

Student attitudes toward their instructor accents in L2 Spanish and French Courses

Carmen Miranda-Barrios
University of British Columbia

The controversy about language instructors' accents (i.e., the manner of pronunciation) has mainly targeted the perceptions and attitudes of learners of English as a foreign and second language (ESL/EFL). Some studies have consistently shown a tendency for English language learners to favour an instructor with a native-speaking accent or the ability to speak like a native (Butler, 2007; Derwing, 2003). However, less is known about this topic in Romance language learning.

The current study analyzed the attitudes and preferences that learners of two Romance languages have towards their instructor's pronunciation of the target language. The study also examined student attitudes toward their instructors' accents on their own pronunciation and comprehension of the second language (L2). The participants were 20 third-year learners of Spanish as a foreign language, and 20 third-year learners of French as a second language at a multicultural post-secondary institution in Canada. The data were collected through an attitudinal questionnaire (quantitative data) and a semi-structured interview (qualitative data).

It was predicted that students would prefer an instructor with a native accent over an instructor with a non-native accent because of a facilitative effect on their pronunciation and comprehension of the L2. Results showed that both clusters of language learners (Spanish and French) favoured an instructor with a native accent. Further, the results also showed the belief that an instructor's native accent has a positive effect on their L2 pronunciation, but not on their L2 comprehension. Qualitative results pointed to the strengths and limitations students believe each type of instructor accent offers to the language classroom. Furthermore, suggestions for the L2 classroom were proposed.

1 Introduction

Instructors' pronunciation has been a controversial topic in second language (L2) learning. The evidence from empirical research on the area of language attitudes indicates that learners of English as a second/foreign language (ESL/EFL) prefer a native pronunciation over an accented one; however, less is known about this topic in other second languages, such as Spanish and French. The study was

motivated by the author's speculation that learners of Romance languages, such as French and Spanish, also share the same tendency or attitude towards preferring an instructor with a native accent that English learners have shown. Furthermore, it was predicted that the participants would prefer native-speaking instructors because of positive impact on their L2 pronunciation and L2 comprehension. The second motivation of this study was based on the need for empirical research on the issue of learners' attitudes toward their instructors' pronunciation in languages other than English (e.g. Spanish and French).

2 Background

2.1 Literature review

“Accent”, a familiar term among academics and the public in general, is derived from the Latin *accentus*, meaning chant or song. “Accent” refers to the manner of pronunciation of a language (The New York Oxford American Dictionary, 2001). In everyday life, speakers around the world are constantly exposed to different accents. When learning a second or foreign language, students can be exposed to a range of native and non-native accents from their instructors of the target language. Lippi-Green (1996, p.165) stated that accents could also be the carryover of native language phonology and intonation into a target language, resulting in what she calls a “diagnostic of identification of geographic and social outsiders.” Furthermore, some scholars argue that there is abundant evidence that individuals generally are not able to achieve a native-like accent in an L2 unless they are exposed to it at an early age (Gass, 2001, p. 336). However, this hypothesis is also facing a lot of controversy (Bialystok 1988; Birdsong, 1992).

However, does accent matter much in instructed language learning? The topic of accent has been a controversial issue among scholars (Medgyes, 1992; Paikeday, 1985; Stern, 1983); however, at the end of the past century, there has been a shift in linguistics training toward accepting and respecting instructors with non-native accents (Callahan, 2006, Roberts & Garden, 1997). Furthermore, Cook (2000) coined the term “L2 user” instead of “non-native speaker,” arguing that people who speak a second language are users of that language, moving beyond the term non-native speaker.

This preliminary study focused on learners' attitudes or perceptions toward instructors' accents. Baker (1992) stated that attitude is a hypothetical construct used to explain the direction and persistence of human behaviour. In the linguistic context, language attitude studies have been used to examine preferences, reasons for learning a language, or uses of languages being studied— and accent preferences have not been the exception. Studies targeting the perceptions and attitudes of English language learners towards their teachers' pronunciation have shown that learners favour a native-speaking accent and

disfavour a non-native one (Butler, 2007; Chiva, Matsuura, & Yamamoto, 1995; Derwing, 2003; Scales, Wennerstromm, Richard, & Wu, 2006). However, studies on this same topic in Romance languages appear to be few. This is the case for Spanish and French, where little is known about student preferences in terms of instructor accents. In the US, due to the increasing Hispanic population, there are some studies comparing student attitudes toward English and Spanish instructors' accents. The findings showed that students of both languages generally have a preference for a native speaking instructor (Callahan, 2006). In terms of the French language, little is known of L2 French pronunciation and student attitudes toward their instructors' accents. In Canada, the majority of studies are focused on language policy-making, culture and/or the effectiveness of French immersion programs (Bournot-Trites, 2005; Krawczyk, 1984).

This study aimed at exploring the perceptions and beliefs of learners of Foreign Language (FL) Spanish and L2 French learners at a multicultural university in Canada, and at contributing, with empirical evidence, to an understanding of student attitudes toward their instructors' accents in these two Romance languages.

2.2 Research questions

The present study was designed to address the following three questions:

- (1) What kind of accent do learners of Spanish and French prefer?
- (2) To what extent do learners of Spanish and French consider their instructor's accent important for improving their L2 pronunciation?
- (3) Is there a motivation among learners of Spanish and French to choose between a native and a non-native speaking instructor in order to improve their L2 comprehension?

2.3 Predictions

Based on previous findings regarding learners' perceptions on ESL/EFL instructor accents, this study predicted that L2 learners of Spanish and French would:

- (1) have a tendency to favour instructors with a native accent over an instructor with a non-native one.
- (2) believe that a native speaking instructor's accent has a positive effect on their L2 pronunciation.

- (3) consider a native speaking instructor as having the potential to improve their L2 comprehension.

3 Methodology

3.1 Participants

The participants were 40 full time students in third-year FL Spanish and L2 French language courses at a post-secondary institution in Canada. Seventy percent (N = 28) of the group were females and 30% were male (N = 12). The age range was between 19 and 45 years (mean 21.72 SD 4.78). Seventy percent (N = 28) were L2 English speakers, while 30% (N = 12) had English as a first language. The rationale behind selecting students at this level was that third-year students have already been exposed to a variety of French and Spanish instructors. Therefore, it was very likely that the participants had already been taught by both native-speaking instructors and non-native speaking ones. Participants were equally divided in two cohorts: FL Spanish (N = 20) and SL French (N = 20). All participants were asked to fill out a background questionnaire.

3.2 Instrument

A two-part instrument was designed for this study: an attitudinal questionnaire (hereafter the questionnaire); and a semi-structured interview (hereafter the interview). The questionnaire consisted of 18 mirror statements where participants were asked to choose their preferred accent variety from a 5-point *Likert* scale, with 1 being “Strongly Agree” and 5 being “Strongly Disagree.” (For example: “Non-native speaking teachers understand my problems with pronunciation more easily”; “Problems related to my pronunciation are seldom understood by native-speaking teachers.”) The questionnaire was divided into three topics: (1) The learner’s preferences for an instructor’s native or non-native pronunciation, (2) the instructor’s accent and its effect on the improvement of the student’s L2 pronunciation, and (3) the effect of the instructor’s accent on student’s comprehension of the target language. All 18 statements were organized randomly.

The interview consisted of two open-ended questions to elicit qualitative data based on the participant’s experiences of having instructors with both accent varieties. The interview was designed with the following in mind: (a) whether the instructor’s accent was considered important for the participant and why; and (b) reasons for preferring one accent over the other. The instrument was written in English; therefore, both cohorts completed the same research tool. Translated versions into Spanish and French were avoided so as not to jeopardize the

ecological validity of the instrument. Participants completed the two-part instrument only once.

3.3 Procedure

All 40 students were recruited from six language classrooms. Students volunteered to participate in the study. On the testing day, participants completed an informed consent document and responded to the background questionnaire. They took approximately 30 minutes of their time to fill out the two-part instrument individually. Participants filled out the instrument once. The investigator was present.

4 Results and discussion

A series of three one sample *t*-tests were run simultaneously to test the three hypotheses about both cohorts of participants for the three themes surveyed. The alpha was set at .05.

4.1 Results for theme 1: Learner preferences for an instructor's native accented or non-native accented pronunciation

The twenty FL Spanish cohort preferred to have an instructor with a native-speaking accent (mean 1.38) rather than an instructor with accented Spanish (mean 0.98). The result of a one-sample *t*-test confirmed this tendency since the results showed that the mean difference between the two variables was statistically significant, $t(19) = 11.160$ $p < 0.005$.

Likewise, the SL French students also showed a preference for a native-speaking instructor (mean 1.27) rather than an instructor with a non-native accent (mean 0.58). The result of a one-sample *t*-test confirmed this tendency since the results showed that the mean difference between the two variables was statistically significant, $t\text{-test}(19) = 9.174$ $p < 0.005$. This result supported the prediction that participants would show a preference for an instructor with a native speaking accent over a non-native speaking one.

4.2 Results for theme 2: Instructor accent and its effect on the improvement of student L2 pronunciation

Similar to theme 1, the results for theme 2 showed a preference for an instructor to have a native-speaking accent. The FL Spanish cohort believed that a native accent (mean 0.7000) has a positive effect on their accuracy to pronounce the L2 Spanish sounds. The results of a one-sample *t*-test confirmed this tendency since the results showed a significant difference between the two variables, $t(19) =$

4.136, $p < 0.005$. The French cohort again showed a similar tendency ($n=20$, mean 0.47), preferring a native accent over a non-native one ($n=20$ mean 0.2), $t(19) = 4.273$, $p < 0.005$. Both cohorts' results supported the prediction that learners believe an instructor with a native accent has a positive effect on their L2 pronunciation.

4.3 Results for theme 3: The instructor's Spanish/French accent and its effect on the improvement of students' L2 comprehension.

The data did not uphold the prediction for theme 3. The FL Spanish cohort did not manifest a preference for an instructor with a native-speaking accent (mean 0.03) over an instructor with a non-native speaking accent (mean -0.02) for better comprehension of L2 Spanish aural input. The result of a one-sample t -test showed that the mean difference between the two variables were not statistically significant, $t(19) = .165$, $p > 0.4355$.

The SL French cohort also did not manifest a preference for an instructor with a native-speaking accent (mean 0.03) over a teacher with a non-native one (mean -0.05) to better comprehend L2 French aural input. The one sample t test result showed that the mean difference between the two variables were not statistically significant, $t(19) = .567$, $p > 0.5$. As mentioned, this result rejected the hypothesis that learners of FL Spanish and SL French would have a preference towards instructors with a native accent because they consider that a native accent has a positive effect in their L2 comprehension.

4.4 Qualitative Results

The results from the interview showed that both cohorts expressed popular beliefs regarding native-speaking instructor speech (e.g., beneficial, proper, authentic, natural). The Spanish group placed importance on the sociolinguistic aspect of the language; in other words, the cultural component that they think is inherent to a native-speaking instructor. However, the French cohort placed more importance on oral proficiency and the academic qualifications of the instructor. The majority of their answers showed a preference for having a native-speaking instructor in French in order to reach the oral proficiency or pronunciation they desired. Likewise, both groups mentioned that native speaking instructors tend to speak English less in the classroom when teaching the target language. Notice also that non-native speaking teachers were perceived to have stronger abilities in teaching the mechanics of grammar as well. Consider these examples of comments:

- Sp 5: Native speakers because they share more than the accent, they share a culture with the class.

- Fr 10: For me, it is important that instructors know how to teach the language, of course, if they have oral proficiency that is also beneficial.
- Sp 15: I prefer native speakers for the genuine and natural way in which they speak, and because they are less likely to revert back to English during the class to explain things.
- Fr 1: I believe non-native speaker instructors are very good in teaching grammar, and perhaps they can acquire a good pronunciation but that is rare.

However, in relation to the topic of L2 comprehension, neither cohort showed a tendency or preference. The majority of the participants answered that both native and non-native speakers could be hard to understand.

5 Conclusion

The findings for this preliminary study suggest that in fact accent is a topic of importance among learners of FL Spanish and SL French. However, it seems the tendencies were not alike. Results suggest that FL Spanish students favour native pronunciation for reasons different from those of L2 French learners. The former were interested in the cultural component of the language, while the latter were more interested in the academic qualifications and oral proficiency of their instructor. Nevertheless, both cohorts demonstrated proclivity towards learning the target languages without the use of the English language.

Although this was a first approach, the study represents a promising start towards understanding language learners' attitudes in languages other than English, such as Spanish and French. However, this study should be replicated in order to validate the two-part instrument and the tendencies found. A new study should increase the number of the mirror statements to strengthen the instrument and should be applied to students in first level Spanish and French language courses. A future study should also attempt to verify whether a native accent really has a positive effect on L2 production, as well as identify the elements of instructor pronunciation that may affect student L2 comprehension skills.

References

Baker, C. (1992). *Attitudes and Language*. Philadelphia: Multilingual Matters.

- Birdsong, D. (1992). Introduction: Whys and why nots of the Critical Period Hypothesis for second language acquisition. In D. Birdsong (Ed.), *Second language acquisition and the critical period hypothesis*. 1-22, Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Bialystok, E. (1988). Levels of bilingualism and levels of linguistic awareness. *Developmental Psychology*, 24, 560-567.
- Bournot-Trites, M. (2005). Standards for the language competence of French: Is there a Danger of Erosion? *Canadian Journal of Education/Revue canadienne de l'éducation*. 28(3), 487-507.
- Butler, Y. (2007). How are normative-English-speaking teachers perceived by young learners? *Tesol Quarterly*, 41(4), 731-755.
- Callahan, L. (2006). Student perceptions of native and non-native speaker language instructors: A comparison of ESL and Spanish. *Stigma*, 18, 19-49.
- Cook, V. (1999). Going beyond the native speaker in language teaching. *Tesol Quarterly*, 33, 185-210.
- Cook, V. (2002). *Portraits of the L2 user*. Toronto: Multilingual Matters. 1-28
- Derwing, T. (2001) ESL learners' perceptions of their pronunciation needs and strategies. *System*, 30, 155-166.
- Dörnyei, Z. (2003). *Questionnaires in Second Language Research: Construction, Administration, and Processing*. New Jersey: Erlbaum, Mahwah.
- Gass, S. & Selinker, L. (2001). *Second language acquisition: an introductory course*. New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Jewell, E., Abate, F. (Ed.). (2001). *New Oxford American Dictionary*. (1st. Ed.), Oxford University Press.
- Krawczyk, A. (1984). *Unit of Canadian Culture and its effects on student attitudes*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia.
- Lippi-Green, R. (1997). *English with an accent: Language, ideology, and discrimination in the United States*. London: Routledge.
- Medgyes, P. (1992). Native or non-native: who's worth more? *ELT Journal*, 46(4), 340-349.
- Paikeday, T.M. (1995). *The native speaker is dead!* Toronto, New York: Paikeday Publishing.
- Roberts, J. & Garden, T. (1997). [Cited in Callahan]. Native or non-native speaker teachers of foreign languages? Old and new perspectives on the debate. *Teanga: Journal of the Irish Association for Applied Linguistics*, 17, 1-28.
- Scales, J., Wennerstrom, A., Richard, D., & Wu, S. (2006). Language learners' perceptions of accent. *Tesol Quarterly*, 40(4), 715-725.