

INVESTIGATING THE CASE OF FOREIGN LANGUAGE USERS PRESERVING THEIR L1 ACCENT WITH REGARD TO GENDER

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Abstract

A ubiquitous phenomenon observed in the oral performance of foreign learners of English throughout different settings is speaking the L2 with some sort of accentuated articulation. The importance of accent, the emphasis being here on speaking English with a standard accent, is often neglected by those teachers who deemphasize its role in the whole process of learning a foreign/second language. Thus, the present study concerns language learners' perception of their own accent and the consequences of speaking with an exotic accent. In this vein, the two variables of gender and the proficiency level of the learners were taken into account. To this aim, data were collected from thirty language learners of both sexes studying at the advanced level of proficiency in a Language Institute of Khomeiny Shahr. The results of a data analysis done after conducting an interview with the subjects alongside assessing the results of a questionnaire indicate that the female subjects preoccupation due to the hampering effects of their foreign accent while speaking in L2 is more than their male counterparts. It was also found that when they were asked if they are being assessed differently by their peers or language learners in the institutes of Isfahan City, over two thirds answered yes.

Key Words: Accent; EFL/ESL learner; English proficiency; gender

Introduction

Foreign accents have been the focus of research for several studies. Psychologists and social psychologists have studied attitudes toward accents and how they are related to such factors as ethnicity and gender, while applied linguists have been interested in finding ways to enhance second language learners' intelligibility. Despite the virtual inevitability of a detectable accent, there is evidence to suggest that adult learners can alter their L2 productions to some extent. Flege's (1980) study indicated that adult learners can adapt their L2 speech over time to more closely approximate phonetic representations in their second language; however, some of their productions still differ from the output of a NS. Purcell and Suter (1980) demonstrated that native language, aptitude for oral mimicry, length of residence, and strength of concern for pronunciation accuracy all factor into one's ultimate attainment in acquiring the phonology of a second language. It is the last of these that can be brought into play in a pedagogical environment. If a second language learner has a desire to sound more like a native speaker, pronunciation instruction can be effective. Derwing, Munro, and Wiebe (1997, 1998), in two before/after studies of pronunciation courses, have shown that native listeners can detect significant changes in L2 learners' intelligibility, comprehensibility (ease of understanding), and degree of accentedness as a result of instruction, even in people who have been using English regularly for many years.

Although these approaches have revealed insights related to both social norms and pedagogical practice, the issue of speaking another language with a foreign accent has not been fully elaborated.

According to Trudgill (1983), from a social point of view, language plays a role in conveying information about the speaker. While speaking, speakers do not only transfer their intended meaning, but also their identity (Guy, 1988). How one represents oneself to others is in part voluntary, but there are some things that are either very difficult or nearly impossible to control. An individual's speech tells a listener far more than the way one is dressed, the car one drives, or the hairstyle one wears. Due to ESL situations, to gain a sense of the context in which second language learners find themselves, one must consider the attitudes of others to L2 accented speech. It is also important to contemplate how likely it is that adult second language learners will speak with a noticeable accent, and to what extent L2 accents can be altered with instruction.

Generally speaking, people tend to hold biases with regard to accented speech; the further the accent is from their own, the more likely they are to experience a negative reaction to it. The effects of accent (both L2 and first language dialects) on affect have been studied for several decades. Many researchers

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have used a matched guise technique to elicit attitudes towards accented speech. This generally entails asking the same individuals to produce speech samples with two different accents, holding constant all other aspects of vocal quality. Anisfeld, Bogo, and Lambert (1962) have shown that listeners tend to assess foreign accented speech more negatively than speech that is perceived to be 'standard.' Brennan and Brennan (1981a, 1981b), Nesdale and Rooney (1996), Ryan and Carranza (1975) and K. Sato (1998) found similar results using a variety of speakers. Listeners judged nonnative speakers to be less educated, poorer, less intelligent, and so on.

Negative judgments of accented speech are not restricted to native speakers. Fayer and Krasinski (1987) explored Spanish non-native speakers' (NNS) attitudes towards other accented speech and found that NNS judgments of formal accuracy were even harsher than those of native English speakers; moreover, NNSs expressed more annoyance with the accented speakers. Riches and Foddy (1989) explored the notion of accent as a status marker among Greek-Australian and Anglo-Australian listeners. Both groups of raters preferred Anglo-Australian English to Greek-accented English, rating speakers of the former to be more industrious, powerful, educated, intelligent, and competent than the latter. Thus the negative bias towards L2 accented speech is not limited to NSs alone.

Even native speakers whose dialect is different from the standard are faced with discrimination. C.J. Sato (1991) documented the court-sanctioned refusal of the American National Weather Service to allow two weather forecasters to broadcast because of their slight Hawaiian Creole accents. Also, Cross, DeVaney, and Jones (2001) described negative biases towards dialects of Alabaman speech not shared by the raters. Given that negative attitudes towards accent are so pervasive, one would expect learners of a second language to encounter deleterious reactions to their accents.

Functions of Accent

Among the linguistic clues that reveal the speakers social background, accent is the most revealing. As soon as a person coming from a certain locality opens his/her mouth to speak a foreign language or even the first language, a myriad amount of data is gained about his/her societal, personal and local background.

Accent is a particular way of speaking which tells the listener something about the speaker's discrepant quirks. A person's accent may disclose the region or the country from which he/she comes from, what social class s/he belongs to and whether or not that person is the native speaker of the language (Wells, 1982; Rivers, 1981; cited in J.C. Richards, 1992).

The issue of accent can be probed from the point of view of native speaker's communities. Among the common accents spoken in England, RP (Received Pronunciation) has received a certain eminence. This type of accent reveals a lot about the speaker's social class, typically being a member of higher class or even belonging to high-level educational elite. This accent is usually taught to students learning English as a foreign language (Wakelin, 1977). Nevertheless, the relatively small number of speakers who use it do not identify themselves as coming from any particular geographical region (Wardhaugh, 1986).

Studies conducted on accented speech

Accent inevitably provides value-judgments for people and hence it is one of the most important aesthetic features of using a language. A few studies have clearly demonstrated that adolescents and even very young children are quite aware of language differences and some of the consequences of such differences. Giles and Powesland (1975) report on one study in which an investigator who could speak in either Birmingham accent or RP, spoke to two groups of seventeen years old students about psychology, using one accent with one group and another with the second group. When the students were asked certain questions after the two talks, it was apparent that the investigator was rated higher in his RP guise so far as his intelligence was concerned. Moreover, students wrote more to him and about him in this guise than in his Birmingham guise (cited in Wardhaugh, 1986).

Apparently, even though many learners do not use a standard accent and may say they don't like it, they are still willing to ascribe certain virtues to those who speak it. Those individuals who speak with a standard accent are judged to be more competent, intelligent and industrious (Wardhaugh, 1986).

This latter feature, i.e. industriousness, is more noticeable through the speaking of a foreign speaker of English and it shows that s/he has paid due attention to acquiring a standard accent and rectifying its probable pitfalls.

Significance of the Study

By using accent, one can say what s/he means and how s/he means it. One of the facets of accent is stress. At word-level, stress conveys meaning through tone or feeling which can be much more important than the actual words used.

If one speaks fairly quickly and with strong intonation, one will be understood more easily (Cook, 1991).

Accent plays a differentiating role between the two main English speaking nations of the US and England. As it is stated by George Bernard Shaw, the Americans and the English are the two people divided by the same language.

Language learners can be seriously hampered by a negative attitude toward their accents (Cook, 1991). As it was aforementioned, accent functions as a decorative denominator for the outward epiphany of one's speech. The aesthetic quirks of accent are so much that the listeners can be affectively influenced by the speaker's accent.

While language learners are no longer expected eventually to acquire 'fully' an L2, i.e. to produce and understand it as would a native speaker of the language, but rather to become multicompetent speakers (the compound state of a mind with two languages, see Cook, 1999, p. 190), their apparent inability to do so has in the past been ascribed almost solely to reduced flexibility and plasticity of the human brain and its neural networks. According to present consensus (Scovel, 1998, p. 76), after a certain age is reached - generally thought to be puberty, although for phonology this may occur even earlier - the brain becomes less able to adapt to complex systems of new stimuli and will continue to use established networks, such as those developed for L1 phonology, in speaking the L2. This is evident in the ability of young children to adopt the phonology of a foreign language, and in the difficulties of older speakers to do the same.

It seems that speaking a language with a foreign accent would pave the way for the penetration of other interfering features of L1 into L2.

Research Questions

This study relies on the assumption that gender differences contribute to the exploitation of a foreign accent while speaking in English. In other words, male and female language learners adopt different attitudes toward recouring to their L1 accent. Consequently, the present study seeks to answer the following questions;

- 1) Does speaking English with a foreign accent have anything to do with language learners' gender?
- 2) Does a higher level of proficiency act conducive in thwarting the presence of a foreign accent?

Methodology

Subjects

The subjects of the present study were 30 English language learners of equally both sexes studying at the advanced level of proficiency in a Language Institute of Khomeini Shahr. They were randomly selected from among the students studying there. The main criterion for placing the subjects into two groups was their gender. As a result, two groups of both sexes were randomly chosen, to each of which 15 subjects were assigned.

It seems noteworthy here to mention a few demographic information about the targeted place of this study, which was named Khomeini Shahr after the revolution of the 1979 in Iran. This city has a population of around 400 thousand and is located in the suburbs of Isfahan City. Its original name was Sedeh (i.e. 3 villages) which was rooted in the geographical and territorial ramifications of the whole city into 3 major areas of Vernus, Foroushan and Khozan. Among these three localities, the first one enjoys the most ancient record. Its dwellers used to be the special guardsmen of one of the kingdoms rulling over Iran prior to the entrance of Islam into Iran around 700 B.C. In this locality, there is a unique language spoken by its dwellers that is called Vellati. This language refutes the tests of mutual intelligibility and is

quite incomprehensible to the outsiders. Due to the way of pronouncing the words and also suprasegmental features, this language is quite unique.

Generally speaking, these three neighborhoods have their own special accents when the medium of communication is Persian, still being intelligible to each other and to the non-residents of Khomeini Shahr. The common thread running through these three accents is the abnormal lengthening of the usual speech sounds and also the insertion of extra sounds at the end of some sentences, like "BAH" and "DOON".

With regard to language learners being born and raised in this city, their accents reveal their territorial background when speaking in Persian or English. This case is not true for all of them, but most of them still preserve their local accents. Certain aspects of their L1 accent such as the aforementioned cases are in a majority of instances manifest themselves in speaking English.

The economic status of the subjects participating in this study was not taken into account; however, by virtue of fiscal matters, Vernusies enjoy a higher welfare and are located on the top of the community s economy ladder, while the other two localities are in the middle steps.

In conducting this research, it was tried to select the subjects belonging to all these communities.

Measuring Instruments

Two measuring instruments were used in this study. Initially, a questionnaire was designed whose main aim was to gather information about the learners personal information including the place of birth, age, their living place at the time of doing the research and their attitudes toward the issue of L1 and L2 accents. Then, in order to elicit information about the learners true accent while speaking in English a structured interview was conducted by each individual separately. Its layout was mainly designed so that the subjects of the study would be engaged in communication via the medium of English and it was attempted to discuss about culturally oriented topics which could yield more information about the true accent.

Procedure

Prior to the administration of the questionnaire and the interview, subjects were given enough assurance that their personal data would not be disclosed neither for love nor for money. In this vein, they were completely briefed about the goals of the research. In order to pave the way for gaining their confidence, they were not required to write their names in the questionnaire. The questionnaire included a section in which the respondents were asked to make value judgments on a scale of 1 to 7 (1= strongly agree, 7= strongly disagree). After coming up with the results of the questionnaire, an interview was conducted in an amicable atmosphere with each of the subjects in isolation. There was also an open-ended component of the interview in which the respondents were asked to express their experiences about their peers' reaction to their accents. When it appeared that a student did not understand a question, it was repeated and/or paraphrased until he or she indicated comprehension. Most students did not have difficulty with the questions, but several asked for clarification that they would have been unable to obtain so easily in a group-administered format. The interviews took 50–90 minutes to complete. Finally, a simple frequency count was carried out to find the instances of accented speech with regard to subjects' gender.

Results and Interpretations

In the light of the responses to the questionnaire and the structured interview, the following results were obtained.

With regard to the first research question concerning the relationship between the gender of the subjects and their susceptibility to preserve their L1 accent, a significant relationship was found. In other words, it was found that male subjects were more vulnerable to speak English with a strong local accent while their female counterparts demonstrated less proneness toward speaking English with a local accent.

With reference to the second research question which concerned the relationship between accented speech and learners' level of proficiency, no significant relationship was found for the female subjects. In other words, girls were more preoccupied with not allowing their local accents to be materialized whenever speaking in English, irrespective of their proficiency level. On the other hand, male subjects

showed more traces of their local accent while speaking in English regardless of their proficiency level in English.

Also, a majority of the learners belonging to both sexes answered to the open-ended section of the interview about their peers or the language learners of Isfahan City Institutes attitudes towards their accents with these remarks;

- 'They don't pay attention to you if your English isn't good.'
- 'They don't listen as carefully as to those who have an accent.'
- 'They make rude comments; they tell us that we should take pronunciation classes.'
- 'When we are speaking English with an accent and we are making mistakes, they're thinking about what we are low. They are very surprised. "How come you don't speak English? What is wrong with you?"'

Conclusion

As a general conclusion, the findings of this study support this widely-held belief among both the professional and the laymen that girls are more capable to approximate their accent to a native-like status. It was also found that proficiency level exerts a less amount of influence on the females L1 accent interference into English.

The findings of this research have direct implications for the pronunciation classroom. This means that teachers need the knowledge and skills to provide pronunciation instruction that will be effective. Although in recent years new materials have been developed that emphasize prosodic factors, and despite the fact that instructors are generally aware of the need for suprasegmental instruction (Breitkreutz, et al., 2001), many aspects of current pronunciation instruction derive from speech pathology, with a strong focus on segmentals. This model is especially inappropriate in a mixed language class where the range in need for segmental work is considerable (i.e., students will have different requirements, depending on their first languages). Prosodic factors, on the other hand, are likely to have greater importance for a diverse group of students. Furthermore, research suggests that instruction involving suprasegmentals is also more likely to transfer to spontaneously produced speech than instruction focused on segmentals (Derwing, Munro, & Wiebe, 1998; Elliott, 1997).

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