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This report presents the results of a pedagogical intervention conducted at the University of West London with a group of first year undergraduate students. Previous research in social psychology and sociolinguistics indicates that language attitudes play an important role in how groups of speakers are perceived and evaluated based on their accent (Garrett, 2010). Given the multicultural nature of the University of London with a large population of ethnic minority students, international students and members of staff from across the globe, it was important to elicit students' attitudes and beliefs about native and non-native accents of English. The task of examining students' attitudes and beliefs about native and non-native accents of English is twofold: first, to elicit overt attitudes towards native and non-native accents of English and second, to prompt a critical reflection on the experience of providing accent judgements.

English as the lingua franca

Seventy five years ago the American linguist Edward Sapir (1933) predicted that 'one of the great national languages of modern times, such as English or Spanish or Russian, may in due course find itself in the position of a de facto international language, without any conscious attempt having been made to put it there' (p. 169). In the contemporary world, that "great national language" is English. Most intercultural communication is conducted in English and English has gained a dominant role in many international domains such as politics, business, culture, research and education (Pennycook, 2017). This international spread of English has had important implications for speakers of English as a second language as English is often used as a means of communication between speakers who do not share the same first language. In other words, English is used as a lingua franca to communicate with speakers from different linguistic backgrounds. However, there are negative attitudes towards non-native varieties of English especially in educational domains (McKenzie and Gilmore, 2017).

Attitudes to English

Since Labov's (1966) seminal work on the social stratification of English in New York City and the process of stigmatisation of certain linguistic features found in American varieties of English, language attitudes have become a core concept in sociolinguistics. In the UK, language attitudes studies began in the 1930s with Pear's (1931) study in which BBC radio listeners were invited to supply personality profiles of voices heard on the radio. The result

showed that different forms of the British English triggered a variety of social evaluations. Since then these stereotype-based judgements of voice have become the main focus of further research in the area of language attitudes.

From more than 80 years of research into language attitudes, it has been established that listeners can make an evaluative judgment based solely on speaker voice qualities. Research also suggests that non-linguists are willing to evaluate different language varieties and assign positive or negative personality traits to speakers of those varieties (McKenzie & Gilmore, 2017). Such reactions can have far reaching consequences for the speakers of different varieties of English such as a negative outcome of a job interview (Rakic, Steffens & Mummendey, 2011), linguistic discrimination in court (Lippi-Green, 1994) or stigmatisation of foreign accented English (Janicka, Kul & Weckwerth, 2008).

In educational contexts, negative attitudes towards linguistic diversity may affect teachers' perceptions of students' abilities and may result in standard accent bias (Pantos & Perkins, 2012) and even affect higher education accessibility (Ryan & Giles, 1982). In light of the above discussion, it is important to understand students' attitudes towards different varieties of English given the number of international students and staff at the University of West London.

A variety of methods has been used to elicit language attitudes, but the matched guise technique (MGT) has been particularly influential. The idea with MGT is to circumvent the observer's paradox by using a covert method of attitude elicitation. The procedure is built on the assumption that speech style triggers certain social categorisations that will lead to a set of group-related trait-inferences (Gilles & Billings, 2004). For instance, a voice classified as 'French' will predispose listeners to assign a set of personality-attributes or qualities to the speaker. A classic model of MGT entails listening to a series of recorded speech samples of the same text read aloud by a number of bilingual speakers with the same level of proficiency in both languages. First, they read it in English and then a translation equivalent in French. Listeners or judges then evaluate the personality characteristics of each speaker using voice cues only, for qualities such as intelligence, friendliness, ambition, honesty, sincerity, and generosity. The main advantage of this technique is that it allows eliminating the effects of the more idiosyncratic features of speech such as rate, loudness, timbre, and pitch.

The matched guise technique also has a rigorous design which allows only one manipulated variable (e.g. accent), so that only this variable remains to explain variable patterns of

response among listeners. As a result of the new research legislation that emphasised research ethics, a modified version of the MGT known as the verbal guise technique (VGT) was adopted with speech samples provided by authentic speakers of each variety rather than one speaker using different guises. For the purposes of the reported intervention, the VGT was employed to collect voice samples. Each speech sample was provided by an authentic speaker of a different variety of English reading the same text to keep the content of the message constant and to reduce the variability in terms of vocabulary and grammar used.

Research design

The intervention was conducted at the University of West London where much of the student population is from non-traditional backgrounds. In other words, the majority of undergraduate students would be the first to attend university in their family. Students participating in the intervention were enrolled in BA (Hons) Education Studies and Early Years Education. The courses consist of four levels (3-6) and are designed to prepare students to work in the area of early years and education in the UK.

Eight recordings were selected from the author's corpus of digital recordings to act as stimuli for the intervention. Each sample was selected to represent an accent of English found in London. Two samples were provided by female Spanish speakers of English; one by a Chinese male speaker; two by French male speakers of continental French; one by a female speaker of Quebec French; one by a male speaker of Standard American, and one by a female speaker of Southern British English. Each speaker was asked to read and record the same text in English that was chosen by the author and deemed age and context appropriate. The read aloud task maintained the same grammatical and vocabulary structures to keep the focus of the intervention on the accent of each speaker and not their grammatical accuracy. All eight speakers were university students and were approximately of the same age. The speech samples were similar in length ranging from 15 to 20 seconds. They were presented to the student-participants in a lecture theatre over the central sound system.

Prior to the intervention, the students were asked to indicate their age, gender and first language on a pen and paper questionnaire distributed individually. Thirty two Level 4 students aged between 18-40 participated in the intervention. All participants were full time students. There were eleven non-native and twenty one native speakers of English. Drawing on the verbal guise method of attitude elicitation, the student-respondents were asked to complete two tasks. The first was a keyword task in which they were instructed to write down

their first reactions as they listened to each of the eight accents. The second task invited the student-respondents to reflect on their rating experience by answering the following questions: 1) What was the experience like for you? 2) Has your perception of foreign accents changed in any way after the exercise? 3) Would you recommend this exercise to raise awareness of the diversity of English? Why? Their written responses were collected at the end of the intervention for analysis and evaluation.

Linguistic features

Following Garrett (2010), the responses were coded to establish the pattern for the comments. In line with the previous research in language attitudes and based on the coding results, the keywords were grouped into four categories: Linguistic features; Affective (positive and negative); Status and social norms, and Comparison. The responses varied greatly in their level of detail and language used to describe each accent.

Linguistic features. This category includes non-technical descriptions of each accent. The keywords varied from naming the nationality to detailing the exact phonological features such as the sound "th" in "that".

Affective. These keywords varied from positive to negative. Positive comments included comments such as "good English", "nice" or "easy to understand". Negative comments included descriptions such as "dull", "monotonous" or "difficult to understand".

Status and social norms. These features included such elements as level of education and correctness (e.g., "intelligent", "educated in an English school", and "posh").

Comparison: Some comments were comparative in nature. For instance, keywords included words such as "similar to" or "like". This category included the highest number of responses as it is often easier to compare your English to that of the other using yourself as the reference point.

Native and non-native English

In order to see whether native and non-native groups of speakers were perceived equally, a further analysis was conducted by looking at the groups of keywords pertaining to the native and non-native voice samples.

The native group of speakers was represented by two accents: Southern British English and Standard American English. These accents proved to be the easiest for the student-respondents to recognise as they named them correctly 99% of the time. Most of the comments simply stated the speakers' nationality or described the voice samples in favourable terms such as clear and intelligent. The British accent was described on several occasions as "wonderful", "clear", "soft" and "posh". However, there were some negative evaluations of the American voice sample, which could be explained by the political situations in the world today with the US dictating the political climate. There were participants describing the American accent as belonging to Trump or as "dull", "monotone" and "difficult to understand". Overall, the students noted the clarity of the native accents, which translated into being a fist language speaker and not a learner.

The non-native group of speakers included two speakers of continental French; one speaker of Quebec French; two Spanish speakers from South America, and one Chinese speaker of English. These accents proved to be more difficult for the participants to recognise with the exception of the Chinese voice sample. Despite the difficulty in naming the exact country of origin of each voice, most participants were able to indicate the non-native status of the speakers. The majority of the voices received mildly positive comments aimed to encourage and support the speakers. The notable exception was the Chinese voice sample, which was singled out as "incorrect" and "not fluent". Overall, the comments mostly related to the speed of delivery with the slow delivery attributed to a lower level of proficiency in English. One speaker of French received predominantly positive feedback with comments such as "clear" and "easy to understand" but he was still recognised as a non-native speaker of English based on the intonation contours.

In sum, second language speech was generally perceived as less easy to understand when compared to native speaker speech. Keywords used to describe the samples focused on the effort required in processing the speech. Several respondents attributed the perceived low levels of English proficiency to the lack of exposure to English or to an earlier stage of second language acquisition.

Impact of the task
Students' written responses to whether they would recommend the accent evaluation task as an awareness raising exercise were collated and coded for recurring themes. According to the results, the student-participants found the experience transformative and helpful in becoming more aware of the diversity within the UK, London and the University. As one of

the participants noted, "I used to stereotype people who had a foreign accent. But now through this activity I realised that I shouldn't stereotype people because of their accents are different". The students strongly recommended the activity as a way of raising critical language awareness and tackling linguistic prejudice: "This kind of activity understands foreign language more. Especially among young people where they tend to label or stereotype quickly". One of the students wrote that, "we assume that we do not have any bias until we asked to judge someone based on their voice and we actually do it based on how someone sounds".

The non-native student-participants in particular enjoyed the activity as a way of creating a sense of comradery between non-native speakers of English who reported that the exercise made them feel good about their own accent. They also called for the acknowledgment of the differences between speaking first and second language and the difficulties associated with thereof. The non-native respondents also asked to stop equating accent with bad grammar. They called for making general public more aware of different accents and linguistic diversity especially in the parts of the country outside of London.

Some student-respondents insisted that their perceptions of foreign accents had not changed because they were already positive. In part those attitudes were explained by family background or the multicultural context of London with over 300 languages spoken on a daily basis. One of the participants explained that you would need a little more patience to understand accented English but everyone should be encouraged to do that. Another student felt very strongly about it: "No, it hasn't changed. I still believe everyone is the same and shouldn't be judged by the way they sound or where they come from" or as a different respondent put it, "it doesn't matter to me if you have a foreign accent".

In their reflections, English native speakers often expressed a high degree of empathy with people whose first language is not English by acknowledging that they might experience difficulty in using English. Some participants even found the non-native accents more pleasant than the native speaker accents. They insisted on the importance of comprehensibility and not nativelikeness or as a student-participant put it, "the message is more important than the accent".

One student would not recommend the activity because there was not enough diversity and all accents sounded clear to her.

Reflection

Research in the area of language attitudes acknowledges the existence of language stereotypes that might result in negative attitudes towards certain varieties of English. However, there are not many practical applications of those studies that look at more classroom-oriented interventions. Reflecting on the experience from the perspective of a non-native speaker of English and a university lecturer, I believe there is a need to continue to work towards raising students' critical language awareness. Given the results of the intervention, we need to keep emphasising the importance of diversity, multiculturalism and multilingualism. Despite slightly less positive overt evaluations of the non-native voices, there were mostly positive attitudes observed in the reflection part of the intervention. The student-participants wanted to be seen as open to diversity and multiculturalism. In their reflective comments, they refused to stereotype based on the first language background or accent.

Conclusion

In the multicultural context of a post-92 university, there is a need to raise language awareness among student population. The present intervention was designed to elicit underlying language attitudes and stereotypes associated with native and non-native accents in English held by Level 4 undergraduate students at the University of West London. Contrary to previous research in language attitudes, the student participants in this study were quite reluctant to make evaluative judgments based on speakers' accents; perhaps due to the diversity of their own peer group. The qualitative comments demonstrate that students appreciated the opportunity to look closer at their deep-seated attitudes and reflect on them in a structured environment. Such interventions allowed students to question the notions of language and identity in the safe environment of a structured classroom. Whilst the findings here present a picture of a student body that resists the urge to make broad evaluative judgements based on a speaker's accent issues related to multiculturalism, super-diversity, and multilingualism still need to be explored in more detail - especially through actively involving students in critical discussions and reflections, especially in the context of a multicultural university.

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