

Linguistic Diversity and Inclusion: Exploring International Students' Attitudes Towards Their Own Accents and Those of Native English Speakers

Yangqianhui Zeng^{1,a,*}

¹*University of Birmingham, Edgbaston, Birmingham, B15 2TT, UK*

a. yxz1508@alumni.bham.ac.uk

**corresponding author*

Abstract: International students studying in English-speaking countries represent a diverse linguistic background and may exhibit varying degrees of accent, which can influence their self-perception and their perception of others. Accordingly, the paper examines the attitudes of international students toward their own accents and those of native English speakers, with particular emphasis on their adaptation processes in academic and social contexts. In this paper, semi-structured interviews were conducted with undergraduate and postgraduate students from China, with varying levels of English proficiency and length of residence in the UK, which aims to elucidate the nuanced attitudes of international students towards accents and their adaptation strategies. The results show that while many students initially perceived British and American accents as prestigious and attempted to imitate them, as they progressed through the language environment they were more inclined to prioritize effective communication and intelligibility over achieving a perfect native accent. This shift is consistent with existing literature, which emphasizes the importance of prioritizing clarity and mutual understanding. Inclusive language policies that prioritize linguistic diversity and communicative effectiveness, thereby fostering learning environments that are conducive to language acquisition.

Keywords: English Learning, English Accent, Language Attitude, International Students.

1. Introduction

In recent years, the study of accent has become increasingly important in the field of second language acquisition, where it plays an important role in an individual's self-perception and others' perceptions of him or her as a marker of cultural and personal identity [1]. In the current global landscape of higher education, international students bring diverse linguistic backgrounds to English-speaking countries. However, there is a lack of research on their attitudes and experiences with their own accents and those of native English speakers, which is an important aspect of their academic and social integration. The ability to navigate complex accents can have a significant impact on an individual's self-esteem, social interactions, and academic performance. Moreover, the reception they receive from native English speakers can facilitate or impede their integration process. The paper aims to reveal the subtle attitudes of international students towards their own accents and those of native English speakers through the use of semi-structured interviews, and explore the themes of

identity, communicative challenges, and adaptation strategies to provide a comprehensive understanding of the role of accent in the lives of international students. In addition, it contributes to the broader discussion of linguistic diversity and inclusion in academic institutions, emphasizing the importance of creating a supportive environment where different accents are valued and respected.

2. Literature Review

Language attitudes, especially attitudes towards accents, play a crucial role in shaping the identity and intercultural experiences of international students. The study emphasizes the complexity of these attitudes and their impact on intercultural communication and self-perception. Baker stresses the changing role of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) and its impact on cultural identity [2]. He argues that the traditional concept of English as a native language is becoming less significant in a world that is increasingly globalized, where English serves as a common language for many different people. This shift has prompted a reevaluation of attitudes towards language, promoting a more inclusive perspective that values all English accents equally. For international students, adopting this viewpoint can help alleviate the feeling of inadequacy associated with non-native accents, encourage a more positive self-image, and facilitate more effective cross-cultural communication. Garrett provides a comprehensive overview of language attitudes, which emphasizes their social and psychological aspects [3]. He points out that attitudes towards accents are often shaped by broader social norms and stereotypes, which can affect an individual's confidence and willingness to use their native accent. In their discussion of attitude structure, Fabrigar et al. highlight the tripartite nature of attitudes, comprising cognition, affect, and behavior [4]. This framework facilitates an understanding of the manner in which international students form attitudes towards themselves and their native English accents. The cognitive component includes beliefs about the prestige and utility of different accents, the affective component includes feelings of pride or shame, and the behavioral component is reflected in language use and adjustment strategies. It is of the utmost importance for educational institutions to address these three issues to develop supportive language policies and practices. Fang provides an in-depth study of attitudes towards accents in English on a global scale, with a particular focus on the Chinese context [5]. Through a critical phenomenological case study, the author suggests that Chinese students often internalize negative attitudes toward their accents due to social and educational pressures. However, exposure to the global English framework can help shift these attitudes by encouraging students to see their accents as valid variations of English rather than deficiencies. In conclusion, the existing literature has emphasized the importance of fostering positive attitudes towards language among international students. However, there has been a notable absence of attention paid to the specific attitudes international students have towards their own accents. Therefore, the paper aims to fill this gap and encourage students to adopt a more inclusive view of English accents.

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

The paper aims to explore the attitudes of international students towards their own accents and those of native English speakers. This was achieved by selecting a diverse group of participants with varying backgrounds, stages of study, disciplines, language proficiency levels, and length of stay in the UK. Participants included both postgraduate and undergraduate students from China who were studying Education, Biology, and Mathematics, and had been in the UK for different periods ranging from 1 to 3 years, as shown in Table 1. This diverse sample contributed to a comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing language attitudes. The insights gained from this study are

valuable for shaping educational policy and language teaching practices that aim to better support international students in English-speaking environments.

Table 1: Participant Information

Participant	Context	Study Stage	Academic Discipline	Language	Length of stay in the UK
1	Chinese	Postgraduate	Education	English, Mandarin	1 year
2	Chinese	Postgraduate	Biology	English, Mandarin, Cantonese	1 year
3	Chinese	Undergraduate	Mathematics	English, Mandarin	3 years

3.2. Research Design

This paper explores two questions, what are the attitudes of international students towards their English accent and their native English accent and how do the attitudes of international students towards their own and native English accents affect their academic and social interactions? In terms of the selection of research methodology, semi-structured interviews have been widely utilized to explore complex language attitudes, largely due to their distinctive advantages Bryman points out that semi-structured interviews allow researchers to use a set of predetermined questions to ensure that important aspects of the research topic are addressed [6]. Moreover, semi-structured interviews allow respondents to express their views and experiences freely. This was especially important when examining the attitudes of international students toward themselves and their native English accents, as each student's experiences and perceptions can differ significantly. Besides, it can help establish strong rapport and enhance the involvement and trust of the respondents. Dörnyei argues that international students may feel uncomfortable discussing sensitive topics such as accent and identity [7]. He suggests that creating a flexible and informal interview setting can help these students share their true feelings more naturally. Such interactions not only help to gather more authentic data, but also make interviewees feel respected and understood, thus providing more valuable information. The semi-structured interview method not only collects data systematically, but also captures the complex emotions and unique experiences of international students' attitudes toward accents. As a result, it can provide more detailed and richer insights into research [8]. Specifically, the interview questions were designed as shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Interview Questions

Question No.	Content
1	How do you feel about your own accent? Does it affect your life?
2	How do you feel about native English accents? Do you think it is at a higher level than other accents?
3	Do you think American English or British English is better? Which one is more suitable for classroom use?

3.3. Data Collection Methods (Interviews)

Adams suggests that semi-structured interviews provide the flexibility to customize questions based on participants' answers, enabling in-depth exploration of themes while maintaining a consistent and comparable structure [9]. This approach enables the collection of rich, detailed data and helps uncover nuances that might be overlooked by more rigid interviewing methods. The semi-interview has lasted for around 20-30 minutes. The interviews were conducted in Mandarin to ensure that the data collected would be more authentic and natural, as Mandarin is the participants' first language. The interview questions used for this study were based on previous research regarding accents, which is relevant to this study. To ensure the quality of the interviews, an interview guide was realized as much as possible and quality control was done during the interview process to ensure the accuracy and thoroughness of the questions.

4. Results

4.1. Students' Attitudes Towards Their English Accents

In the study, some participants expressed negative attitudes toward their English accents, while others had a more positive view. These attitudes were influenced by factors such as educational background, exposure to different languages and cultures, familiarity with other languages, and individual ideologies and preferences. One participant voiced dissatisfaction with his accent, feeling it lacked the necessary naturalness. This sentiment is shared by many international students, who may experience feelings of inadequacy or lack of confidence if their accent is perceived as falling short of native-like proficiency. The pursuit of a "natural" accent often involves significant pressure to meet native speaker standards, which can adversely affect self-esteem and impede effective communication. Thomson and Derwing posit that this sentiment is pervasive among language learners, as the emphasis on acquiring a native accent often eclipses the importance of effective communication, which is a more crucial objective [10]. The authors stress that pronunciation instruction should prioritize intelligibility and effective communication over accent reduction. They argue that an emphasis on sounding "natural" can be counterproductive, undermining learners' confidence and willingness to engage in conversation. Another participant posed an intriguing question and acknowledged the presence of a combination of Chinese and American accents, which one perceived as somewhat unconventional but ultimately tolerable. The participant underscored the notion that each individual possesses a distinctive accent, which signifies a gradual shift towards the acceptance of diversity. This perspective demonstrates an awareness and respect for linguistic differences, recognizing that accents are a natural aspect of an individual's identity and cultural heritage. This indicates a shift in perspective, whereby individuals are no longer convinced that there is a single, definitive manner of speaking English.

After completing their study abroad experiences, participants demonstrated a marked shift in attitudes. One participant, for instance, initially worried about his accent during the first year of learning but later reported increased satisfaction with his accent, noting that it no longer significantly impacted his daily communication or learning. This indicates that the accent is no longer viewed as a major obstacle. This shift reflects how, over time, students become more integrated into their new environment and develop greater confidence in their communication abilities. Initial anxieties fade, and students increasingly adopt a pragmatic view that accent does not determine language proficiency. This change aligns with the findings of Saito and Hanzawa, who, in their longitudinal studies, found that increased exposure to the target language and culture greatly influences second language pronunciation learning [11]. Their research shows that as learners encounter more target language input and engage more frequently in the target language environment, their self-perception and

confidence significantly improve. This increased exposure enables learners to focus more on effective communication rather than merely striving for native-like pronunciation, thereby fostering a more positive attitude towards their language identity.

4.2. Students' Attitudes Towards Native English Accents

One perspective posits that British and American accents are regarded as having higher status. This viewpoint is informed by historical and cultural factors, including the UK's role as the origin of the English language and the widespread influence of Anglo-American culture. Learners often perceive these accents as "standard" or "desirable," believing that mastering them could confer social and cultural advantages. Another perspective underscores the practical motivations driving Chinese students to acquire a native accent, including achieving more authentic pronunciation, enhancing communication effectiveness, and gaining a competitive advantage in the global marketplace. The widespread use of English as a lingua franca has amplified this aspiration, with students believing that a native accent may improve their clarity and professional standing. And a more sophisticated perspective emphasizes the significance of effective communication over accent perfection. Though learners may initially aim to acquire a native accent, immersion in an English-speaking environment often leads them to realize that conveying meaning is a more crucial goal. This view aligns with modern linguistic principles, which focus on clarity and intelligibility rather than accent consistency. Levis argues that clear and effective communication is more important than achieving a native accent [12], supporting the notion that effective communication outweighs accent perfection. He further asserts that the primary goal of language learning should be to enhance intelligibility rather than to attain native-like pronunciation. These perspectives reflect a shift in attitudes towards native English accents. While these native accents were once highly regarded for their historical and cultural value, there is now a stronger focus on the importance of effective communication. Thus, educators and learners are increasingly encouraged to prioritize clarity and meaningful interaction over the pursuit of a native accent, promoting a more pragmatic and realistic approach to language learning.

4.3. Students' Attitudes Towards English Accents on English Language Teaching

In English language teaching, participants indicated that native English accents, especially British and American English, should be the main focus of instruction. This preference is underpinned by the practical benefits of these accents, which are broadly recognized and utilized on a global scale [13]. Proficiency in British and American English accents is widely acknowledged as advantageous due to their global acceptance. From the students' perspective, the emphasis on British accents in education is motivated by both practical and cultural factors. One perspective supports the focus on British English, citing its prominence in standardized tests like the IELTS. Advocates argue that familiarity with this accent would better prepare students for these exams and potentially enhance their academic and career opportunities. Another perspective advocates for an integrated approach, recommending that schools introduce both British and American accents at different educational stages: American English from elementary through middle school, and British English in high school and college. This method aims to ensure that students achieve proficiency in their primary native accent while reducing culture shock when studying or working abroad. Furthermore, it seeks to provide a comprehensive linguistic foundation to enhance adaptability and cultural competence. These insights highlight the importance of a strategic approach to accent education, balancing test preparation with global engagement. Schools are encouraged to integrate these recommendations into their curricula to optimize student outcomes. This approach is supported by the research of Bonsuuk and Fang, who found that proficiency in native English variants is perceived as beneficial for English learning and for boosting confidence in English communication [14].

5. Conclusion

The paper highlights significant changes in international students' attitudes towards their own and native English accents during their study abroad experience. Initially, students may perceive British and American accents as superior due to their historical and cultural prestige, leading them to strive for authentic pronunciation to enhance communication effectiveness and global competitiveness. However, as they become more immersed in English-speaking environments, their focus shifts from perfecting their accent to prioritizing effective communication. Immersion in the English environment helps students realize that the core function of language is to convey clear and effective information, rather than merely achieving native-like pronunciation. This shift not only alleviates their excessive anxiety about their accent but also boosts their confidence and ability in actual communication. The results indicate that clarity and comprehensibility in communication gradually become their primary language learning goals, underscoring the crucial role of educational institutions in supporting international students' language learning and adaptation process. Educators should reassess and adjust their teaching strategies to meet students' practical needs. Specifically, the focus should shift from perfecting accents to enhancing communication effectiveness and confidence. Additionally, promoting language diversity and respecting various accents can help students overcome accent-related insecurities and foster a positive self-perception of their language abilities.

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