STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF UNIVERSITY INSTRUCTOR ACCENT IN A LINGUISTICALLY DIVERSE AREA

Shannon M. McCrocklin, Southern Illinois University, Carbondale
Kyle P. Blanquera, University of Texas, Rio Grande Valley
Deyna Loera, University of Texas, El Paso

As American universities promote globalization, they welcome Non-Native English Speakers (NNESs) as students and faculty. Yet, 40% of students are more likely to drop a class if taught by NNESs, and students have complained about NNES Teaching Assistants due to their accents. Importantly, exposure to non-native accents leads to greater tolerance of NNESs. This study seeks to understand how exposure to one non-native accent, in this case Spanish-accented English, impacts perception of unfamiliar accents. Preliminary findings show the majority (96%) of participants (n=107) had high levels of contact with native Spanish speakers. Participants were randomly presented one of three surveys using a verbal guise technique that featured three varieties of English (native, Spanish-accented, and Chinese-accented) as well as images of women representing three phenotypes. Students used Likert scales to rate the recorded instructor's personality and language ability. Across all ratings, the native English speaker recordings were rated most favorably. The phenotype presented played a relatively minor role. No noticeable difference was found between students' reactions to Chinese- or Spanish-accented speech. Finally, students showed a preference for taking a course with the Hispanic phenotype when paired with a native English accent.

INTRODUCTION

As American universities promote globalization, they welcome many staff and faculty who are Non-Native English Speakers (NNESs) (Jenkins, 2015). For many students, classes at universities are their first major exposure to people from other countries and to non-native speech. However, students do not always perceive this diversity as a positive aspect. Students have raised concerns regarding the qualifications of NNES Teaching Assistants due to their accents (Lippi-Green, 2012), and Rubin and Smith (1990) found that 40% of students are more likely to drop a class if taught by a NNES.

But Rubin (2012) pointed out that instead of focusing entirely on the NNESs, researchers should also examine the listeners; "any assessment of a speaker's speech performance could very well reflect nearly as much about the listener as about the speaker" (p. 11). In their study on perceptions of NNES Teaching Assistants, Rubin and Smith (1990) found that speaker proficiency was less determinant of listener comprehension than lecture topic or lecturer ethnicity. Further, when student listeners perceived high levels of accentedness, they judged those teachers to have poor teaching quality. Findings suggested that more work is needed to understand listener's judgments and exploration of ways to reducing linguistic stereotyping.

One particular experience that impacts the listener's perception of non-native accent is prior exposure to non-native accents. In a study on reverse linguistic stereotyping, Kang and Rubin

(2009) recruited 158 participants from the campus and local community to acquire a diversity of perspectives. Utilizing an Asian and Euro-American guise with a recorded academic lecture on galaxies, Kang and Rubin asked participants to fill in missing words from the lecture in a cloze test as a measure of comprehensibility. Participants also self-reported their own exposure to NNESs in a typical week and rated the teaching quality and accentedness of the recorded speakers. Kang and Rubin found that 18-23% of the variance in comprehensibility was tied to the perceived ethnicity of the speaker, but there were positive correlations between prior exposure to NNES accents (as well as the study of linguistics and languages) and greater tolerance of NNESs; students with prior exposure had more positive perceptions of the speakers and greater comprehension of the speech.

Therefore, while it may be important for universities to continue providing NNES instructor language and teaching training, it is also important to focus on the listeners. Undergraduates may benefit from training programs that promote listening skills and work to shift attitudes towards NNESs (Rubin & Smith, 1990). However, more information about the impacts of exposure to NNESs will be helpful in designing effective interventions or trainings for undergraduates. While exposure to non-native accents has been shown to reduce stereotyping and linguistic bias, it is not clear if exposure to speakers of a single language background will equally impact perceptions of all language backgrounds or if such exposure would have an outsized influence on only the perceptions of the specific language students have been exposed to.

Our research seeks to better understand language exposure by examining the following question: When studied among a population with increased exposure to one particular non-native accent, namely Spanish along the U.S. Mexico border, do participants display equally positive attitudes towards a familiar and unfamiliar non-native accent?

THE PRESENT STUDY

The study was conducted in the Rio Grande Valley (RGV) of South Texas. According to 2010 US Census Data, the majority of the population in the RGV is Hispanic (around 93%), around 75% of households report using Spanish as the first language, and about 25% of residents are foreign born (predominantly coming from Mexico). Further, research has shown that the RGV does not fit the more typical pattern of three-generation heritage language loss/shift to English; instead, bilingualism is commonly maintained into the fourth and fifth generations (Anderson-Mejías, 2005). Spanish is common in the RGV, and students are likely to be familiar with a Spanish accent in English speech. On the other hand, the Asian population of the RGV is less than 1%, and that number would notably include multiple national and linguistic backgrounds such as Chinese, Korean and Japanese (2011 US Census).

Survey

Data collection was managed through online surveys created in Qualtrics. To prepare the surveys, videos were created that matched an image of a woman with an audio clip of a female voice presenting course policies.

Videos

Images were collected of fourteen women that represented three different phenotypes: White/Caucasian, Hispanic, and Asian. Following procedures suggested by Kang and Rubin (2009), who discussed the impact of appearance on ratings, efforts were made to control for the

appearance of the women in the images. All of the women featured were in their late 20s to early 30s, wearing professional clothing and had dark hair (ranging from brown to black). The background of the images was a solid light grey color. The images were piloted for ratings of general attractiveness. Using Qualtrics to create a pilot survey, researchers included all images in a survey in which participants (n=56) from upper-level university courses and the community provided basic demographic data and rated images on a single feature, attractiveness, on a scale. Researchers used scores from the piloting to choose four images to include in the study (2 White/Euro-American, 1 Hispanic, and 1 Asian) that received the closest scores (were rated to have similar levels of attractiveness).

Recorded presentations of four sections of course policies were collected from five women that represented three different accents in English: native English (regionally standard), native Spanish (Mexican), and native Chinese (Mandarin). The non-native speech samples were piloted for similarities in level of accentedness primarily to match one of three Spanish speakers to the level of accentedness of the Chinese speaker. Similar to the piloting conducted for images, small samples of the audio recordings were included in a Qualtrics survey with a single scaled rating for accentedness. Only one Spanish speaker, a bilingual of Spanish and Macuiltianguis Zapotec, came close to the level of accentedness of the Chinese speaker. Although Spanish was reported to be her dominant language, her recordings were also sent to experts in the field of second language pronunciation to check whether her accent would represent a recognizable Spanish accent in English. Five of the six experts identified Spanish as a likely native language, allowing the recordings to be approved for use in the study.

The images and audio were then matched and used to create videos that showed the still image for the entirety of the audio recording. The White phenotype was matched in separate recordings to all three accents, while the Hispanic phenotype was only matched with the native-speaker and Spanish-accented speech and the Asian phenotype was only matched with the native speaker and Chinese-accented speech. This led to seven different video recordings.

Survey Questions

Three different surveys with four video matches on each, were created to prevent students from seeing reuse of images and recordings, which would alert students to variables being investigated This design also allowed for overlap across surveys and additional data points. The survey started with two questions regarding informed consent. Next, the four videos were presented. For each recording, five Likert scale items for rating intelligence, pleasantness, clarity/ease of understanding, fluency, and accentedness were included with a six-point range from strongly disagree to strongly agree. For each recording there was also one additional Likert scale item asking, "Do you think you would like to take a class with this instructor?" with a five-point range from definitely yes to definitely not. At the end of the survey, 11 questions were included to collect demographic information about the participants, including experience with non-native English speaking friends/family and instructors.

Procedure

Participants were recruited from freshman-level courses, including introductory composition courses and a course in university learning framework, at a large university in the RGV. To control the quality of sound for listening, students selected times to come into a monitored computer lab or office to take the survey. Participants were asked to halt consumption of any food or drink for the duration of the study and to dispose of any gum. Further, participants all

used the same type of headphones (Sony stereo, over-the-ear headphones- MDR ZX110) to complete the listening activity. Most participants needed 10-15 minutes to complete the activity.

Participants

The average age of participants (n=107) was 20.55 years. Participants were predominantly in their first year of college (58.9% reporting 1 or 2 semesters), while around 22% were in their second year, and around 20% were in the third (or later) year of college. Although students were recruited from introductory classes, the university has a large number of non-traditional students that may have transferred from other colleges or are completing degrees slowly due to family or work obligations. Of the participants, 66 were Female and 40 were Male, while one declined to report. The majority of participants had spent a substantial portion of their lives in the area; 64% reported having lived in the RGV for 16 years or more, while 26% reported 6-15 years, and 10% reported 1-5 years. The majority of participants reported being bilingual in English and Spanish. Figure 1 shows participants' self-perception of their language learning experiences.
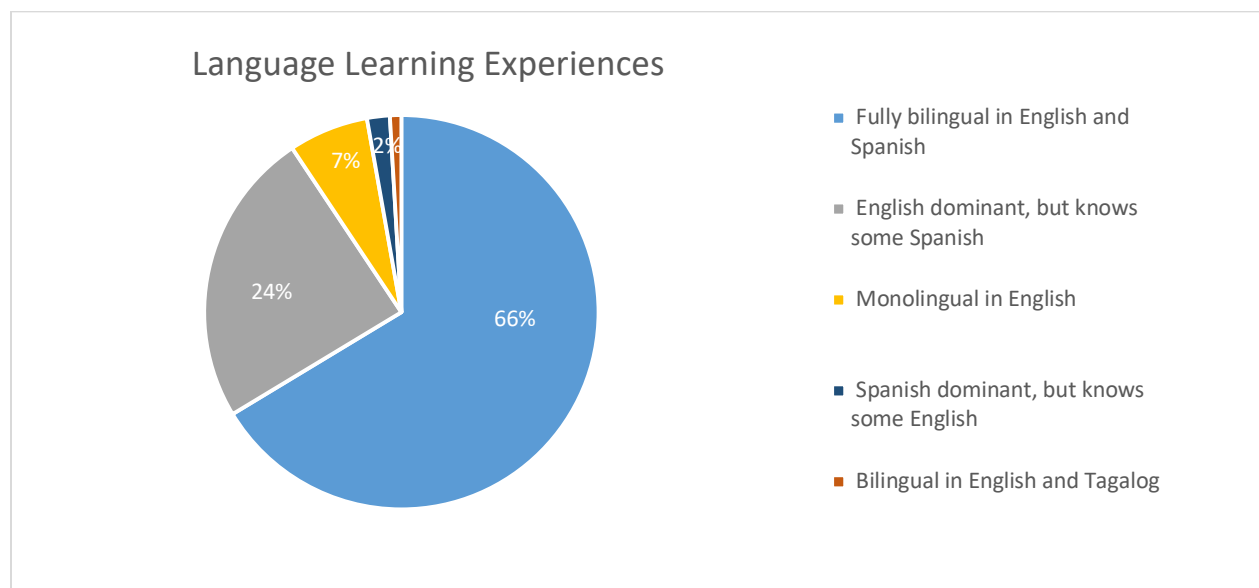
Figure 1. Participants' Primary Language Learning Experiences

About a quarter of participants (26.2%) also reported having studied another language, including Korean, French, American Sign Language, German, and Vietnamese.

Participants reported high levels of contact with Spanish first-language speakers. Almost all (96.3%) of the participants reported having close friends or relatives that spoke Spanish as their first language, while only 24% reported having close friends or family that spoke a language other than English or Spanish as their native language. For these 24% of participants, languages reported included French, Korean, Filipino, Akan, Chinese, Swedish, German, Arabic, and Vietnamese. Participants were also asked about their experiences taking classes in English that were taught by a non-native speaker in either high school or college. Figure 2 shows the participants' reported encounters with instructors of particular first languages, including "yes,"

"no," and "I'm not sure" if they had had an instructor with the particular language background. Most participants (76%) had taken courses in English with a native speaker of Spanish and were more likely to have had the instructor in high school than in college. Somewhat surprisingly, 45% of participants also reported having taken classes with instructors who spoke a language other than English or Spanish as their first language. Participants were more likely to have encountered the instructor in college than in high school. The languages of instructors included Filipino, Swahili, Chinese, German, Arabic, Russian, French, Korean, and Hindi. Taking friends,
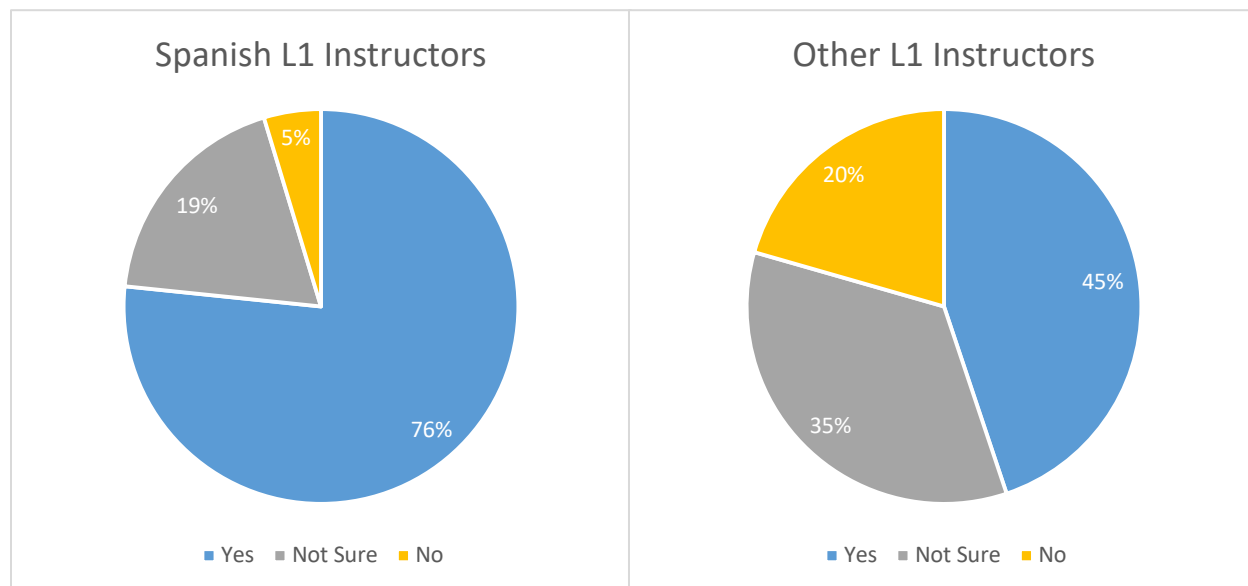

Figure 2. Participants' Exposure to Spanish and Other L1 Instructors

family, and instructors into account, only 6 participants (5.6%) had experience with native speakers of Chinese.

Analysis

The distribution of participants across the three surveys was reasonably even: 39 participants took survey 1, 33 participants took survey 2, and 35 participants took survey 3. Each recording/picture match existed on two surveys, which allowed for between 68-74 ratings for each video. An ANOVA was used to test for statistical significance in ratings between the various videos.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The average ratings for the Likert scales following each video were calculated. On the first five items with a range of 0-5, higher scores indicated stronger agreement of the presence of targeted personality and language features. Averages on these items ranged from 1.70 disagree to 4.66. For the final Likert item with a range of 0-4, higher scores indicated a higher degree of interest and willingness to take the instructor represented by the video for a class. Averages on this item ranged from 1.51-3.05. Table 1 shows the average score for each video for each Likert scale item. The videos are labeled first by the phenotype represented (H- Hispanic, A-Asian, W- White/Caucasian) and then by the accent of the speaker (E- Native English, S-Spanish-accented

English, C- Chinese-accented English) so that, for example, WE represents the match of the White/Caucasian phenotype with the native English speaker accent.

Table 1

Average Score for each Likert Scale Item for each Video (picture/audio match)

Video/Match	Intelligent	Pleasant	Clear	Fluent	Accent	Would Take
WE	3.94	3.72	4.66	4.63	1.81	2.84
WS	3.69	3.03	2.13	2.44	4.13	1.49
WC	3.63	3.06	2.06	2.48	4.13	1.64
HE	4.09	3.85	4.54	4.42	1.86	3.05
HS	3.76	3.32	2.15	2.74	4.13	1.66
AE	4.15	3.63	4.64	4.59	1.70	2.99
AC	3.89	3.57	1.92	2.28	4.22	1.51

The ANOVA identified statistically significant differences between group means on all Likert scale items (p values ranging from .000-.048). A Tukey test post-hoc for each of the language feature Likert items illuminated significant differences between each of the native English accent pairings and each of the non-native accents (p values ranging from .000-.034). This difference existed for every native speaker-non-native speaker pairing, regardless of the phenotype represented. This result is not surprising as there are actual linguistic differences between the speech samples.

Conversely, there were no significant differences within a single accent speech sample (for example between HE and WE) or between the Spanish- and Chinese-accented speech. This indicates that students did not exhibit clear reverse linguistic stereotyping (judging the speech based on the image/phenotype presented), and students did not exhibit differences in judgments between the Spanish-accented speech that most (96.3%) were familiar with and the Chinese-accented speech that was unfamiliar to most (94.4%) of the participants.

For ratings of personality features (intelligence & pleasantness), the interactions were much more limited. There was a statistically significant difference between ratings of pleasantness for HE when compared to WC (p=.013) and WS (p=.004) and for WE when compared with WS (p=.013). Particularly notable in this finding is the lack of preference for the White/Caucasian image when paired with a non-native accent. Although the ANOVA identified a statistically

significant interaction for the item "intelligent" (p=.048), the Tukey test did not isolate any statistically significant pairings.

Although participants exhibited somewhat low levels of linguistic stereotyping in the measures of intelligent and pleasant, the Tukey test post-hoc on the measure of whether students would want to take a class with the instructor showed significant differences (all p values= .000) between each of the native English accent pairings and each of the non-native accents (for example, there was a statistically significant difference between the HE and HS pairings). There was, however, no difference between the phenotypes presented. This shows that despite exposure to Spanish-accented speech, students discriminated against L1 Spanish-speaking instructors, along with L1 Chinese-speaking instructors, while preferring the native English-speaking instructors.

Trends

Some trends in the data were also interesting although they were not statistically significant. In Table 2, each column shows the Likert item with each match (video) reordered by the average score with highest scores on top. To more clearly show patterns, the scores for accent have been flipped so that the lowest levels of accent are at the top. Further, the cell of each match has been recolored based on the accent represented (Blue=Native English, Grey= Spanish Accent, Dark Red= Chinese Accent)

Table 2

Videos Ranked by Highest Score per Likert Scale Item- Color Coded by Accent

Intelligent	Pleasant	Clear	Fluent	Accent	Would Take
AE	HE	WE	WE	AE	HE
HE	WE	AE	AE	WE	AE
WE	AE	HE	HE	HE	WE
AC	AC	HS	HS	WS	HS
HS	HS	WS	WC	WC	WC
WS	WC	WC	WS	HS	AC
WC	WS	AC	AC	AC	WS

From Table 2, it is possible to see that the scores for the native English accent were the highest across all items. Table 2 also highlights the fact that AC was the highest rated non-native speech when rated for intelligence and pleasantness. Participants may be drawing from cultural stereotypes that Asians possess superior intelligence and are inoffensive (if not pleasant). AC, however, received the lowest average scores when rated for clear, fluent, and accented. Participants also may have been drawing from expectations that the Chinese accent is more difficult to understand. Further, for the Chinese accent, students noticed language issues more when paired with an Asian face. However, this pattern did not exist for the Spanish-accent, and HS only averaged a lower score than WS on a single rating, accentedness.

Another interesting trend is that the White phenotype was rated lowest for intelligence when sorted by accent. AE and HE had higher averages than WE, while AC and HS had higher averages than WC and WS. This may be related to reverse linguistic stereotyping. When seeing the Asian or Hispanic phenotype, the participant may have expected an accent and, when none was present, may have given credit to intelligence for overcoming the accent. This may have also led to lower scores for the White phenotype when paired with an accent, because the White/Caucasian person is likely expected to have a native English accent.

Finally, participants were most likely to want to take a course with the Hispanic phenotype that was paired with a native English accent. This may relate to students feeling that they are more likely to relate to a person from a similar background, as 93% of residents in the RGV are Hispanic. The Hispanic phenotype was also preferred on the measure of would take within the non-native accents, ranking higher than WC, AC, and WS. The Hispanic phenotype also ranked quite high on the item pleasant for both the native and non-native accents.

Limitations

While this study provided insights into the reactions of listeners with prior exposure to non-native accents, there are limitations that need to be addressed. First, previous research has shown that stereotyping (linguistic and reverse linguistic) can lead to changes in intelligibility, or the actual ability of the listener to catch the message (Kang & Rubin, 2009). This was outside the scope of the current study, but would be useful to revisit with familiar and unfamiliar accents. Further, while a goal of the study was to attract mostly freshmen before they were exposed to numerous additional non-native accents while in college, the study included students in their second and third years of college. Around 45% of the participants had exposure to at least two non-native accents when entering the study. However, Chinese-accented speech was still unfamiliar to 94% of the participants. Finally, steps were carefully taken to ensure quiet and equivalent listening experiences for all participants across all three surveys. Unfortunately, noise issues in the labs (which only had flimsy barriers to prevent spread of noise) may have negatively impacted participants' abilities to carefully listen. This impacted all surveys equally, however, and the problem was solved early in the collection of data by moving the survey task into a quiet, private office.

CONCLUSION

While it is impossible to make exact comparisons with Rubin and Smith (1990) and Kang and Rubin (2009), the participants in this study who had frequent encounters with non-native English speakers (primarily Spanish L1) did not exhibit much reverse linguistic stereotyping, in which

the same audio file was rated significantly differently based on the image attached. It is notable that on the measure of pleasantness there was a dis-preference for the White phenotype when paired with a non-native accent. However, there were also some trends in the data, not statistically significant, that suggest that participants may have still been pulling from some cultural or linguistic stereotypes; the impact may have been minimized due to exposure to non-native accents.

The primary statistically significant differences were between the language feature ratings (clear, fluent, and accented) in comparisons of the native speaker and the non-native speaker audio samples. This is reasonable given that there were actual linguistic differences in the speech samples. However, it is concerning that despite prior exposure to non-native speech, participants still showed linguistic stereotyping and discrimination when it came to their judgments of whether they were interested in or willing to take a class with the instructor.

Finally, for none of the Likert scale items were there statistically significant differences between the Spanish- or the Chinese-accented speech. It seems that, for this group of participants, exposure to one non-native accent may have similar positive impacts on unfamiliar non-native accent tolerance. This makes training for listeners easier to accomplish as trainers do not have to work to expose students to every accent they may be likely to hear in order to increase tolerance. However, the findings suggest that exposure alone may not be enough to make students more willing to take courses with NNES instructors.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Shannon M. McCrocklin is an Assistant Professor at Southern Illinois University Carbondale in the Department of Linguistics. She teaches courses in TESOL, focusing on teaching speaking/listening skills in ESL as well as computer-assisted language learning. Her research focuses on second language acquisition of phonology and pronunciation teaching methods, including computer-assisted pronunciation training.

> 1000 Faner Dr., Room 3228
> Carbondale, IL 62901
> Shannon.mccrocklin@siu.edu
> 618-453-3428

Kyle P. Blanquera received his Bachelor's in English with emphasis on applied linguistics from The University of Texas—Pan American, and his Master's in English as a Second Language from The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley. His research interests include accent perception, sociolinguistics, applied linguistics, and language acquisition.

> 1201 W. University Dr, ELABS 329
> Edinburg, TX 78539
> Kyle.blanquera@gmail.com
> 956-665-3441

Deyna Loera is a graduate student at the University of Texas at El Paso studying for a Master's degree in Linguistics. She received her Bachelor's degree in English with a concentration in Linguistics and a minor in Sociology from the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley. Her fields

of interest include sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics, and language acquisition and is focused on research in those areas.

500 W. University, Liberal Arts Building 137
El Paso, TX 79968
Deyna.j.loera@gmail.com
915-747-5767

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