

Accentuated Perspectives: Learners' Attitudes Towards Non-Native English Teachers in the Age of English as a Lingua Franca

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ABSTRACT

The primary objective of this study was to investigate students' perceptions of their English teachers based on whether the teachers have native or non-native accents. To address this research question comprehensively, a thorough analysis of three key studies: Butler (2007), Buckingham (2014), and Hendriks et al. (2018) was conducted. These leading studies were carefully selected in order to provide a holistic perspective on the issue, covering various angles, age groups and geographic regions. The findings from the three studies highlight the complexity of students' attitudes towards non-native English teachers and accent preferences. While native speaker ideology tends to influence these attitudes, cultural and linguistic factors, as well as the degree of accentedness, also play crucial roles in shaping students' perceptions of their teachers' accents.

Keywords: English teachers , native speaker ideology , students ' perceptions

INTRODUCTION

In contemporary society, the English language has emerged as a global phenomenon, with an estimated two billion speakers, constituting approximately one-third of the world's population (Crystal, 2008, p. 5). This pervasive presence of English has catalyzed a profound transformation in its demographics and linguistic characteristics. Notably, native speakers of English have witnessed a perceptible shift in their primacy, both in terms of sheer numbers and linguistic authority. This shift is underscored by the fact that the number of nonnative speakers of English worldwide has now surpassed that of native speakers (Graddol, 2006).

Consequently, this shift has given rise to a new reality within the realm of English language teaching. Presently, the majority of English language teachers and learners are nonnative speakers, marking a significant departure from traditional educational paradigms (Canagarajah, 2005; Crystal, 2003; Prodromou, 2003). As this ongoing transformation continues, it underscores a compelling and significant research focus: delving into the perceptions of English language learners regarding their non-native English instructors. These attitudes wield a direct and substantial impact on students' educational journeys, molding their perspectives on the language, instructional methods, and their overall motivation to learn.

This literature review explores this intriguing topic by examining three key articles that scrutinize the issue, focusing specifically on learners' attitudes toward their non-native teachers based on their accents. The selection of these three studies was executed with meticulous care, aiming to provide a comprehensive understanding of the topic from multiple vantage points, across various age groups, and representing diverse geographical regions. By synthesizing the findings and insights from these articles, this paper aims to present a more nuanced perspective on the complex

interplay between non-native teachers' accents and student attitudes in the context of English language education.

The evolving landscape of English language education necessitates a deeper exploration of the dynamic relationship between teachers and learners, shedding light on how accents influence the classroom experience and the broader implications for the global English-speaking community. Understanding these nuances is critical in shaping more inclusive and effective pedagogical practices, ultimately enhancing the quality of English language instruction in this new era of linguistic diversity.

The Notion of Native Speaker

As we embark on a journey to delve into the multifaceted realm of learners' attitudes towards their non-native English teachers, it is crucial to establish a foundational understanding of the concept of English as a Native Language (ENL) and to navigate the often-debated terrain of who qualifies as a native speaker. This definitional clarity is essential as it forms the foundation on which the subsequent discussion will rest.

ENL is a term that refers to the language spoken by individuals born and raised in one of the countries where English has historically been the primary language. Under this definition, native speakers of English are those individuals who have the privilege of speaking English as their first or sole language and have the distinct advantage of being born or raised in regions where English-speaking populations constitute the majority. Within these linguistic territories, English reigns supreme not only in daily communication but also in cultural identification, making it the key of both social interaction and personal identity (Jenkins, 2009, p.15).

However, it is imperative to acknowledge the ongoing and often heated debate among scholars regarding the precise delineation of a "native speaker." Paikeday (1985), for instance, espouses the term "proficient user" and boldly asserts that the notion of a "native speaker" is nothing more than a construct of linguistic imagination. In contrast, Rampton (1990, 1995) introduces a tripartite framework encompassing language inheritance, language affiliation, and language expertise as the three defining components of a native speaker. Notably, he places particular emphasis on the last component, contending that language expertise is the most significant component in this complex categorization.

In the context of this paper, it is essential to clarify that the term "native speaker" will adhere to Jenkins' definition mentioned above, as it best aligns with the nature of the current investigation. This foundational understanding will provide us with a solid platform from which to explore the dynamics of learners' attitudes towards their non-native English teachers, particularly within the context of exposure to diverse accents. By firmly grounding the current paper exploration in these concepts, we are better poised to dissect and comprehend the multifaceted angles of this intriguing phenomenon.

Reevaluating the NEST vs. Non-NEST Debate in English Language Teaching: The Impact of English as a Lingua Franca and Nativespeakerism

For English language teachers, the debate on the effectiveness of NESTs vs. non-NESTs has been a long-enduring one in the field of ELT (Cook, 2007; Medgyes, 1992). NESTs have for long occupied a privileged status compared to their non-native counterparts and they have been recognised as excellent linguistic role models for English language learners (Cook, 1992). The basis of such a biased stance in favour of the NESTs over their non-NESTs peers is deeply rooted in the notion of "nativespeakerism", to which Holliday (2005) refers as "the belief that 'native-speaker' teachers represent a 'Western culture' from which spring the ideals both of the English

language and of English language teaching methodology” (p. 6). According to Illés and Csizér (2010), the rise of English as a global lingua franca has called into question not only the privileged status of native speakers but that of NESTs as well. Many of the strengths of NESTs which are perceived as weaknesses of non-NESTs, such as knowledge of L2 culture (Árva & Medgyes, 2000), idiomatic expressions (Medgyes, 1994) and possessing authentic pronunciation (Madrid & Cando, 2004) have lost their sense from an ELF point of view. ELF empowers non-NESTs and as Illés and Csizér (2010) point out, the non-NESTs’ knowledge of the foreignness of the language they teach is their most important asset which NESTs lack in the age of ELF.

This debate on the roles of NESTs and non-NESTs and the evolving landscape of English language teaching provides the backdrop against which we delve into students' attitudes towards their non-native English teachers based on their accents. In a world where English has transcended its native speaker boundaries, examining how students perceive their non-native teachers, especially concerning their accents, becomes a pertinent and intriguing research focus.

Analysis and Synthesis of Prominent Previous Studies

Bultler (2007) investigates 312 Grade six Korean elementary schools students’ attitudes towards teachers with American-accented English (a native speaker model) and Korean-accented English (a nonnative speaker model). In order to create a homogeneous sample, representative of the whole population, the author carried out his research in two public schools located in different geographical areas, reflecting two different environments. The school in Seoul, the capital, reflected an open and diverse atmosphere while the other in Daegu, a regional city, stood for a conservative one. The number of male and female participants was almost equal.

In order to explore the students’ attitudes, a matched – guised technique was employed. Students listened to the same person, a Korean – American female, once speaking with American accented English and once with Korean accented English. After listening to the tapes , students’ attitudes were examined by an attitudinal questionnaire in which they were asked to decide two things : the first concerning the extent to which they would wish to be taught by the supposedly either of the teachers speaking in the recordings and the second related to the extent to which they thought those teachers possessed specific qualities related to the teachers’ ability to use English , their English teaching strategies and their general teaching strategies.

The analysis of the questionnaire’s results revealed that students’ attitudes to the two guises were not significantly different on items regarding the teachers’ general teaching strategies. However, the attitudes regarding teachers’ ability to use English (i.e., pronunciation and confidence) and selected items regarding teachers’ English teaching strategies (i.e., focus on fluency and use of Korean in class) were found to be significantly different. These results clearly show that students tend to have more favourable attitudes towards teachers who are presumably native English speakers and less favourable attitudes towards their non-native counterparts.

The findings of this study compliment Buckingham’s (2014) study which has investigated whether the native – non-native teacher status impacts Omani students’ level of confidence towards their teachers. The study took place in one of Oman’s largest universities at which English was the language of instruction. The majority of the teachers came from the outer and expanding circle while few who mainly taught in the English department were from the inner circle. The 373 students participating in this study were enrolled in a one-semester course entitled ‘English 2’. Females comprised the majority of the sample, which was expected as only 15% males

were enrolled at the university. An adapted match-guise technique involving five different speakers was employed in order to explore the students' attitudes. The teachers came from: Iran, Kenya, Oman, Pakistan and Syria. Each had to record twice, once with non-native English accent and another with an American, Canadian or British English accent. A sixth teacher from South Africa, who was only recorded once, was included as a distractor. The students' perceptions of their teachers were explored through a questionnaire consisting of nine items distributed over four main themes; the teachers' use of English (i.e., This person will be a good model for correct English pronunciation.), their status value (well educated, experienced teacher), their social values (friendly, intelligent) and finally their suitability as teachers at the foundation and for that particular course. Responses were provided in the form of a five-point Likert scale ([0] strongly disagree; [1] mostly disagree; [2] don't know; [3] mostly agree; [4] strongly agree). The results show that students had a more favorable attitude towards speakers who were thought to be native English speakers from the UK, placing the British accent in the lead over all the other native and non-native accents. This confirms Butler's (2007) findings regarding students' tendency to prefer Native English speakers' accents. However, it sheds light on the fact that some native speaker accents are more favourable than the others. Despite this clear preference for the British accent, a surprising finding of this study reveals that some non-native accents are received more favourably than the native ones. For example, the two guises that came in the second and third place after the British guise were the Omani Arab and the Filipino guise, receiving more positive attitudes than the American and the Canadian guises. The Syrian guise has also received a favorable attitude almost similar to the Omani guise, leading to the conclusion that students can respond positively to teachers of English with moderate accentedness, which is typical of Arab speakers of English, and to those who come from their own cultural background.

The third study Hendriks, van Meurs, & Reimer's (2018) is linked to the previous two studies as it investigates students' attitudes towards native and non-native accents and similar to Buckingham' (2014) it also sheds light on the impact of the accent strength and the mutual L1 backgrounds on students' perceptions of their teachers. While the first two studies explored students' attitudes in countries in East Asia and the middle East, the current study shifts focus to Europe, mainly Germany and the Netherlands. The participants in this study were 293 Dutch students and 274 German students who had to judge the accents of lecturers who were native speakers of British English or lecturers who shared their L1, or shared a language typologically related to their L1, whether it is German for the Dutch or Dutch for the Germans. The study had a within-subject verbal-guise experimental design in which participants listened to two fragments of different lecturers recorded by different speakers with a different accent in each fragment.

The novel dimension in this study is that when it comes to foreign accents judgment, students were exposed to Dutch accented English and German accented English, but with different degrees of accent strength ranging from slight to moderate. A total of 21 male speakers (eight speakers of standard Dutch, nine speakers of standard German and four British speakers of Standard English) recorded two speech fragments. After listening to those fragments, students had to fill in an online questionnaire in which they judged the two recordings in terms of identification of origin of the speaker and the strength of their accents, the perceived intelligibility and the overall comprehensibility of the speech. In addition, they had to evaluate their impressions of the speakers and their teaching qualities. The results show that lecturers with British native accents and with slight non-native English accents received more favourable attitudes than their heavy accented non-native counterparts. The results also reveal that Dutch moderately accented speakers were evaluated more positively than the German moderately accented speakers. The outcomes of this study are in line with the findings of the first two studies in terms of students' preference for teachers with native speakers' accents. It also confirms Buckingham's (2014) findings in which the degree of

accentedness played an influential role in students' attitudes towards their non-native English teachers.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this paper was to examine students' attitudes towards their teachers based on the teachers' native or non-native accents. Three leading studies (Bultler 2007, Buckingham' 2014 and Hendriks, van Meurs, & Reimer's 2018) were analysed in order to answer the research question. For the sake of covering the issue holistically, during the selection phase of the studies, the writer of this paper had three criteria in mind. First, the age of the participants. The writer made sure that the studies investigated the attitudes of learners who belonged to different age groups. For example Bultler (2007) investigated young learners while Buckingham(2014) and Hendriks et al. (2018) focused on adult learners . Second, the writer intended for the studies to cover the attitudes of students from different linguacultural backgrounds. For this purpose, the first study was from Korea, the second from an Arab country (Oman) and the third was from Europe (Germany and the Netherlands). The last criterion of selection was to have studies tackling the topic from different angles. While the first study explored the attitudes of students towards one native accent and one local non- native accent, the second investigated many native and local and non-local non-native accents and additionally explored the impact of the familiarity with the accent, its degree and its connection with the students' own cultural backgrounds on their attitudes. The last study added a new aspect to the inquiry as it placed a heavy focus on the impact of the degree of accentedness whether slight or moderate on students' attitudes. The studies were presented in a chronological order which coincided with the ascending depth in which each study tackled the issue.

In light of the outcomes of the three studies presented above we conclude that many factors can shape students' attitudes towards their native, non – native accented English teachers. Native speaker ideology appears to be a dominant factor as could be seen in students' preference for teachers with native English accents in all the three studies. However, this conclusion should be considered with caution as in Buckingham (2014), it was revealed that although the British accent received the most positive attitudes, some non-native accents that had social and lingua cultural implications for students were received more favourably than some non-British native accents. The degree of accentedness in non- native speech whether slight or moderate seems to be another prominent factor which can impact students' attitudes as Hendriks, Hendriks et al. (2018) study show , the less the degree of accentedness is , the more positive the attitudes become .

This literature review paper provides a valuable foundation for educators and policymakers to consider when addressing the roles of native and non-native English teachers in a globalized and diverse world. It underscores the need for inclusivity, open-mindedness, and the celebration of linguistic diversity within English language education. In future studies , examining the impact of these attitudes on learning outcomes and the quality of language instruction would further enrich our understanding of this complex phenomenon.

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