

Activity Proposal to Work with English Language Variation: Focus on the Phonetic-Phonological Level

Every language has variation, insofar as it is part of a natural, historical, and cultural process of any language (Queiroz 2018; da Rosa 2021). Variation in all levels of grammar and vocabulary is part of the acquisition and learning of any language (da Rosa 2021). Owing to that, when it comes to learning an additional language, it is important that teachers consider language variation in their lessons to prepare students to communicate with speakers from different countries.

In this article, the focus is on the phonetic-phonological level. Bieswanger (2008) and da Rosa (2017) have turned their attention to the important role that language variation plays in English lessons and how beneficial it is to prepare students to communicate with different speakers, respecting and understanding the different English-accented speeches around the world. Learners of English in the past may have heard only a local or regional variety in their classroom or their country; however, today learners can easily hear varieties from around the world through available technology. Therefore, teachers who bring activities to help their learners become familiar with different accents can prepare their students to understand different varieties, be more comfortable communicating in international personal or professional situations, and realize that language variation is natural. Moreover, these activities can demonstrate to learners that others, outside the classroom and around the world, can accept their variety of English.

Given that, the main objective of this article is to help English teachers from different parts of the world embrace language variation in their lessons, acknowledging that working with variations in the phonetic-phonological level may prepare students to communicate in English with speakers from different nationalities and to respect language varieties, including their own. The article presents six activities for teachers to use or to serve as a model for teachers to develop their own adaptations. The activities are designed for teachers at all levels to make their students realize the importance of recognizing language variety, experience directed practice in listening to examples of variation, and prepare for communicating with speakers of other varieties.

EXAMPLES OF LINGUISTIC VARIATION

Linguistic variation is present in all levels of a language's grammar and vocabulary:

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phonetic-phonological, morphosyntactic, lexical, semantic, and pragmatic (Queiroz 2018; da Rosa 2021). In English, for example, speakers can do the following:

- pronounce words like *car* as [kɑːr] or [kɑː] and *cotton* as [ˈkɒ.tən], [ˈkɑː.rən], or even [ˈkɑː.ʔən]. This represents variation at the phonetic-phonological level. (Note: For an explanation of phonetic symbols, search for “International Phonetic Alphabet.”)
- say either “My dad bought a video game for me” or “Dad bought me a video game.” This represents variation at the morphosyntactic level.
- use more than one word or phrase to refer to the same thing (*chips* or *french fries*; *flat* or *apartment*) or refer to the same word with different acceptable spellings, as in *color/colour* and *analyze/analyse*. This represents variation at the lexical level.
- use the same word to mean different things; for instance, the word *season* may refer to a period of the year, a set of episodes in a TV series, or (as a verb) to add flavor to food. This represents variation at the semantic level.
- change the way they speak in terms of politeness and formality, depending on whom they are speaking to; compare the formal request, “May I ask you a question?” with the more informal request, “Let me ask you a question.” This represents variation at the pragmatic level.

Many other examples are possible. This list shows variation on different levels as a

background for the following sections. It also gives an idea of the kinds of variation that English language learners might see and hear, which adds to the challenge of learning the language, comprehending it, and knowing how to use it.

WORKING WITH LANGUAGE VARIATION IN ENGLISH LESSONS

After the Industrial Revolution, which took place in England in the 18th century and later, and the economic and cultural rise of the United States in the 19th and 20th centuries, English reached the status of a *lingua franca* (Silva 2009)—that is, a language used for global communication among people who speak different native languages (Carter and Nunan 2001). Within the perspective of English as a *lingua franca*, English is seen as a language that belongs to all its users, going against the view that it belongs exclusively to native speakers and that only native standards of the language are “correct” (Delego 2023; Jenkins 2000). Instead, the varieties of language usage—such as different pronunciations, accents, and morphosyntactic structures—are taken into consideration as students learn English to communicate with people from different nationalities.

According to Cruz (2006), interaction in English currently happens more often among nonnative speakers in their home countries or in multilingual contexts. Therefore, English learners need to be prepared to communicate with both native and nonnative English speakers from different parts of the world. For that to happen, English teachers should favor various linguistic and cultural repertoires in their classes; consider the language usage in

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local contexts, as well as speakers' identities; and respect different forms of expression and the varieties of pronunciation and accents spoken around the world (Delego 2023; da Rosa 2021), provided that speech intelligibility is not at risk.

Nunes (2023) affirms that schools must be spaces for students to broaden their knowledge of language variation to promote mutual respect and to counter linguistic prejudice. Da Rosa (2021) defends the teaching of English to refute the ideology of "correctness" and proposes instruction that enables learners to reflect upon real-life communication and different sociocultural interactions in the target language. Therefore, English teachers must prepare their students to communicate with speakers from different countries, acknowledging intelligibility as a realistic goal for oral communication (Pennington 2021).

To help English teachers work with language variation in their lessons, assuming that most of the time they need ready-to-use materials that suit their students' needs in the classroom, the next sections contain an activity proposal to work with English variation at the phonetic-phonological level. This proposal can be adapted to different contexts and needs.

ACTIVITY PROPOSAL TO WORK WITH PHONETIC-PHONOLOGICAL VARIATION

The following activities, which can be administered with students on different levels and at different ages, are designed to work with phonetic-phonological variation. The main objectives are to raise students' awareness of the fact that more than one pronunciation (and accent) is accepted in the English language and to promote respect for differences at the phonetic-phonological

1. Listen to sentences spoken in different accents. Which word is repeated in each set of sentences?

1-	2-
3-	4-
5-	6-



Source: Pixabay (OpenClipart-Vectors)

2. Compare your answers with a classmate's. Listen to the sentences again. How are the words pronounced?

Figure 1. Variation in English pronunciation

Discuss the following questions with the whole class:

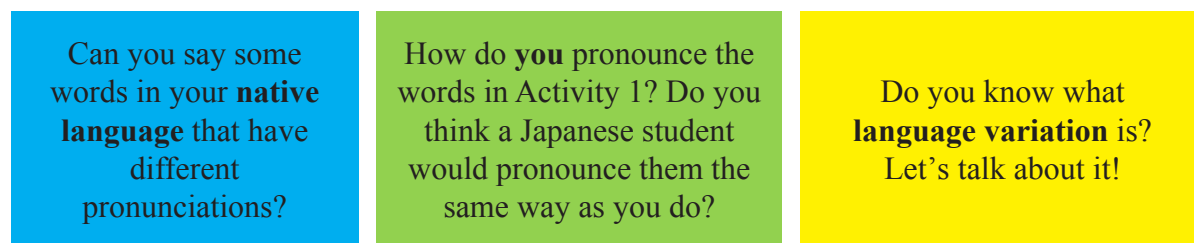


Figure 2. Discussion questions for variation in English pronunciation

level. Following is an explanation of how the activities can be administered in the classroom, along with suggestions for adaptation.

Activities 1 and 2

The specific goal of Activity 1 (see Figure 1) is to perceive whether students can identify which words are repeated in sets of sentences. In the first set, for example, the sentences are "I love tomatoes!" and "The tomatoes are green"; students must be able to notice that *tomatoes* is the repeated word.

Below are the six sets of sentences I have used for Activity 1. Teachers are free to change or adapt the sentences considering their students' level and age as long as the repeated words have two or more pronunciations.

Set 1: I love **tomatoes**!

The **tomatoes** are green.

Set 2: What's your **city**'s name?

I am from Mexico **City**.

Set 3: It's my **garage**.

Where is the **garage**?

Set 4: My **aunt**'s name is Maria.

Aunt Rose lives in Paris.

Set 5: I live with my older **brother**.

Hey, **brother**, how are you?

Set 6: It's my **new** house.

I like the **new** teacher.

To work with pronunciation variation, the sentences must be pronounced by speakers of different nationalities (accent variation), and the repeated words must be pronounced in two different fashions (pronunciation variation). For instance, in the first set of sentences, the word *tomatoes* can be pronounced as [tə'mɑ:.təʊz] and [tə'mei.rəʊs]. In the fifth set, <th> in the word *brother* may have different pronunciations, and so on.

Teachers can use speech tools to generate words spoken in different voices. An online search for "free text-to-speech" or a similar term will provide several results. Teachers can explore some of these tools and choose one they feel comfortable with. One tool I have used is *TTSMAKER Free Text to Speech* (<https://ttsmaker.com>). This technology allows people to write texts in any language and be able to listen to text-to-speech audio that can be downloaded for free. Teachers need to access the website and select a language (Portuguese, Japanese, Hindi, etc.), and the audio from the provided text will be spoken in the selected language. Teachers can typically choose between male and female voices. They can then delete the first text and type a new script, after which they click on "Convert to Speech." The audio will be created in the language chosen; later, teachers can listen to the audio and/or download it to use in their classroom.

Teachers can use a text-to-speech tool to conduct Activity 1 by choosing different

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accents for each sentence and then creating the audio to use in the classroom. For example, a French woman and a Mexican man speaking the sentences in the third set will likely produce variation in the pronunciation of *garage*. In case teachers cannot access this speech tool (or any other), perhaps they can ask different English speakers to read and record the sentences before the class so that they can use the recordings in the classroom later on; remember, though, that the repeated word in each set must be pronounced differently for the sake of the activity.

The objective of Activity 2 is to raise students’ awareness of the fact that the repeated words are pronounced differently in the sentences. Teachers go back to the set of sentences used in Activity 1 and ask students to discuss in pairs or trios how the repeated words are pronounced before checking them with the whole class. While checking the words with students, teachers can write

them on the board and connect this activity with the next one by asking students the first question in Activity 3 (see Figure 2).

Activity 3

The goals of Activity 3 are to discuss with students what language variation is, promote respect for differences in accent and pronunciation in the English language, and help students understand that this linguistic phenomenon exists in all languages (native or foreign).

Figure 2 shows questions I have used for this activity. In the first question, on the left, teachers help students understand that the same word in English can be pronounced differently, depending on where the speakers are from. Students reflect that there is no superior pronunciation (or accent) and there is not a “correct” pronunciation (provided there is mutual intelligibility and speakers can understand each other). After that, teachers can link the discussion with the second



Source: Pixabay (IO-Images)

What did you notice about the variations in English pronunciation present in our class?

After you listen to people from different parts of the world reading a short paragraph in English on https://accent.gmu.edu/browse_language.php, it’s your time to do the same!

Record yourself reading the same paragraph and then send the audio to your classmates (WhatsApp group, blog, or any other platform the school has available). Listen to some of your classmates reading the same paragraph. Are there many variations in your classmates’ pronunciations?

Figure 3. Variation in English pronunciation

The aim of Activity 6 is to help students notice that variation in English pronunciation exists even among speakers who share the same native language.

question, in the middle of Figure 2, explaining to students what language variation is and the kinds of variation that exist in languages, and providing them with examples of each kind of variation while focusing on the phonetic-phonological level.

After reading the last question of Activity 3, on the far right in Figure 2, students come up with words that are pronounced differently in their native language, reinforcing the fact that language variation is natural and present in all languages. They work in pairs or trios, and then teachers create a list on the board with the words mentioned by the students. Taking Brazilian Portuguese as an example, students reflect that it does not matter whether speakers pronounce the word *dia* (day) as [dʒiɐ] or [diɐ], as both pronunciations exist in this language, and therefore both are “right,” depending on which region of the country the speaker is from.

Activities 4 and 5

In order to administer Activities 4 and 5, teachers will need to show their students the video that I recommend (see Manoloy 2024) or any other video they find interesting with variation in English pronunciation. The video suggested for these activities shows people from around the world talking about different topics in English.

First, for Activity 4, teachers can have students watch the whole video without pausing it, then ask them to share information in pairs about the variations in English pronunciation that they noticed. For Activity 5, teachers can lead a brief discussion about speech comprehensibility: In the video, who was the hardest/easiest to understand, and why? Do you understand native speakers better than nonnative speakers? Is it easier to understand people from the same nationality speaking English? Why or why not?

Answers to these questions will vary. Teachers should promote respect for the different accents present in the video and stress the importance of language variation while learning English due to its status as a *lingua franca* (Cruz 2006; Jenkins 2000). After the brief discussion, teachers can show the video again, pausing after each speaker while students share reactions and/or discuss the above questions in pairs or trios. Students can also discuss answers to the following questions: “What do you know about any of the famous people in the video?” and “Can you understand what they are talking about? What information can you share from what you heard?” If teachers find it helpful, the answers can be compared with the whole class back together, and students can watch the video again without pauses.

Teachers may then wish to connect the video to Activity 6 (see Figures 3 and 4), perhaps saying that students’ pronunciation (and accents), both in their native language and in English, may be different from one another’s. This is another opportunity to emphasize the importance of not being prejudiced or judgmental towards each other’s accent, as it is part of every speaker’s identity.

Please call Stella. Ask her to bring these things with her from the store: Six spoons of fresh snow peas, five thick slabs of blue cheese, and maybe a snack for her brother Bob. We also need a small plastic snake and a big toy frog for the kids. She can scoop these things into three red bags, and we will go meet her Wednesday at the train station.

Figure 4. Paragraph sample from the Speech Accent Archive (2024)

These activities serve as a model for English teachers, and adaptations—depending on students’ level and situation—are always possible.

Activity 6

The aim of Activity 6 is to help students notice that variation in English pronunciation exists even among speakers who share the same native language. To follow the activity’s instructions, teachers can use the Speech Accent Archive (2024), a website with selections of people from different nationalities reading the same paragraph in English (see Figure 4 for a sample text). To find a paragraph, teachers access the website, select one language (the one they want their students to hear the accented speech in English), and then choose a speaker (there are male and female speakers from different cities and countries, according to the language selected).

To reinforce understanding of variation in English pronunciation, I recommend that teachers choose at least three speakers from the website: one who speaks the same native language their students do, one who speaks English as a native language, and one whose native language is different from their students’. Students listen to the speakers without following the reading of the paragraph. This way, teachers can ask students how difficult (or easy) it was to understand each of the speakers and whether they understood the message conveyed in the paragraph.

In the next step of the activity, students record themselves reading that same paragraph aloud. Later, they send the audio recording to any digital platform the school has available (a WhatsApp group is a good resource for carrying out this part of the activity) and listen to some of their classmates’ readings (three or four recordings). It is important that teachers remind students that the main goal of the activity is to notice the variations in English pronunciation that exist in the classroom, even among students who speak the same native language. If the classroom is a multilingual

environment, teachers can take advantage and explore the diversity of accents besides the variations in English pronunciation. Again, it is essential to emphasize that no accents or variations are superior or inferior to any others.

Another suggestion for this activity is to work with students’ self-perception. Teachers ask their students to listen to the recording of themselves reading the paragraph, check whether they can understand their English, and identify which sounds or words they could work on to improve their English intelligibility. Most importantly, teachers cannot forget to promote respect for the varieties of accents and pronunciations present in the classroom, call students’ attention to the fact that there is no superior or better accent, and finally stress that speech intelligibility is what really matters when we use English for global communication.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The activities proposed in the previous paragraphs aim to help teachers work with phonetic-phonological variation in English in their classes as a way to promote respect and raise students’ awareness that different pronunciations and accents are welcome when learning a foreign or additional language. These activities serve as a model for English teachers, and adaptations—depending on students’ level and situation—are always possible. Furthermore, teachers can create their own activities to work with language variation in their lessons, including other levels of variation: morphosyntactic, lexical, semantic, and pragmatic.

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