

THE INFLUENCING FACTOR OF FOREIGN LANGUAGE PRONUNCIATION: ACCENT

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ABSTRACT

There are several factors that might contribute to experiencing problems in speech production, such as age, personality, social environment and instruction. Individual variation is a feature of SLA and should thus be taken into account when talking about L2 phonology acquisition. This study will take special interest in how accent might affect speech production, because it seems to be very influential.

Keywords: Accent, omission or insertion of phones, perfect accent, a non-native accent, Transfer and accent, accent attitudes, Manchester way, the stereotype features of the English language, high quality, international appreciation, confidence, practical use, practical lifestyle.

INTRODUCTION, LITERATURE REVIEW AND DISCUSSION

There are several factors that might contribute to experiencing problems in speech production, such as age, personality, social environment and instruction. Individual variation is a feature of SLA and should thus be taken into account when talking about L2 phonology acquisition. This study will take special interest in how accent might affect speech production, because it seems to be very influential. Accent is a common term to describe the way in which a person pronounces a language, and because languages always have to be pronounced when speaking, everybody has an accent. However, the term accent sometimes seems to be used to describe accents that differ from the standard variety, and confused with intelligibility or comprehensibility [1, 65-66p.]. As researchers write, non-native speakers of English are often easily recognized because of their pronunciation, and in many cases their specific L1 backgrounds can be identified, even in casual conversations. At the segmental level, accented speech can be noticed, for example, by the omission or insertion of phones, the substitution of one phone for another, or the production of phonemes that differ from native-like phones. Furthermore, accent is something every language learner brings to the table with him or her, and, as an example of how L1 affects L2. It is necessary to think whether an accent, for example, is a result of a certain task, a speech style or the view of the interlocutor, or a feature of competence [2, 56-59p.]. Other variables than age that influence pronunciation ability include the amount of L2 use, length of residence in the L2 environment, target language input, instruction or training, attitude, the cognitive variables of field independence and right hemispheric specialization, and social identity. Accent is a part of SLA that raises a lot of discussion: there are standards for pronunciation, but very few second language learners seem to be able to achieve them perfectly. Lately, many researchers have questioned the need for SL learners to speak in a so-called perfect accent, since a foreign-accent-free pronunciation is not necessary in communicating in English [3, 165-166p.]. Now that English is widely used as a medium of communication between different groups of people, who do not speak English as their native language, some of these non-native speakers even feel that it is easier to understand a non-native accent of English than the native one. Accent is discussed here in relation to L2 speech production, because it seems to raise a lot of different opinions and, more importantly, it seems that especially Uzbek English learners are quite concerned about their English accents.

The results of the early studies in SL phonology indicate that the amount of L2 use may not greatly affect the L2 accent: whereas the amount of L2 conversation at work and/or school predicted pronunciation accuracy third best (after native language and how concerned the speaker was about her/his pronunciation), L2 use was no longer important in predicting what the L2 accent was like [4, 78-79p.]. In addition to these studies, research by Thompson, Flege and Fletcher also found that the amount of L2 use had no significance. An exception is a study by Moyer (2004), who studied L2 learners of German. Moyer's study focused on twenty-five immigrants, who lived in Berlin, were all advanced speakers of German, had different ages, and had stayed in Germany for different lengths of time [5, 112-113p.]. Moyer's results were that the amount of spoken interaction in German with native speakers correlated with how the speakers' accents were rated by native speakers of German. The amount of L1 use has also been studied in relation to L2 accent: many studies indicate that the amount of L1 use does not influence L2 pronunciation ability in late learners, but that with early learners it does. Hansen Edwards points out that there is, however, also a study that shows that L1 use influences both groups: Flege, Frieda and Nozawa (1997) studied Italian immigrants and found out that although both low and high users of Italian had foreign accents, the latter group had a more detectable Italian accent of English. Of course, these studies had to do with immigrants, whereas this study focuses on learners, who are in a different setting for language learning, which makes it somewhat different [6, 221-223p.]. However, the amount of L2 and L1 use should be considered in this context, too. Age affects pronunciation ability, as concluded and so it is connected to accent as well as other factors discussed in this study. Next transfer, and then accent attitudes will be discussed in more depth.

Transfer and accent: Transfer is also an influencing factor in one's accent, because many studies show that a foreign accent is due to the transfer of L1 sounds to the L2, and because, it has significant influence on SL acquisition, especially in phonology. This is called negative transfer, because it might affect intelligibility. Negative transfer refers to the type of transfer that causes the speaker to mispronounce words or have a foreign accent. One of the reasons for this is that the L1 may not contain similar sounds to the TL, and so the TL sounds might be replaced by L1 sounds [7, 142-143p.]. This may also be connected to markedness, as discussed earlier. However, because of the current position of English as a medium of ESL/EFL communities, it should be questioned whether the type of transfer that causes the learner to have a foreign accent in the TL but does not affect intelligibility should be called negative. It is possible to draw the conclusion, based on research that has studied late onset learners' L2 accent, that people who have started learning an L2 later on in their lives will be likely to have L1 features in their L2 pronunciation. These features or sounds that do not correspond to the L2 sounds may be somewhere between the L1 and the L2 sounds. Thus, transfer may be a greater problem for late onset learners.

Accent attitudes is defined as "a psychological tendency that is expressed by evaluating a particular entity with some degree of favor or disfavor". Attitudes are a hypothetical construct that was invented by researchers to account for a body of phenomena, which we cannot observe directly but infer them from individuals' self-reports and behavior [8, 98-99p.]. Accordingly, the processes underlying self-reports of attitudes are also important in analyzing the nature of attitudes. An Uzbek English teacher, an informant of this study, who was asked about his adult English learners' skills and views of speaking English, has said: Adults feel that if you cannot pronounce English "the Manchester way", then it is "wrong". This view is quite deep rooted in many of them. Based on this, it seems that at least some Uzbek adult learners would rather like to speak in a British-like accent of English and that the Uzbek accent of English might be seen as merely incorrect, or that this is what their teacher thinks they feel. Either way, this might

create pressure when speaking English [9, 132-134p.]. Researchers pose a valid question: why do people love certain accents and hate others? It is usually argued that it is either because of their inherent sound qualities ('inherent value hypothesis'), or their social connotations ('imposed norm hypothesis'). Of these hypotheses the latter is the generally held view. So, what type of social connotations does the British English accent, for instance, or the Uzbek accent of English have? Uzbek people indeed seem to prefer certain accents of English over others. This was found in the study by researchers, where informants were asked to describe their feelings towards an Uzbek, who speaks fluent and native-like English, an Uzbek, who speaks fluent English with an Uzbek accent, and an Uzbek, who speaks stammering English. 63.8% reported that they admire a native-like speaker, 18.5% admire a fluent speaker with an Uzbek accent, and 13.8% admired the stammering speaker for trying. Most informants felt compassionate towards the stammering speaker or thought the attempt was comical. Based on this, it seems to be difficult to achieve other people's admiration by speaking English with an Uzbek accent, and so some people might want to avoid speaking English in order to avoid embarrassment. It is only understandable that these high goals or expectations, in other words attempts to achieve a native-like accent, might cause some people frustration. Standard language emphasizes correctness, which is then, reinforced by authority [10, 78-79p.]. For example, standard language is codified in dictionaries, grammar books, and spread through educational systems, and further reinforced by awarding prestige or stigma to language forms. Devaluing some forms makes people view them as non-standard or substandard, and therefore less prestigious. It does indeed seem that in Uzbekistan the standard forms of English are looked up to and appreciated quite highly. This "standard language ideology" seems to have spread through the media and education, and people seem to award stigma to standard varieties of English, for example by praising Uzbek learners who are able to speak English with a near-native accent. The legitimacy of social structures, such as language practices or political groupings, can be conceptualized into horizontal and vertical axes. Horizontally, a structure, e.g. a language variety, is reinforced by the local community at a non-governmental level, for example by awarding values and recognition. Then again, vertically, it is reinforced if the government recognizes it, for example if it fits their values. These two axes can be used in analyzing the reasons behind accent attitudes and the standard language ideology. In Uzbekistan, Standard English varieties are legitimized by both horizontal axes, such as individual people who prefer standard varieties, and vertical axes, such as the education system. An example on how accent attitudes influence people's daily lives was pointed out by Hernandez: according to him many immigrants come to the US and are fluent in English, but even so seek speech therapists and tutors in order to reduce their accents. The same has happened in Britain. As Hernandez's article shows, ridicule about accents often hurts people's self-esteem, and makes people want to get rid of them, in order to fit in, or to escape discrimination. Accent is another interesting example of how accent attitudes affect people: in the study an interview, in which a patient is at a doctor's appointment and describes his symptoms, was evaluated by the participants of the study. The patient spoke either RP i.e. received pronunciation ("the accent that has been used as the standard in phoneticians' description of the pronunciation of British English for centuries" (Roach, 2013)) or a south-west England rural accent, the symptoms implied a heart disorder, and the patient experienced anxiety, tension and relationship problems, and used a lot of alcohol. According to Garrett, the RP speaker's symptoms were diagnosed as more likely to be psychosomatic than the rural English speaker's. The RP speaker was also evaluated as having more sophisticated vocabulary and using better grammar, although the audio-recorded texts were identical for both guises [11, 56-58p.]. Thus, it seems that accent related attitudes may affect in perceiving someone's use of vocabulary or grammar, for instance, in a better light if the speaker has a certain accent. So, where do these attitudes come from? According to Tesser as cited by Garrett, attitudes might

be partly due to hereditary factors; both genetic inheritance and social environment influence attitudes, but also experience, social environment, and other people's behavior creates attitudes. Attitudes come from many sources: parents, teachers, media etc. For example, instruction and teachers' attitudes may influence one's accent or create accent related pressure. Removing "bad habits", in other words incorrect pronunciation, has been a quite widespread goal in SL education. However, if taken to extreme, it might cause harm to the learners, creating pressure and anxiety in speaking the L2, since changing accents is a very difficult process. As mentioned before, one source of attitudes towards the English language or the Uzbek accent of English might be the status of English in Uzbekistan: it is awarded quite a lot of recognition as an international tool of communication. According to Haarmann, the stereotype features of the English language are high quality, international appreciation, confidence, practical use, and practical lifestyle. The two first of these at least seem to fit the general view of English in Uzbekistan. The conceptions about Uzbek English learners, on the other hand, have been contrary to these as commonly they have been said to have trouble with English or weak communicative abilities, although English is appreciated in Uzbekistan as a global tool of communication. High quality and international appreciation seem like words that can cause pressure in English learning – do SL learners also have to achieve these in their English skills? Then again, for Uzbek learners the doubts some people might have of their English skills may also be a source of pressure. A language learner's attitude towards their own accent can be a cause for speech difficulties and anxiety. Uzbek people, especially, seem to have quite a negative image of the Uzbek accent of English. This can also cause confusion, if teachers greatly favor native-like accents, but themselves speak with a non-native accent. In Uzbekistan, the English pedagogy has traditionally heavily favored native (AmE/BrE) models, which can create insecurities among the Uzbek English teachers if they consider their accent inferior to native English accents. Also, the learners seem to appreciate the native varieties more than non-native ones. In fact, challenges the native speaker model, because according to him it can be disadvantageous for learner identity to reach for an identity other than the learner's own. Instead he would promote teaching that enhances the European identity and function in global use. Although there are studies that have concluded that strongly foreign-accented speech tends to irritate native speakers, there have also been signs of non-native speakers being less tolerant to strongly accented speech than native speakers. One reason for this might be the fact that a heavy accent might affect intelligibility. However, this might also be a result of the favoritism toward the native speaker model, which might be another source of pressure for English learning.

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