

LEARNING NATIVE-LIKE ENGLISH PRONUNCIATION AND CULTURAL IDENTITY OF PAKISTANI ESL LEARNERS

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ABSTRACT

Acquiring native-like pronunciation is the epitome of second/foreign language learning, but is hardest to achieve. Recently, it has been recognized that adopting a native-like or localized accent of a second/foreign language can also be a matter of choice, influenced by learners' sense of identity with their local culture - a socio-cultural factor. Taking up this research inclination, the study has inquired if Pakistani ESL learners' sense of cultural identity has any influence on their attitude towards adopting native-like English pronunciation. One hundred and thirty ESL learners from NUML, Islamabad, were surveyed through a questionnaire targeting both the variables of the study – cultural identity and native-like English pronunciation. Twenty of the study participants were interviewed as well. Data gathered from both tools of the study was triangulated to generate the results. Findings revealed that despite identifying strongly with their native culture, Pakistani ESL learners hold a positive attitude towards adopting native-like English pronunciation.

Keywords: Second Language Acquisition (SLA), Cultural Identity, ESL Pronunciation, English Language Teaching (ELT), Native-like English Accent.

INTRODUCTION

A second language learnt in childhood results in a fluent speech devoid of a “foreign accent”; while learning it in adulthood makes it quite unlikely to acquire a native-like pronunciation (Gilakjani & Ahmadi, 2011). Age is typically acknowledged as a major factor of accentedness in L2 (Scovel, 2000). Accentedness, a common experience in foreign/second language learning, is the distinctiveness of two accents (foreign and native) of the speaker (Derwing & Munro, 2005). Lenneberg, Chomsky and Marx in their

“Critical Period Hypothesis” (1967), proposed a biologically or neurologically constrained period for optimal language learning as lasting till the age of 12. It is claimed that once this critical period expires, it is almost impossible to acquire a second language to its fullest specially its pronunciation. On the contrary, it has also been avowed that L2 learners can acquire a native-like accent even in their adulthood (Bialystock, 1997), though the extent of precision, as noted by Avery and Ehrlich (1992), may vary considerably from learner to learner (cited in Gilakjani & Ahmadi, 2011).

Variation in degree of mastery of L2 pronunciation by adult learners’ hints that acquisition of native-like pronunciation can be a matter of learners’ preference and choice besides being a biological barrier constrained by their age. This choice, however, is influenced by certain factors. Research in sociolinguistic paradigm has particularly explicated the influence of socio-cultural factors on L2 learners’ attitudes towards native-like pronunciation and their likelihood of developing fossilized local accents (Moyer, 2004). Sociolinguists have signified individual differences in L2 pronunciation attainment with special reference to cultural identity and sense of self (Levis & LeVelle, 2012). Culture, as defined by Hudson (1980), is “something that everybody has” and involves some “property of a community, especially that, which might distinguish it from other communities.” As culture is specific to a community or people comprising that community, it marks their identity, hence the term “cultural identity.”

In fact, most of the factors which are typically considered to affect L2 pronunciation have “an overlapping and mostly unexplored socio-cultural element” particularly identity (Pullen, 2011). For instance, taking age as a social factor, Ellis and Ellis (1994), have pointed out that the young language learners are more likely to be influenced by social or peer pressures for they do not have as “rigidly formed identities” as adult learners. This weaker sense of identity makes it easier for them to assimilate or identify with the new language community (Mayora, 2010). Ellis and Ellis (1994), has also traced a relationship between gender and social identity by asserting that female culture is more prone to submit to the threat posed to their identity by L2 learning. They further argued that language learners’ attitudes towards L2 learning reflect their perception of their native identity besides the target language’s culture, and, will significantly determine their proficiency in the target language.

In this backdrop, certain researchers have argued that L2 pronunciation instruction should not overlook the factor of cultural identity. Dalton and Seidlhofer (2001), for instance, have stressed over the moral aspects in attempting to transform learners' accent for it is an expression of their identity. Drawing upon the lingua franca version of English, Jenkins (2002) asserts that L2 learners of English need not to strictly abide by the native speech norms. They should instead adapt their speech according to their immediate non-native audience. In fact, English is no more considered to be a commodity of the inner-circle countries only (Kirkpatrick, 2008), because presently the speakers of English as a second language significantly outnumber its native speakers around the globe (Crystal, 2003). The rarity of native-like speech among adult L2 learners has instigated scholars like; Goodwin (2001), and Derwing and Munro (2005), to recommend language instructors to encourage their students achieve realistic targets in L2 pronunciation than native-like accents so as to avoid failure. Thus, it is established that identity has a significant relationship with L2 pronunciation (Pullen, 2011).

According to Hall (2003), "Cultural identities come from somewhere; have histories." They are formed under the influence of history, culture and power (ibid). The identity of Pakistani speech community is also rooted in its language history. Pakistan, as acknowledged by Rahman (2005), is a multilingual country having 6 major and 57 minor (regional) languages. Urdu is its national language. Although being extensively used in the country, especially, in the metropolitan areas, there are just 7.57 % native speakers of Urdu. English is the official language of Pakistan since the time it was part of a British colony – the subcontinent India. Both Urdu and English have been, ever since, associated with the domains of power; government, business, media, education, etc. State's language policy has always privileged these two languages over a whole lot of regional languages spoken in the country. Consequently, the concept of ethnic/cultural identity in the country is tied to languages other than Urdu. English has become a symbol of power and sophistication while debilitating the underprivileged local languages of Pakistan to an inferior status and cultural shame.

In view of Jabeen, Rasheed and Mehmood (2011), English possess a love-hatred relation in Pakistan; while, many aspire to acquire the language, there are those who strongly resist learning and using it. Despite being widely used in government, law, education and technical fields in the country, English is yet a minority language. While, English connotes power and exploitation for

some (Rahman, 2002); for others, it is an anti-Islamic code of life (Pennycook, 1994). For Ghani (2003), English is not merely a second/foreign language in Pakistan; its status is quite complicated.

This status quo of English language in Pakistan makes it significant to study the cultural identity as a potential factor in shaping Pakistani ESL learners' attitudes towards learning the English language.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Identity research in SLA dates back to Lambert's study, conducted on a sample of French as second language learners in America. *Anomie* was the term tossed by Lambert for the thoughts of socio-cultural insecurity or discontent experienced by learners of a second language in natural contexts. According to Lambert, identity has an inextricable connection with attitudes (cited in Block, 2007). Guiora et al. (1972), also marked pronunciation as a central element of language influenced most by identity. Guiora coined the term "language ego." By investigating the effects of alcohol on pronunciation, Guiora's study tested the idea of "ego-permeability." It was found that weakening ego-boundaries result in more native-like pronunciation (cited in Pullen, 2011).

Enough of research in recent years has explored the connection between identity and pronunciation in a naturalistic context. Gathbonton, Trofimovich and Magid (2005), for instance, experimented with a sample of listeners rating speakers with different degrees of cultural loyalty on the basis of their accent. However, research investigating the impact of cultural identity in foreign/second language context is scanty. One of the studies, that is, Georgountzou and Tsantila (2017), sought for the interplay among native Greek speakers' attitudes towards English pronunciation, accentedness and cultural identity. The study found that "Greek speakers dissociate their cultural identity from their preference for standard native/native-like models of English pronunciation" (p. 160). A study conducted on Iranian EFL learners by Shabani and Alipoor (2017), explored the correlation between intrinsic motivation, cultural identity, and the pronunciation knowledge of EFL learners. The study found that the participants' pronunciation knowledge did not correlate with their cultural identity. However, the participants who were found to be highly motivated performed better in the pronunciation test. Amirian and Bazrafshan (2016), attempted to gauge the influence of language learning attitudes and cultural identity on Iranian EFL learners' achievement in English pronunciation. The study found favourable attitude on part of the study participants towards English pronunciation, besides, a positive correlation between

their cultural identity and pronunciation achievement. Pullen (2011), have also found significantly positive correlation between attitudes towards FL pronunciation, accentedness and cultural identity. Borlongan (2009), and Rindal (2010), also concluded that the language variety FL learners aspire for in pronunciation reflects their sense of identity. Certain studies have also explicated non-native English instructors' attitudes towards English pronunciation to be influenced by their cultural identity (Jenkins, 2005; Sifakis & Sougari, 2005).

Considering research conducted in the Pakistani ESL context, the authors found multiple researchers studying learners' attitudes towards the English language in general, but not particularly pronunciation except one by Parveen and Mehmood (2013), which explored the attitude of ESL learners towards the spoken varieties of English in Pakistan. The study found that learners prefer a standard English accent over Pakistani English. The present study is distinct in nature as it seeks to explore the factors influencing learners' attitudes towards English pronunciation, particularly the cultural identity of being a potential factor in a complex multicultural and multilingual setting like Pakistan.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The present study intended to document Pakistani ESL learners' attitudes towards adopting native-like pronunciation of English and then to trace out the relationship between learners' attitudes and their sense of cultural identity. To achieve the purpose, the study followed a survey method.

A total of 130 ESL learners (78 males & 52 females) studying in a local university, participated in the study by filling in the questionnaire. The study participants were picked randomly from all four levels of language courses offered at NUML titled as *foundation and certificate* (both requiring a minimum of ten years of education), *diploma* and *advanced diploma* (both requiring a minimum of fourteen years of education). Twenty randomly selected participants of the study were also interviewed individually.

Research Instruments

Questionnaire. A questionnaire considering both the variables of the study – *Cultural Identity and Attitudes towards pronunciation* - was used as the primary research tool. The questionnaire included two parts, other than the initial personal information part. Part A in the questionnaire was titled '*Identity*' and had questions asking participants about their sense of cultural identity. It was adapted from Pullen (2011). The second part of the questionnaire labeled as '*Pronunciation*' measured participants' attitude towards English pronunciation. It was adapted from Kang

(2010). The respondents were asked to mark their response on each question in the questionnaire along a five-point Likert scale. In the end of the questionnaire, an open-ended question for the participants was included so that they can add anything that they might find to have been missed out in the questionnaire.

Interview. A short interview, consisting of five open-ended questions was taken individually from each of the twenty randomly picked participants (11 males & 9 females) of the study. The interview questions targeted the main variables in the study. They were recorded and after listening to the audio tapes were transcribed.

The questionnaires were quantitatively analyzed in terms of frequencies and percentages using SPSS (version 15.0). Qualitative analysis of interview data was carried out. Data gathered through questionnaires and interviews was triangulated in order to authenticate the results.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Questionnaire

Part A - Identity. Part A of the questionnaire labeled '*Identity*' was meant to investigate the degree to which ESL learners identify with their culture. An agreement with most of the statements in this part of the questionnaire was thought to reflect learners' keen sense of cultural identity while disagreement meant their openness to foreign cultures and weaker cultural identity.

Statement 1, 2, 9 & 12 in the '*Identity*' part of the questionnaire directly targeted learners' loyalty to their nation. A clear majority of participants showed agreement on all these statements reflecting a strongly favorable opinion held by them of their culture and nationality.

Note: Agreement value mentioned in all the following tables is a cumulative percentage of the 'strongly agree' & 'agree' values on the respective statements.

Table 1. *Cumulative Agreement on Statements 1, 2, 9 & 12*

Statement #	Cumulative Agreement
1. I am honored to be a citizen of Pakistan.	97.7 %
2. Being a Pakistani, it is my responsibility to strengthen and advance my nation.	99.2 %
9. The educational institution should teach students loyalty towards their nation.	94.6%
12. All political decision in Pakistan should be according to Quaid e Azam's ideology	73.8 %

Majority of participants (83.8 %) have also shown that they take pride in their national history as reflected through their agreement with statement 3 in part A of the questionnaire, which states that influential personalities in the history of world belong to their nation. In line with Hall's (2003) view, that 'cultural identities come from... histories', learners' pride in their history reflects a strongly held cultural identity by them.

Statements 5 & 6 assessed participants' resistance to foreign cultures. Agreement with both these statements by a majority of participants, also, on the one hand, exposed their resistance towards foreign cultures, and, on the other hand, a rigid sense of identification with their native culture.

Statements 7 & 8, on the contrary, probed learners' openness to foreign cultures. A clear majority of participants reflected agreement with statement 7; while on statement 8 participants reflected a mixed response (39.2% showed agreement, 34.6% showed disagreement and 25.4% neither agreed nor disagreed).

Agreement with statement 7 is in a clash with participants' response on statements 5 & 6. Considering all the four statements together, it can be claimed that participants showed a mixed response with regards to their openness or resistance towards non-native cultures.

Table 2. *Cumulative Agreement on Statements 5, 6, 7 & 8*

Statement #	Cumulative Agreement
5. I don't like when Pakistani musicians imitate other's styles in their music.	62.3%
6. If overseas food is very common in Pakistan, traditional Pakistani food culture will be damaged.	76.9 %
7. People should be ready to try food, dresses or other stuff from other cultures.	52.3 %
8. I prefer foreign TV programmes over Pakistani TV programmes.	39.2%

Statements 10 & 11 targeted identity particularly with relevance to language. A vast majority of respondents (94.6 %) agreed that 'Language is an important element of a nation's identity,' and also that acquiring a non-native language does not threaten their native identity.

Table 3. *Cumulative Agreement on Statements 10 & 11*

Statement #	Cumulative Agreement
10. Language is an essential element of a nation's identity.	94.6 %
11. Speaking another country's language does not mean that you have become a member of their culture.	86.9 %

Similar views have also been reflected by most participants in interviews as well. 70 % of the interviewees expressed that adopting a native-like English accent will not influence their cultural identity. For instance, an interviewee opined, '*No, I don't think so (that speaking English would influence cultural identity). It (English language) is just an international language, not a language of any specific country or a specific region.*' Another was of the view that '*Cultural identity will remain intact. It will never be affected by using a foreign language or sounding like a foreigner. People should be open towards other cultures like if we like to use American/British products, we should also be willing to learn their language and their accent as well.*' 75 % of the interviewees' preference for native/near to native English accent over a localized Asian accent further strengthens these results. This attitude expressed by the learners is akin to that expressed by the participants of the study by Pullen (2011), who also viewed native-like pronunciation as ideal, and did not perceive it as a danger to their cultural identity. Further evidence in this regard was gathered from the second part of the questionnaire.

Part B - Pronunciation. This part of the questionnaire explored learners' attitudes towards pronunciation in English. Majority of participants have reported to be able to identify the native and non-native accents (statement 1) and that they want to improve their pronunciation (statement 4) striving for a native-like accent (statements 2 & 5). Participants' response to statement 9 has also reinforced their positive attitude towards native-like English pronunciation.

Table 4. *Cumulative Agreement on Statements 1, 2, 4, 5 & 9*

Statement #	Cumulative Agreement
1. I can easily make a distinction between two pronunciations in English (native and foreign).	85.4 %
2. Native-like English pronunciation is very important to me.	83.8 %
4. I believe I ought to improve my pronunciation of English.	93.8 %
5. I really long for a native-like English pronunciation.	82.3 %
9. If I have the native-like pronunciation of English, I will be more confident in speaking English.	84.6 %

Similar attitudes have been expressed by most learners in interviews as well. 75 % of the interviewees expressed a dire concern to acquire precisely like natives or closer to a native English accent. The reasons behind this desire vary though. Some of the interviewees need to acquire native-like accent because they want to settle abroad in the future while others consider it an ideal to be acquired even in a local setting. Like, one of the interviewees' expressed, *'I want to settle abroad in future, so I intend to learn native-like pronunciation as it would help me in surviving abroad. But, in Pakistan I think I must not speak exactly like a native as it would be difficult to comprehend.'*, while another said, *'Even in Pakistan right now the British accent, you know, has been most acceptable, so that is why it's very well to acquire that accent.'* These results coincide with the study conducted by Parveen and Mehmood (2013), exploring learners' attitude concerning different varieties of English spoken in Pakistan. The study found that learners prefer standard English accent over Pakistani English speech variety.

Statements 6, 10, 11 & 12 assessed learners' resistance towards native-like English pronunciation. Majority of participants showed agreement on statement 6.

Table 5. *Cumulative Agreement on Statement 6*

Statement #	Cumulative Agreement
6. Usually, I intentionally avoid sounding like a native speaker.	45.4 %

In statement 10, the participants have rather exhibited a mixed response (table 6). This mixed response of the participants is in agreement with the statement in Jabeen, Rasheed and Mehmood (2011), that English possess a love-hatred relation in Pakistan, aspired by some and resisted by others, and, with Ghani's view (2003), English has quite a complex status in Pakistan; hence the complexity of the cultural and linguistic attitudes held by ESL learners in Pakistan.

Table 6. *Cumulative Response to Statement 10*

Statement #	CA	CD	Neither A nor DA
10. I feel shy to speak English like a native speaker.	43.1%	43.8%	13.1%

Note: CA = Cumulative agreement, CD = Cumulative disagreement, A = Agreement, D = Disagreement

Statements 11 & 12 were meant to probe participants for two possible reasons of resistance towards native English pronunciation – peer pressure and difficulty in articulating foreign sounds. Participants' response to these

two statements, when considered in comparison (Table 7), reflects that both factors play a part in the avoidance of native-like English accent.

Table 7. *Cumulative Response on Statements 11 & 12*

Statement #	CA	CD	Neither A nor DA
11. I believe people will make fun of me if I imitate native-like pronunciation of English.	43.8%	32.3%	23.8%
12. It is very difficult to pronounce English like a native speaker.	53.1%	3.1%	13.8%

Note: CA = Cumulative agreement, CD = Cumulative disagreement, A = Agreement, D = Disagreement

However, in interviews, learners have expressed a different response rate. Just 20 % of the interviewees showed shyness in adopting a native-like accent, and 30 % believed that it's difficult to acquire exactly native-like English accent but they still struggle to acquire it and do not feel hesitant in using it even if they are mocked or censured by their peers for pretending to be an Englishman, like an interviewee, reported; *'I try hard to imitate native-like pronunciation even if my class fellows laugh.'*

The learners' acknowledgement of the difficulty in speaking English exactly like natives is in line with the "Critical Period Hypothesis" by Lennberg, Chomsky and Marx (1967), which suggested that after the expiry of the critical period of language learning (till age 12) attaining optimal mastery of L2 skills, in particular pronunciation, is almost impossible; while, against the findings of Bialystock (1997), that L2 learners can acquire native-like L2 accent even in their adulthood.

Learners were also asked about their pronunciation instruction in their language classrooms (statements 7 & 8). Participants majorly expressed their satisfaction over their teachers' pronunciation as well as the teaching methodology adopted by them. A similar attitude was observed in interviews also. 85% of the interviewees showed satisfaction over their teachers' accent and instruction.

Table 8. *Cumulative Agreement on Statement 6*

Statement #	Cumulative Agreement
7. I believe an excellent model of English pronunciation can be provided to me by my teacher.	84.6 %
8. I believe we should be taught native-like pronunciation of English in	76.9 %

Interviews, however, revealed that the reason of learners' approval and liking for their teacher's accent is that they consider it very close to a native English accent which they seek in their own speech too. The very attitude of the participants goes against the claims made by multiple studies (Derwing & Munro, 2005; Jenkins, 2002; Dalton & Seidlhofer, 2001; Goodwin 2001), arguing that learners of English, because of their natural ineptness and resultant discomfort, plus, threat to their native identity involved in adopting a native-like accent, should adapt their accent according to their immediate non-native audience. The findings of the study can be said to have reinforced the results of some very recent studies like; Georgountzou and Tsantila (2017); Shabani and Alipoor (2017); Amirian and Bazrafshan (2016).

CONCLUSION

Concluding the study, it can be claimed that although ESL learners in Pakistan possess a strong sense of identity in terms of loyalty to their nation, they are not rigidly resistant towards foreign cultures, specifically towards acquiring a non-native language. Learners have exhibited strongly positive attitude towards adopting native-like English accent despite reporting difficulty in imitating native sounds. Learners attested that adopting a native-like English accent has nothing to do with their cultural identity.

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