]: saying /yæ:m/ for <i>jam</i> , /yæk/ for <i>Jack</i>	60	40	34
7	Articulation of final [r] in words such as <i>car, butter, cancer</i> : /ca:r/, /bʌ tər/, /kænsər/	55	24	33
8	[b] replaced by [p]: saying /po:t/ for <i>board</i> , /pʌ tər/ for <i>butter</i> , /pʌlp/ for <i>bulb</i>	40	59	26
9	[b] replaced by [v] : saying /v e:v ɪ / for <i>baby</i> , /v aɪ sɪ kəl/ for <i>bicycle</i> , /v a:tru:m/ for <i>bathroom</i> , /ælv əm/ for <i>album</i> .	39	60	27
10	[d] replaced by [t]: saying /tans/ for <i>dance</i> , /tɪ sh/ for <i>dish</i> , /tɪ ki:/ for <i>dickey</i> , /tɪ saɪ n/ for <i>design</i> and /kɔ :tɪ yal/ for <i>cordial</i> , /ka:t/ for <i>card</i> , /ka:tpo:t/ for <i>cardboard</i>	32	74	19

As seen in nos. 1 to 6 in Table 3, six features heard frequently by 60% or more of the participants are also considered errors by more than half of them. At the same time, the replacement of [d] with [t], a feature that was considered a serious error by the largest number at 74%, was reported as the most infrequently heard one. Similarly, to a slightly lesser degree, the replacement of [b] with [v], which was considered a serious error by more than half the participants, was infrequently heard by over 60% of them.

The comments made by the participants indicate that the participants are aware of the widespread influence of Tamil phonology on their students' pronunciation. The comments also revealed the participants' concern for their students' lack of exposure to English speech. Participants also commented on the need to consider pronunciation a significant part of language proficiency, as well as the need to teach pronunciation to their students.

Conclusion

Overall, the study revealed that the phonological features unique to Jaffna English, spoken by L1 Tamil speakers, did not receive much validation by the teachers of English who participated in the study. Although most of the features were heard either very frequently or fairly frequently, most of the teachers tended to consider them errors. Even frequently heard features among proficient speakers such as the omission of the initial [d] and [t] in words such as *driver* and *train* were unacceptable to more than half the participants. The only feature that was significantly acceptable to the group is the articulation of the final [r] in words such as *butter* and *cancer*. To a lesser degree, the replacement of [dʒ] with [j] in words such as *jam* and *Jack* was also accepted by the participants.

The synthesis of acceptability with frequency which shows the most frequently heard features alongside their acceptability by teachers suggests a possible focus in pedagogical interventions. For example, features that are considered errors but are infrequently heard can be given less prominence than the frequently heard features that are considered serious errors. Infrequently heard errors can perhaps be ignored in the classroom. However, according to this study, none of the features were totally acceptable to the participants.

This study provides an initial glimpse into what teachers of English in the Northern Province think of the influence of Tamil phonology on the SLE pronunciation of their students. As cautioned by Canagarajah (2006), teachers who participated in the study also appear to be quite prescriptive and critical in their rejection of the phonological features that display the influence of Tamil, the students' and their own L1. The study thus highlights the need to raise awareness and to create a space for discussion among ELT practitioners with regard to the phonological variation in World Englishes such as SLE.

The comments of the participants show that the problems of pronunciation of their students is a serious concern, and that pronunciation requires more explicit focus in the classroom. The degrees of acceptability and the frequency with which the phonological features are heard in the classroom as reported by the participants suggest further directions for pedagogical interventions. At the same time, the need to approach the design of such interventions with understanding and sensitivity is suggested in the findings, as prescriptive and generally judgmental views on variation in pronunciation can result in what Canagarajah refers to as the pedagogies that "border on the pathological" (2005: 365).

The questionnaire has proven to be a feasible research tool to obtain the initial responses of the participants. However, the findings of this study are presented with some caution as a questionnaire can affect the responses of the participants by its very design. As Dörnyei (2007) points out, acquiescence bias, the participants' tendency to agree with questionnaire prompts, as well as the Observer's Paradox, the impact of the observer's presence on the participants' responses, could have affected the findings. In addition, a larger sample would naturally lead to findings that are more representative of the research population.

Despite limitations, the findings of this study are significant as it reveals the views, although preliminary, of a group that is often ignored in descriptions of SLE phonology, teachers of English located outside the metropolitan centre. In particular, the findings are significant as it is probably the first time that the voices of the teachers of English in the Northern Province speaking Tamil as a L1 have been heard in any SLE phonology research. As contemporary directions in World Englishes research have shifted its focus into the classroom, this study provides an initial understanding of a largely ignored aspect of SLE phonology research as well English language teaching in Sri Lanka: that of the contemporary need to understand, in a pedagogical context, the attitude towards the variation in SLE pronunciation that occurs as a result of different first languages among SLE speakers. Further studies of this nature, with a larger sample and more rigorous methodology, will contribute to greater knowledge in this area.

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