

## Second Language Learners' Ownership of English in the USA: The Influence of Accents

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*Abstract: This article presents how accent and ownership is perceived among L2 learners. In order to accomplish the task this study attempts to answer the question: In what way does the perception of ESL students' accent influence their sense of ownership of English? It begins with the background by looking at accent, ownership, ESL and then it illustrates the "structuralist" and "post-structuralist" approaches. Finally, this article recommends adopting "post-structuralist approach" by English teachers.*

*Keywords: Accent, Ownership, ESL, Structuralist and Post-Structuralist Approaches.*

### Introduction

Researchers such as Lippi-Green (2012) has shown that accent has very little to do with language, but accent is still as the most visible part of a language. Pilus (2013) emphasizes the need for the native accent to be regarded merely as a model that is a source of reference for the learners and not as a norm that should be rigidly adhered to. However, the ESL students still experience discrimination based on their accent which compels them to improve their accent to sound more native like.

A study conducted by Derwing (2003) demonstrated that ESL learners had negative impressions on their own English accents, because their accents have caused communication problems. She also found that these participants explained that they wanted to have "native-like" accent and they did not want to retain their own accents. The discrimination which the ESL students came across is due to the social factors rather than the linguistic factors. Therefore, ESL students feel an urge to improve their accents to break those social barriers (Gluszek & Dovidio, 2010). When they can remove those social inhibitors, they gain more confidence and develop a stronger sense of ownership. This paper will showcase how

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accent and ownership is perceived among L2 learners. In doing so, the specific research question for this study is: In what way does the perception of ESL students' accent influence their sense of ownership of English? We begin with the background of our study by looking at accent, ownership, and ESL.

**Accent**

Accent is a distinctive mode of pronunciation of a language, especially one associated with a particular nation, locality, or social class. According to Lippi-Green (2012), accent has little to do with communicative competence or a speaker's ability to use language in different contexts. However, society has placed more emphasis on accent and sometimes ties it to an L2 speaker's intelligence. This situation is more prevalent in academia where L2 learners are often discriminated against just because of their accent. On several occasions, the other party deliberately refuse to bear his/her part of the burden to understand an L2 speaker. It must be noted that accent discrimination is a social construct, and since most L2 speakers are socialized into such predicament, they tend to a goal of speaking like a native speaker. Conforming to native speaker norms has been an issue for a long time. In a survey conducted in the USA by Pilus (2013), 67% of 400 ESL students preferred native accent and about 32% preferred what she calls "an intelligible non-native accent" (p. 144). Pilus continues to say that most of the students wished they could speak with native accent. Similarly, the author administer questionnaire to 43 students about their attitude towards the variety of English they preferred, they listed the following; "American English as their first choice (69.2%), followed by British (28.2%) and Canadian English (2.6%)." This shows the three most preferred variety of English that the Koreans preferred or wanted. The author also points out another survey of Malaysia teachers and students and how majority of them perceived the Malaysia English as inferior compared to the native English –British English. When asked about the accent they will choose as a pronunciation model in the classroom, majority chose British accent and American accent over Malaysia accent. In further justification, the participants state that the British and American accents were easy to understand. On the other hand, the participants rated their Malaysian accent higher over British and American accents when it comes to familiarity. This piece highlights the ESL students' perception and attitude of accents as purely based on correctness.

On her piece about what ESL students say about their accent, Tracey Derwing (2003) talks about the difficulties these students face in pronunciation and their accents. She states that ESL students must be conversant with grammar, vocabulary, and idioms. She talks about how people show biases towards accented speech especially foreign accent in a negative way. Also, Derwing mentions that the biases on accent shown is not only toward L2 speakers, but sometimes towards native speakers especially those whose dialect is not considered to be the standard experience the same biases.

### **Ownership**

Ownership is defined as a cognitive-affective state “in which individuals feel as though the target of ownership or a piece of that target is ‘theirs’” (Pierce, Kostova, & Dirks 2003, p. 86). Ownership of a language implies a relationship between the target language and a person’s sense of self. The concept of ownership of English is better suited to describe speakers’ proficiency because it avoids the dichotomy of ‘native speaker’ and ‘non-native speaker.’ However, ownership requires careful analysis because it is viewed as referring indigenization or legitimacy. The term ownership has been used to refer to the ways in which speakers consider English as their language used for their needs and communication. Kamwangamalu and Chisanga (1997) use this term to refer to the indigenization of English in South Africa by means of lexical borrowings, morpho-syntactic transfer, and semantic extension.

Widdowson (1994) also uses the term ownership to refer to the ways in which speakers consider English for their own use. He argues that native speakers no longer have an absolute authority over which forms are considered Standard English because norms and standards are no longer only created by communities of speakers from mother-tongue contexts. He criticizes the application of standard to international varieties of English for measuring speakers’ proficiency and describes indigenization as an alternative way of viewing mastery over the language. Widdowson (1994) further states, “You are proficient in a language to the extent that you possess it, make it your own, bend it to your will, assert yourself through it rather than simply submit to the dictates of its form” (p. 384). Norton (1997) conceptualizes ownership as legitimacy within a broader framework that is useful for examining the complex linguistic identity. She argues that the categorization of speakers into native speakers and non-native speakers sets up a dichotomy that prevents learners from owning English because they are prevented from becoming legitimate speakers of English. Norton (1997) also reveals that the ownership can be achieved by having the sense of the right to speak, “If learners of

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English cannot claim ownership of a language, they might not consider themselves legitimate speakers of that language" (p. 422). Therefore, ownership is relevant to any speaker of any language users.

**English as a Second Language (ESL)**

ESL stands for English as a Second Language. ESL students are those who study English in addition to their first language or mother-tongue. According to Ortmeier-Hooper (2008) in recent years there has been a great deal of interest in meeting the needs of ESL students in the composition class room, particularly with the growing number of second language. She has stated that the number ESL students has increased significantly in the US institutions due to the global education policy.

According to Andrade (2006) ESL students in the US institutions make valuable educational and economic contributions. For these benefits to continue, universities must become more knowledgeable about the adjustment issues these students face and implement appropriate support service. Adjustment challenges are primarily attributable to English language proficiency and culture. Norton (1997) has suggested that if English belongs to the people who speak it, whether native or nonnative, whether ESL or EFL (English as Foreign Language), whether standard or nonstandard, then expansion of English in this era of rapid globalization may possibly be for the better rather than for the worse. Considering everything that has been said, it is important to highlight the status quo that has been socially constructed and entrenched due to power and ideology. These hegemonic structures have made English language studies cumbersome. In addition, we will highlight what the real world should be in terms of second language learning and education.

The concept of ESL is important for this paper because in Bangladesh, English is receiving the status of a second or official language. The widespread use of English in multifarious sectors in Bangladesh is giving English a prestigious position as a language to communicate.

**Structuralist and Post-Structuralist Approach**

As a matter of fact, all the literature provides the nuances the established nature of the status quo which promotes the linguistic discrimination in higher education in the USA. For instance, researchers like Lippi-Green (2006) has shown that accents have nothing to do with language use. However, students with accents face discrimination in academia. For example, to get a better job, a better ("native like") accent is required. Such is the structured world that we live in today. The "Structuralist Approach" towards language promotes the status quo where second

language learning and acquisition is taught through the deficit model. Teachers who believe in this model, focus more on sentence level ability and pronunciation. It is created by the power and ideological structure that believes that “Standard American English” is the only option for upward mobility for students. However, Simon Blackburn has argued that everything in the “structuralist approach” is socially constructed. In other words, most of the educational policies have been put in place to reinforce and entrenched these hegemonic activities in higher education. Therefore, any new method or approach that calls the status quo to question is always rejected. For example, even though critical pedagogy is needed to teach basic English in this “structuralist approach,” there are some composition teachers who still do not welcome the idea of critical pedagogy in teaching composition. This “structuralist approach” sets the goal of second language learning in such a way which is never achievable. It denotes the hidden fact that “ESL” students can try to acquire English, but it will never be theirs.

On the other hand, “poststructuralist approach” as propounded by Jacques Derrida is more about creativity and human participation. In this approach, second language acquisition and learning is seen from the multi-competence perspectives. In other words, students can be helped to construct sentences based on how they communicate in real life. In this approach, students are regarded multicompetent instead of being deficit. This approach does not set unreachable goals for the students created by the power structure and dominating authoritative approaches. Here the teachers work as the facilitators or moderators of the total process of language teaching and learning. Moreover, this approach provides the L2 learners with the opportunities of a reachable goal within their capacities. Here, language learning and teaching is viewed from more humanistic perspective and does not promote superiority or inferiority complex. Teachers welcome students’ background knowledge and use it as a resource and not as a deficit. In this approach, each student is a potential language learner and individual differences are treated with respect because students are from different linguistic backgrounds.

From the perspective of the above stated “structuralist approach” and “post-structuralist approach,” it can be said that people in USA are so used to “structuralist approach” that any new rhetoric that introduces “post-structuralist approach” to them seems to be unrealistic and hence may lead to resistance. As a matter of fact, all of us have been socialized into “structuralist approach” and have accepted all the norms that promotes the power and ideological hidden agendas because we see it as only option for upward mobility.

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Indeed, notions of the “ideal” speaker and of a “legitimate speaker” (Bourdieu 1991:68) are central to the concept of language ownership (Guerretaz, 2015). Language is often viewed as a tangible entity that resides in the minds of its native speakers. From this perspective, native speaker expertise is often accepted as the sole requisite of ownership that “native” speakers “own” the language, while non-native speakers do not (Guerretaz, 2015). Having a nonnative accent may lead speakers to question whether they are accepted in a community, whereas individuals with regional native accents, which are less likely to interfere with communication would be unlikely to question their belonging in the United States (Gluszek and Dovidio 2010).

### **Discussion & Conclusion**

According to Saville-Trokie and Barto (2016), children acquire language by means of their innate capacity. They have developed universal grammar and other linguistic rules before they go to school. In addition to that, through socialization and all the language learning models, they adapt to the environment and can mediate through interactions. Thus, they build up their capabilities of acquiring new languages. However, when it comes to learning a second language in an American education setting, such capabilities and the students’ linguistics repertoire are ignored and instead given a prescribed second language learning model that is ineffective. Besides the ineffective approach that is being taught, the students themselves are labeled as English as Second language learners (“ESL”) and not as users. This kind of monolingual approach to teaching ESL was boldly rejected by Scott (2016). Scott suggested that teachers should construct language class as a place to develop language uses. Her approach is reinforcing the multi-competent model whereby L2 learners create vision of themselves and engages in conscious reflection about their language and culture as they are in the process of learning an additional language. Scott’s suggestion is foregrounded in a multi-competent model.

We now present some nuances about multicompetent model: a model which reinforces the “post-structuralist approach” and we conclude that second language acquisition and learning should be situated in a multicompetent model. The concept of “multicompetence” was brought to the fore by Vivian Cook. Cook (1991) defines the term multicompetence as the “compound state of mind with two grammars” (p. 558). The multicompetence nuances provided by Cook is in contrast with the usual poverty-of-the-stimulus argument. That has

been the hallmark in second language acquisition studies. His multicompetence evidence proves that it is not about how much grammar is learnt by L2 learners but how L2 learners learn more grammar “with one or more settings for each parameter-multicompetence” (p. 558). What Cook did by situating multicompetence model in L2 teaching and research was groundbreaking. Because, with multicompetent model, L2 learners will not be seen as “learners of a foreign Language” only but will be recognized additional language learners who possesses broad linguistic repertoire that will directly impact the additional language they are learning. He posits the multicompetence model influences language teaching in many ways. For instance, it helps the teachers to tap into language learners’ multicompetence capabilities and develop them as multicompetent learners instead of monolingual learner. The previous goal of teaching L2 learners to be “imaginary native speakers” goes away because, it is not realistic. Instead, L2 learners will be taught from a multicompetent perspective with a goal of developing them to flourish in their L1 and L2.

Conversely, besides teaching, Cook’s multicompetence model provides new perspectives into second language research. L2 learners are seen from different perspectives as Cook (1992) mentioned “Instead of L2 users being treated as deficient monolinguals, they should be treated as people in their own right” (p.577). Recent L2 research work (Ortega, 2016; Scott, 2016) embraces multicompetence approach--therefore, L2 research is no longer unidirectional rather adapting multidirectional approach.

From linguistic perspectives, the concept of multicompetence is phenomenal. Because, the model positioned L2 learners as co-constructed of their own learning, and their own identity. L2 learners here participate in a socialization that they are part of and not the imaginary word that has already been constructed for them. In other words, the multi competence theory reinforces the “post-structuralist approach” that has already been mentioned in this article. Indeed, any model that embraces the principles of “post-structuralist approach” is a viable model particularly for second language learning, teaching, and research. Therefore, English teachers should try to adopt “post-structuralist approach” with a view to bringing a humanistic attitude towards language teaching in general.

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