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Perceptions of World Englishes among Romanian University Students[1]

Abstract: *The article is based on a study conducted during a STA ERASMUS Teaching Mobility Mission at Ovidius University, Constanta, in May 2009. The purpose of the study was to look at the newer varieties of English, at teaching International English and World Englishes and to discuss the results of a questionnaire answered by students of the Faculty of Letters of Ovidius University, Constanta, regarding their attitudes towards native (British and American), and non-native (Indian, Portuguese and Spanish) varieties of English. Among other conclusions, it is important to mention that students should be aware of the many varieties of English because the future of English does not depend only on what happens in the native countries.*

Key words: *varieties of English, globalization, teaching English, questionnaire, accent*

1. Introduction

"The English tongue is of small reache, stretching no further than this island of ours, nay not there over all."
Richard Mulcaster, schoolmaster and linguist

When Richard Mulcaster made the above statement (quoted in Melchers and Shaw, 2003:6) some 400 years ago, no one could foresee that the English language was going to become the world's *lingua franca* by the end of the 20th century. McArthur (2003:3) calls

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attention to the impressive though soft statistics of world English[2]. However, he presents three undeniable facts about the use of English: (a) it is used in over 70 countries as an official or semi-official language and has a significant role in over 20 more: 90 in all; (b) worldwide over 1,400 million people live in countries where English has traditionally been in use; and (c) some 75% of the world's mail and the world's electronically stored information is in English.

In spite of the diverse contexts of language use, the several forms of the English language all over the world are commonly defined as 'English'. Essentially, according to McArthur (2003:8), "the term English routinely (but ambiguously) refers to both a major language with many varieties and that aspect of itself which is regarded as (more or less) above regionalism, either within a country such as England or the United States or throughout the world".

In an attempt to describe the significance of the new varieties of English, the 'New Englishes' such as Indian English, Philippine English, Singapore English and African Englishes, and their distinctive features, Platt et al. (1984:2-3) state that a new variety of English, that is, a New English, is one that fulfilled the following criteria:

1. It has developed through the education system. This means that it has been taught as a subject and, in many cases, also used as a medium of instruction in regions where languages other than English were the main languages.
2. It has developed in an area where a native variety of English was *not* the language spoken by most of the population.
3. It is used for a range of functions among those who speak or write it in the region where it is used. This means that the new variety is used for at least some purposes such as: in letter writing, in the writing of literature, in parliament, in communication between the government and the people, in the media and sometimes for spoken communication between friends and in the family. It may be used as a *lingua franca*, a general language of communication, among those speaking different languages or, in some cases, even among those who speak the same native language but use English because it is felt to be more appropriate for certain purposes.
4. It has become 'localized' or 'nativized' by adopting some language features of its own, such as sounds, intonation patterns, sentences structures, words, expressions. Usually it has developed some different rules for using language in communication.

In the same way, Platt et al. (9-12) suggest that there were four types of English which might seem to be 'newer Englishes' but which could not be included in the 'New Englishes' for several reasons:

Native varieties other than British English: although they are all in a sense *new* Englishes, they differ from the New Englishes because there has been a continuity in the use of English as people came to these areas speaking English and remained speaking English.

[2] According to different sources, the number of native speakers of English range from 320 to 380 million, second-language speakers from 150 to 375 million, and foreign-language speakers from 100 to 1,000 million.

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The Newer Englishes of the British Isles: the influence of the native languages, such as Welsh, Irish and Gaelic are still used to some extent and their influence on the English language persisted in the pronunciation, intonation and grammatical structures of the English variety used in some parts of the British Isles.

Immigrant English: the types of English spoken by immigrants who spoke a language other than English and who came to English-speaking nations occur in areas where a native variety of English is spoken by most of the population, whereas the New Englishes have developed in areas where a native variety of English was *not* the main language.

'Foreign' English: the English used in countries such as Italy, Germany and Sweden does not fulfil the third criterion for a New English as it is not typically used for purposes of communication within these countries.

In other words, Platt et al. (11) affirm that "the New Englishes have developed through English-medium education either in areas where English-based pidgins or creoles were spoken or where local languages and possibly a non-English *lingua franca* were used by the majority of the people."

Although Platt et al. distinguish what is and what is not a New English, English as a *lingua franca* encompasses all types of English, older and newer, native and non-native alike. Melchers and Shaw (2003:179), in an attempt to present and describe global variation and change in English, call attention to the fact that although "in the expanding circle English will not be used in primary education, religion, courts and the law, national politics, literature, national administration, or home and family life (...) it may be used (along with local languages) in international relations, communication with or within international organizations, research, education (especially university level), publicity, business, popular culture, the mass media, and in everyday interaction with foreigners of all sorts".

Later on, these authors remind readers that in the context of globalization, the role of the English language in the 21st century and the diversity of English varieties certainly bring fundamental implications for the choice of school variety in the countries of the expanding circle. More specifically, they refer to three questions that need to be answered: 1. What *exposure* should we give the learners?; 2. What production *model* should we choose?; and 3. What production *target* should we aim for? (191) These and other questions will certainly be in the minds of every teacher of English in the expanding circle.

2. Teaching International English and World Englishes

Melchers and Shaw believe that "in the expanding circle, it is increasingly considered that learners will need English to communicate with almost anyone in the global community, rather than merely learning it as a foreign language studied for personal development and cultural awareness." Because of this, "they should be able to understand as many accents and varieties as possible, so there would be wide exposure" (192).

Similarly, Modiano (2001a:340) identifies two major areas in the teaching of English as an international language and their scope: language varieties and culture. Modiano believes

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that when teachers only emphasize AmE or BrE, students tend to perceive other varieties as less valued. Such approach to teaching "presents English as the property of a specified faction of the native-speaker contingency". Modiano (2001b:162) also stresses that when students need to learn English as a tool for intercultural communication seeking competence in an international perspective of the language, they are supposed "to develop the ability to comprehend a wide range of varieties but also strive to utilize language which has a high likelihood of being comprehensible among a broad cross-section of the peoples who comprise the English-using world". In Modiano's opinion, teaching and learning English based on an international frame of reference aiming at developing such competence is superior "when compared to the conventional integration-orientated practices associated with the learning of culture-specific varieties such as British English", what he calls a 'nation-state centred view' (2001a:340). In other words, teaching international English means not only stressing both AmE and BrE but also including other native and non-native varieties.

Several authors have reported on significant changes to be introduced in teaching the language. Baxter (1991:67) says that "teaching materials should be drawn from all the various English-using communities, not only L1 communities, so as to introduce students to the different manners of speaking English and to build an attitudinal base of acceptance".

Medgyes (1999:185) also indicates that teaching international English is basically teaching "a large stock of native and non-native varieties of English". Native English teachers will certainly teach the variety they are native of, while non-native teachers should choose a widely spoken variety – British English and American English are the most obvious choices. However, all teachers should incorporate "familiarity with other native and non-native varieties and tolerance toward non-standard norms" (186) in their classes.

Strevens (1992:41) states that teaching international English implies an "awareness of the fact that most ESL/EFL relates to non-native speaker populations requiring English for their internal purposes, or for dealing with other non-native speaker populations, without the presence or intervention of native speakers". In view of this, Modiano (2000) stresses the idea that students should be exposed to a wide scope of native and non-native Englishes, without aiming at near-native proficiency.

3. The study

This study is concerned with the discussion of the subjects' attitudes toward native and non-native varieties of English. Their attitudes are manifested and examined through the following domains: (a) students' reaction to native and non-native accents, (b) students' liking and desire for native and non-native accents, and (c) students' identification of native and non-native speakers' origin.

The study made use of a questionnaire (see Appendix) answered by 35 2nd year (1st cycle) students at the Faculty of Letters of the University of Constanta, Romania. These students have been studying English as a first foreign language. Some of them were from the American Studies section of the Faculty of Letters and no one had background knowledge about varieties of English.

In order to perceive the attitudes of language users towards the diverse accents of English, this study attempted to widen the scope of accents usually examined. Firstly, a thorough

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picture of the students' attitudes was investigated through four distinct issues: their reaction to accents based on five sets of adjectives (friendly/unfriendly, clear/unclear, polished/rough, no accent/strong accent, not funny/funny), their liking for the accents, their desire for having a particular accent themselves, and their ability to identify the speaker's country of origin or language affiliation (native speaker, second language speaker, foreign language speaker). Secondly, this study presented samples of native and non-native accents, some of which the subjects might not be familiar with, such as Portuguese and Spanish accents.

The subjects' remarks about each of the above aspects were interpreted based on how close they were to either a lingua centred or a more international approach to English. Essentially, a lingua centred approach is one which focuses predominantly on Standard British English – and to a certain extent, Standard American English – while an international approach attempts to represent English in all its global diversity. However, these are just the extreme ends along a continuum of points of view, and users of English today usually maintain a set of attitudes which display characteristics of both linguacentred and international approaches to English to a greater or lesser degree.

4. Analysis and discussion of data

This section reports the findings concerning the students' attitudes toward native and non-native English accents. First, it analyses data from the students' reaction to ENL, ESL and EFL speakers' accents based on a semantic differential scale. Then, it discusses the subjects' liking and desire for these native and non-native accents. Finally, it comments on the students' attempt to identify the origin of the speakers.

4.1. Reacting to accents on a semantic differential scale

Students were asked to react to ENL (British and American), ESL (Indian) and EFL (Portuguese and Spanish) accents according to five sets of adjectives in a semantic differential scale. Scores that the students gave to each accent were averaged and the respective mean scores for the ENL, ESL and EFL speakers were calculated. Results showed that students reacted more positively toward the native accents than they did toward the ESL and EFL accents. Figure 1 shows the profile of the students' attitudes toward the accents. The lowest scores indicate a more positive reaction.

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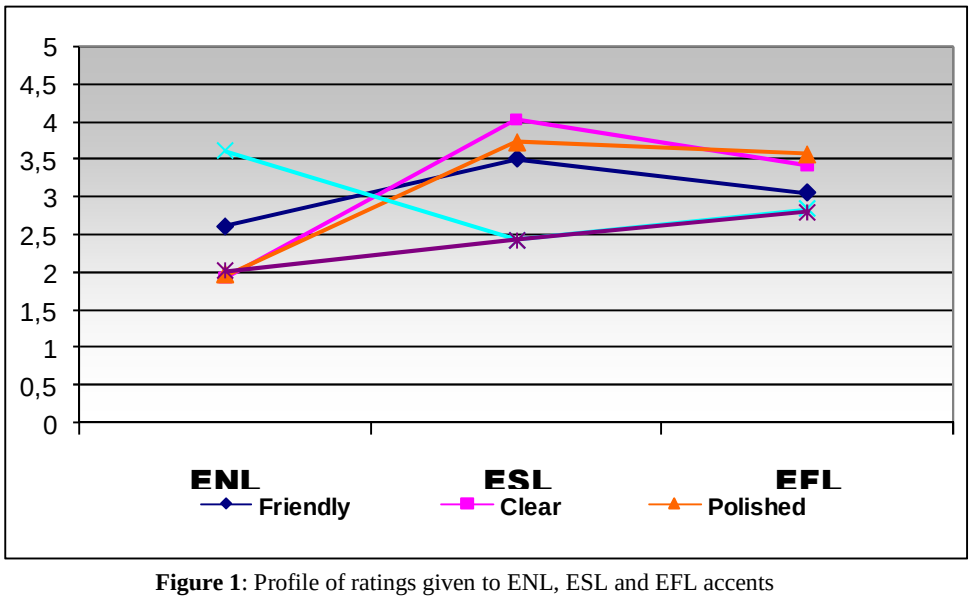

Figure 1: Profile of ratings given to ENL, ESL and EFL accents

As far as the individual speakers are concerned, subjects reacted more positively to the British speaker. Curiously, the EFL speakers (Portuguese and Spanish) achieved a lower score than the ESL speaker (Indian). Table 1 provides the mean score for each speaker.

ENL		**EFL**		**ESL**
UK	US	SPA	POR	IND
2.21	2.65	3.07	3.21	3.23

Table 1: Mean score for each speaker

4.1.1. Analysis of accent categories

Each category (*friendly accent*, *clear accent*, *polished accent*, *no accent* and *not funny accent*) was analysed, and differences between groups were identified.

A. Friendly accent

In this category, students identified the British as the friendliest accent while the Indian speaker had the least friendly accent. Curiously, the speaker from Portugal had a slightly more positive score than the speaker from the US.

B. Clear accent

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Students here followed the same pattern as in the 'friendly accent' category: the speaker from Britain received the lowest score and the ESL speaker had the highest score. Unlike the previous category, the American speaker came in second place.

C. Polished accent

In this category, the British speaker had the most polished accent while the Portuguese speaker had the least polished accent.

D. No accent

Results in this category were quite peculiar as according to subjects, the Indian speaker was seen as having no accent while the British speaker (followed by the American speaker) received the highest score. This can be explained by the fact that subjects were given no directions on how to interpret the sets of adjectives in the semantic differential scale. 'Having an accent' or even 'a strong accent' depended solely on each student's understanding of the concept. While some might have viewed the ENL speakers as having an accent, i.e. a 'native accent', others interpreted the task as identifying an accent in the non-native speakers, i.e. a 'foreign ESL or EFL accent'. Although the researcher tried to avoid any sort of influence in the subjects' response to the questionnaire, in order to overcome this problem some explanation of what an accent is should have been provided.

E. Not funny accent

Students identified the American speaker as having the least funny accent. On the other hand, the Portuguese speaker had the funniest accent.

Table 2 shows the mean score for each speaker in all categories.

	US	**IND**	**UK**	**POR**	**SPA**
Friendly accent	3.06	3.51	**2.17**	3.00	3.11
Clear accent	2.43	4.03	**1.43**	3.49	3.34
Polished accent	2.48	3.74	**1.46**	3.85	3.29
No accent	3.31	**2.43**	3.91	2.80	2.92
Not funny accent	**1.97**	2.43	2.06	2.91	2.69

Table 2: Mean score for each speaker in all categories (lowest scores in bold)

Students clearly regarded the ENL accents more positively in almost all categories. Such positive reactions toward the American and British speakers might be explained by the significant role played by these native varieties in ELT materials. Not only are students more often in contact with British and American cultures and varieties but they are usually the linguistic models to be followed. Furthermore, students tended not to perceive distinctions between ESL and EFL accents (the ESL speaker received higher scores in two categories – 'friendly accent' and 'clear accent' – while the EFL speaker from Portugal had higher scores in the categories 'polished accent' and 'not funny accent'). This might be explained by the little contact subjects have with ESL and EFL accents in the English classes.

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4.2. Students' liking for native and non-native accents

Students were requested to put the five accents in order of preference. In the first place, 74.3% most liked the sound of the British speaker. Then, 42.9% of the students allocated the American speaker as the second most liked. Next, in the third position, came the speaker from India with 37.1% of the choices. In the fourth position, 42.9% of students allocated the Portuguese speaker. Finally, the speaker from Spain was placed in the fifth position by 45.7% of the students. Table 3 shows the order of speakers in terms of whom the students most liked the sound of.

1st		2nd		3rd		4th		5th	
Country	%	Country	%	Country	%	Country	%	Country	%
UK	74.3	US	42.9	IND	37.1	POR	42.9	SPA	45.7
US	8.6	UK	25.7	US	31.4	IND	25.7	POR	25.7
SPA		SPA	14.3	POR	22.9	SPA	22.9	IND	20
IND	5.7	IND	11.4	SPA	8.6	US	8.5	US	8.6
POR	2.8	POR	5.7	UK	0	UK	0	UK	0

Table 3: Students' liking for accents

From these results, it can be suggested that students clearly know which accent they most like, i.e. the UK accent. The same trend can be seen in the other positions (perhaps not so markedly in the third position), when a majority of students allocated the accent in the top place. Although students reacted very positively towards both native accents, they unquestionably preferred the British accent. Curiously, although the EFL accent received more positive scores than the ESL ones in some categories of the semantic differential scale – friendly accent and clear accent –, students chose the Indian as the third accent they liked most.

4.3. Students' desire for native and non-native accents

Subjects were then asked to order the five accents according to their desire to have that same accent. In the first position, 85.7% of the students most wanted to sound like the British speaker. Next, 54.3% of the students placed the speaker from the US as their second choice. Then, in the third position came the Portuguese speaker with 37.1%. In the fourth position, 34.3% of the students chose the Indian speaker. Finally, the speaker from Spain was placed in the fifth position by 37.1% of the students. Table 4 shows the speakers in order of whom the students most wanted to sound like.

1st		2nd		3rd		4th		5th	
Country	%	Country	%	Country	%	Country	%	Country	%
UK	85.7	US	54.3	POR	37.1	IND	34.3	SPA	37.1

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US SPA	5.7	SPA	20	IND	22.9	POR	34.3	IND	31.5
		UK	14.3	US SPA	20	SPA	17.1	POR	25.7
IND	2.9	IND	8.6			US	14.3	US	5.7
POR	0	POR	2.8	UK	0	UK	0	UK	0

Table 4: Students' own desire for having an accent

Based on these results, it can be said that students clearly prefer to sound like the British speaker. Here the percentage for the British speaker (85.7%) is even higher than in the students' liking for this accent (74.3%). The same can be said about the students' second choice, the American speaker (42.9% for liking it and 54.3% for their desire to have this accent).

Another interesting fact about these results is the Portuguese accent as the students' third choice and the Indian accent in the fourth position, Although it might seem that students make a distinction between liking (in this category the Indian speaker came in third and the Portuguese in fourth) and desiring to have the accents, this explanation may not be so clear (see the results for both accents in the fourth position).

4.4. Students' identification of the speaker's origin

Subjects were asked to try to identify the country of origin of each speaker based on their accent. Figure 2 shows the percentage of correct identification of speakers' origin.

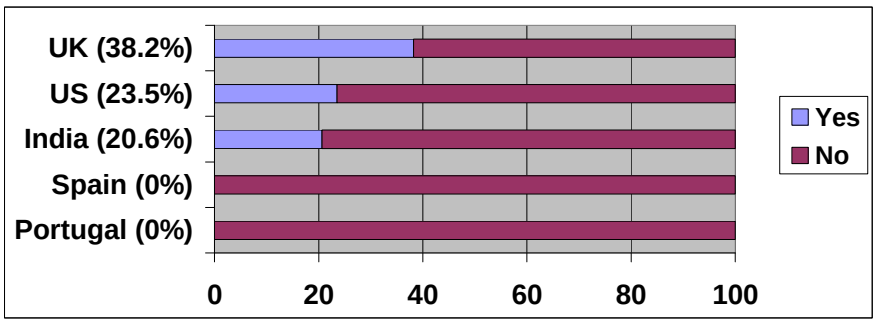

Figure 2: Identification of speakers' origin

Some comments can be made about the identification of the speakers. First, results clearly indicate that students are more familiar with the British than the American accent, in spite of the increasing influence of the American variety in the students' daily life.

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Second, surprisingly less than half of the subjects were able to identify the origin of the native speakers: only 38.24% of the subjects correctly identified the British speaker while only 23.5% of the students correctly identified the American speaker.

Finally, curiously but not unexpectedly, no one was able to identify the origin of the Spanish and Portuguese speakers. The lack of correct guesses for these speakers may indicate that students have very little familiarity with some EFL varieties.

While the overall percentage of identification of the speakers' origin was considerably low, many students attempted to at least identify the speakers' language affiliation (ENL, ESL or EFL speaker). Other times the subjects indicated a country that belonged to the same group of language affiliation. Table 5 shows the subjects' identification of speakers' language affiliation.

US		**IND**		**UK**		**POR**		**SPA**	
ENL	11	ENL	3	ENL	19	ENL	0	ENL	9
ESL	12	ESL	11	ESL	2	ESL	10	ESL	9
EFL	3	EFL	13	EFL	0	EFL[3]	26	EFL[4]	15

Table 5: Students' identification of speaker's language affiliation

Except for the UK speaker, where the vast majority of students identified him as a native speaker, subjects had different opinions about the language affiliation of all other speakers: 12 students believed the American speaker was an ESL speaker; 13 students believed the Indian speaker was an EFL speaker; although 26 students identified the Portuguese speaker as an EFL speaker, 10 subjects thought he was an ESL speaker; finally, 18 students thought the speaker from Spain was either a native or an ESL speaker.

5. Concluding remarks

When considering the subjects' attitudes toward native and non-native accents (reaction to ENL, ESL and EFL accents based on a semantic differential scale, liking and desire for native and non-native accents and identification of the speakers' origin) a few comments can be made. Firstly, although students appreciate and want to sound like the native speakers, particularly the British, the percentage of subjects who were able to identify both of them is not so high. Secondly, there is no doubt that subjects hold more positive attitudes toward the two standard varieties (BrE and AmE) than other varieties of English. Subjects reacted more positively to those varieties in terms of four characteristics ('friendly accent', 'clear accent', 'polished accent' and 'not funny accent').

On the other hand, students seemed not to distinguish ESL and EFL accents. Sometimes they showed a more positive attitude toward the EFL accents ('friendly accent', 'clear accent', 'polished accent' and desiring to have the accent); other times, the ESL accent had a

[3] Sometimes the names of countries were mentioned: Russia, Romania, Poland, Spain and Mexico.

[4] Sometimes the names of countries were mentioned: Russia, The Netherlands, Middle East, Romania and Scandinavia.

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more positive reaction ('not funny accent' and liking the accent). Moreover, 20.6% of the subjects were able to identify the origin of the ESL speaker while no one was able to identify the origin of the EFL speakers.

Fundamentally, subjects exhibited a more lingua centred attitude toward English as most of their attitudes are more positive toward the British accent, and to a lesser extent, to the American accent as well.

As early as the 1980s, some linguists attempted to establish a framework for teaching English as an international language. Trifonovitch (1981) pointed out some aspects that need to be emphasised in the classroom. First, as speakers of English will be contacting a variety of cultures – native and non-native – teachers should not concentrate on the cultures of the native speakers. Second, it is important that the learners of EIL understand their own culture and develop awareness toward accepting other cultures in order to understand the other's point of view. Also, the EIL learner should listen to as many varieties of English as possible. Finally, he/she should be able to notice and accept different styles of spoken and written English, because they exhibit the cultural background of the speaker/writer.

Fundamentally, this research attempts to make space for the voices of the Expanding Circle. The international English debate has been led by researchers in the Inner and Outer Circles. However, this does not represent the reality of English use in the world today. The future of the English language does not depend only on what happens in the native countries of the Inner Circle or in the communities of the Outer Circle where English has acquired an official status.

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Appendix: The questionnaire

A major Portuguese TV station is producing a programme on the role of the English language in the twenty-first century and is looking for a narrator. You will hear five people from different countries who have applied for the job. All of them will read the following text:

As a language changes, it may well change in different ways in different places. No one who speaks a particular language can remain in close contact with all the other speakers of that language. Social and geographical barriers to communication, as well as sheer distance, mean that the change that starts among speakers in one particular locality will probably spread only to other areas with which these speakers are in close contact. This is what has happened over the centuries in the case of the languages we now call English and German. Two thousand years ago, the Germanic peoples living in what is now for the most part Germany, could understand one another perfectly well. However, when many of them migrated to England, they did not remain in close contact with those who stayed behind. The result, to simplify somewhat, was that different linguistic changes took place in the two areas independently so that today English and German, while clearly related languages, are not mutually intelligible.

1. Please listen to their readings and decide how *friendly*, *clear*, *polished*, etc their **accent** sounds. For example, if you think it sounds *friendly*, put a circle around number 1, *unfriendly* number 5, neither *friendly* nor *unfriendly* number 3 and so on. For example,

(1) FRIENDLY 1 2 3 4 5 UNFRIENDLY

Candidate A:

(1) FRIENDLY 1 2 3 4 5 UNFRIENDLY
(2) CLEAR 1 2 3 4 5 UNCLEAR
(3) POLISHED 1 2 3 4 5 ROUGH
(4) NO ACCENT 1 2 3 4 5 STRONG ACCENT
(5) NOT FUNNY 1 2 3 4 5 FUNNY

Candidate B:

(1) FRIENDLY 1 2 3 4 5 UNFRIENDLY

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(2) CLEAR	1	2	3	4	5	UNCLEAR
(3) POLISHED	1	2	3	4	5	ROUGH
(4) NO ACCENT	1	2	3	4	5	STRONG ACCENT
(5) NOT FUNNY	1	2	3	4	5	FUNNY

Candidate C:

(1) FRIENDLY	1	2	3	4	5	UNFRIENDLY
(2) CLEAR	1	2	3	4	5	UNCLEAR
(3) POLISHED	1	2	3	4	5	ROUGH
(4) NO ACCENT	1	2	3	4	5	STRONG ACCENT
(5) NOT FUNNY	1	2	3	4	5	FUNNY

Candidate D:

(1) FRIENDLY	1	2	3	4	5	UNFRIENDLY
(2) CLEAR	1	2	3	4	5	UNCLEAR
(3) POLISHED	1	2	3	4	5	ROUGH
(4) NO ACCENT	1	2	3	4	5	STRONG ACCENT
(5) NOT FUNNY	1	2	3	4	5	FUNNY

Candidate E:

(1) FRIENDLY	1	2	3	4	5	UNFRIENDLY
(2) CLEAR	1	2	3	4	5	UNCLEAR
(3) POLISHED	1	2	3	4	5	ROUGH
(4) NO ACCENT	1	2	3	4	5	STRONG ACCENT
(5) NOT FUNNY	1	2	3	4	5	FUNNY

2. Put the candidates in order of who you most liked the sound of, by putting their letters into the boxes below:

1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th

3. Now put the candidates in order of who you yourself would most want to sound like, by putting their letters into the boxes below:

1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th

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4. Finally, try to guess the countries the candidates come from:

Candidate	Country of origin
A	
B	
C	
D	
E	

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