

## **Raising Awareness about “World Englishes” in the ESL Classroom: The Case of Indian English**

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Most urban ESL classrooms boast many first languages (L1) spoken by immigrant students who came to the United States from many different countries and continents. Theory and research about teaching such ESL students abound: from bilingual instruction and second language acquisition to Generation 1.5 and English as a foreign language. Pedagogy and methodology for teaching all four skills (reading, writing, listening, and speaking) are expanding to include second language composing, writing across the curriculum, and genre-based instruction. However, many teachers in New York City schools or colleges (this being true for the entire tri-state area as well) know that there is yet another group of students present in their classrooms—those foreign students who grew up speaking other varieties of English termed “world Englishes” (Kachru, 1983, 1989). Though this group is said to be a growing student population in the United States (Jenkins, 2006), it is curiously less discussed in current pedagogical journals or teaching manuals.

This lack of focus on speakers of other varieties of English caught our attention at the college where we both teach. We realized there was a need to understand “world Englishes”—specifically that spoken by Indian English students, who represent a sizable group at our urban college. In faculty meetings and during professional development, many instructors talked about their Indian students and sounded frustrated with the types of language problems that were evidenced, according to them, in speech and writing. After the initial research into world Englishes, we began to develop strategies to help instructors better understand their students and help both groups, instructors and students, better cope with differing cultural and educational perspectives on the issue. The work that we completed at the college was first given in a PowerPoint presentation at a linguistic roundtable, and later, we decided to disseminate this awareness at professional conferences with larger concentrations of ESL instructors.

Research into Indian English variety is not new. Syntactic, lexical, grammatical, and phonetic characteristics have been documented by Kachru (1983), Kapoor and Gupta (1994), Trudgill and Hannah (1994), and others. For clarification purposes we offer a definition of world Englishes speakers. They are those students who come from countries where English exists alongside with another “mother” tongue and is used for educational, government, or institutional business and purposes (Kirkpatrick, 2007).

According to Kachru and Nelson (2000), the world of English language use comprises three concentric circles: one inner and two outer. Inner-circle English is the “original” language spoken in the UK, the United States, Canada, Australia/New Zealand, and South Africa. Those are the countries that have English as an official first or mother tongue. In contrast, the outer circles represent countries, post-colonial in history, that have English *in addition* to one or many local languages that act as a first language to the population. Kirkpatrick provides the following specification: “English spoken in this [outer] circle is often described as ESL, which means that people use English alongside their mother tongue as a second language to officially communicate in several domains or carry out various institutionalized functions” (Kirkpatrick, 2007, p. 34).

Though they are often fluent speakers of Indian English (which is classified as one of the world Englishes), Indian students are frequently placed into ESL classes and considered “language learners.” This is odd, because speakers of Indian English typically have native-like fluency and full communicative competence. They often consider themselves competent “speakers of British English variety” or native speakers of Indian English. But however fluent such students appear to be in daily communication upon arrival to U.S. colleges, they are often perceived as speaking “broken” English or as being ESL students. This labeling is troubling because speakers of Indian English are likely to have acquired the basic underlying structure of English, though they may need to continue with language education as all native speakers do. This process is remarkably different from the language learning process (e.g., a Chinese first language speaker learning English).

To lessen the problems related to perceptions faculty and administration may have about Indian English speakers, we created a list of their most commonly recognized characteristics. We did this for two reasons: first, we intended to share such materials with faculty to raise awareness and help develop appropriate teaching strategies, and second, we wanted to share with students to help them overcome the linguistic and cultural negative perceptions of their variety of English. Though the list of recorded characteristics of the Indian variety of English is long, we here provide a few important cases from Trudgill and Hannah (1994, pp. 129–30):

- Indian English morphology is very creative and boasts many newly added words that reflect a direct transfer from Hindi (or another Indian language)—e.g., a compound cousin-brother/cousin-sister, a gender function inherent in most Indian languages.
- Pluralizing English mass nouns, e.g., furnitures, woods.
- Reflecting Hindi syntax, e.g., “replication” or the doubling of verbs: come come; sit sit.
- Word order in questions not utilizing inversion: “What you want to eat?”
- Vocabulary transfer from Hindi, such as “open the light” and “close the light.”

All these examples, documented by scholars and teachers, were easy to notice in our own students’ writing and speaking. We used this knowledge to help students learn how to code-switch between the Indian English and Standard American English.

Raising awareness is the first step toward understanding and change. We hope our presentation and this article can help promote that change and also help students and teachers become more successful in real classrooms.

## References

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