

Review Article

English as a Lingua Franca: Attitude and Perception of the Ghanaian English Teacher Towards Native Speakers Accent

Sarah Takyiwa Mensah

Department of English Language, Offinso College of Education, Offinso, Ghana

*Correspondence: Sarah Takyiwa Mensah (takyiwa1970@gmail.com)

Abstract: English language has become a global language due to first, the results of British colonial expansion and, global commercial interests. It has become a lingua franca in many countries, including Ghana. Qualitatively, the study adopted case study research design. The purpose of the study was to find out the perception and the attitude of Ghanaian English teachers towards the Native Speakers' accents. The population of study consists of all ten (10) tutors in the Department of Languages, Offinso College of Education. Purposive and convenient sampling techniques were used to select the college and the tutors for the study. The main tool used for the collection of data was the semi-structured interview. Most of the participants revealed positive attitudes towards their own English accents which were different from that of the native speaker. Ghanaians are often faced with the challenge of which accent to use when communicating with each other and with outsiders. Most of the tutors from Offinso College of Education who participated in this study expressed positive responses to their non-native speaker's accents. Not only did the idea of having a native speaker's accent hold no attraction for them but they also found it strange because it would not represent their L1 identity. The majority of participants in this study preferred to use their non-native accents to attempt to adopt those of the native speaker. To them, there is only one distinction between English accents - you are either a native or non-native.

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1. Introduction

1.1. The Position of English in the World

The English language holds a unique and important position in today's world. It may not be the language with the highest number of native speakers, but it is a language that holds a dominant position and has far-reaching influence around the globe. English is nowadays mastered by more than 750 million non-native speakers [1]. No other existing language can boast of such a high volume of people learning it as a foreign language. English has served as a language of wider communication in many pluralistic contexts and many multi-lingual countries like Ghana, Nigeria, Kenya, and India. Alternatively, a particular vernacular or native language may develop the role of a language of wider communication in a multilingual community, such languages are labelled lingua franca [2]. Examples of these are Hausa in Ghana and Nigeria, and Akan in Ghana.

1.2. What is Lingua Franca?

When two people from different linguistic backgrounds meet and want to communicate with each other, language may become a barrier. To break through this communication barrier, they resort to a common language that will be mutually intelligible. That language which thus facilitates communication between them becomes a lingua franca. A lingua franca is a language that is adopted as a common language between speakers

whose native languages are different [3]. Commenting on the facilitative nature of *lingua franca*, a writer states that “*lingua franca* is also known as bridge, common language, trade language, vehicular or link language. It is a language or a dialect systematically used to make communication possible between people who do not share a native language or dialect, particularly when it is a third language that is distant from both native languages” [4]. A linguist, in her definition of *lingua franca*, states that the term stands for a common language used for communication between people who do not share their first language. Successful communication between speakers who do not share a first language demands a language that is mastered by both interlocutors. The language used in such situations could be a native language of one of the interlocutors another native language that is spoken and understood by both of them, or one that has been acquired as a foreign language by both parties. A language used in such settings is known under the term *lingua franca* [5]. Seidelhofer definition is reiterated by another linguist writer who describes *lingua franca* as follows: “...a *lingua franca* is a contact language used among people who do not share a first language, and is commonly understood to mean a second (or subsequent) language of its speakers.” [6].

From the preceding definitions, one can say that *lingua franca* is a language that serves as a regular means of communication between different linguistic groups in a multi-lingual speech community.

As mentioned above, the English language is used as a *lingua franca* in many countries. Countries that belong to the Commonwealth and are multi-lingual use it to facilitate communication among their citizens. In some of these countries, English has assumed the role of an official language and is used for judicial, legislative and educational purposes as a medium of instruction and a course of study in educational institutions. Seidelhofer and Jenkins have studied the fairly newly established phenomenon of English as a *lingua franca* (ELF) [5, 6]. Seidelhofer defines English as a *lingua franca* as follows, “...any use of English among speakers of different first languages for whom English is the communicative medium of choice, and often the only option” [7]. Another writer too writes, “...ELF emphasizes the role of English in communication between speakers from different first languages...” [6].

1.3. Language and Identity

Identity is crucially involved in attitudes towards ELF given that, “It is at the very heart of what language is about, how it operates, why and how it came into existence and evolved as it did, how it is learned and how it is used, every day, by every user, every time it is used” [8]. This holds for L2 speakers as much as for L1 speakers, a point frequently made by those who take a sociocultural approach to second language learning. For example, writers regard learners first and foremost as social beings and users of their L2 in their own right rather than “disembodied brains” [9-12]. It is a point that is echoed, too, in Preston’s concern that learners should be “allowed to develop their selves as they learn a new language” [13].

1.4. English as a Lingua Franca and Identity

A writer emphasises that “there seems to be a good deal of ambiguity in English teachers’ perceptions of ELF in general and ELF accents in particular.” [6]. On the one hand, the majority involved in this study revealed an unquestioning certainty that native speakers’ English (British or American) is the most desirable and most appropriate kind of English for international communication. On the other hand, it is evident that beneath the surface-level argument used to justify English as a Native Language and disparage ELF, lie deeply entrenched attitudes and, at times, an emotional and even irrational attachment to British and American English. These attitudes, she suggested, have to do with identity, whether that of the ‘native speaker’s English aspiring’ and non-native speaker teacher of English or the ‘native speaker English-owning’ native speaker teacher. Here, we focus on

ELF identity issues as they affect non-native speaker teachers, exploring, in particular, the extent to which any ambivalence, that is uncertainty as to which one to accept, towards ELF, may be the result of some kind of conflict between their identities as successful teachers and as members of their first language groups and a wider ELF community.[6].

1.5. Underlying Attitudes and Their Potential Effects

The phenomenon of ELF has engendered different attitudes among people. Some people think that English as lingua franca means errors and anything goes and that it is simply interlanguage. Such an attitude to ELF is often very revealing. For one thing, the language tends to be emotive. There are three typical examples here. A study describes an ELF approach to pronunciation as one that will “bring the ideal (that is, the Received Pronunciation) down into the gutter with no checkpoint along the way” [14]. A similar study describes ELF as “a broken weapon” and its speakers as “stuttering onto the world stage” [15]. Roy Harris refers to a letter written to the Times Higher Education Supplement (14 September 2007, p. 14) in which Korean Airlines had reportedly chosen to use French speakers of English, rather than British or American English speakers because Koreans found the English of the French more intelligible. He comments, “I couldn’t care less what kind of English Korean Airlines inflict on their passengers.” The derogatory nature of the preceding comments demonstrates the strength of antipathy towards ELF forms among supporters of English as a native language (ENL). Although it is not possible to make direct causal links between such attitudes and ELF speakers’ identities, the staunchly native English speaker ideology that underpins these attitudes should be critically studied. Due to the increasing effects of globalization, speakers of English as a second language, especially the youth, are interacting more with native English speakers. A lot of them are becoming affected by the accents of native speakers. There is a growing concern among teachers of English as a second language about which accent, native speakers or non-native speakers, is to be adopted for effective communication. The purpose of this study is to find out the attitude and perception of Ghanaian English tutors towards the native speaker’s accent for effective communication.

2. Materials and Methods

Qualitatively, the study adopted a case study research design. The population of study consisted of all ten (10) tutors in the Department of Languages, Offinso College of Education. Purposive and convenient sampling techniques were used to select the college and the tutors for the study. The college was the only teacher training institution in the Offinso South Municipality. The tutors were selected for the study because they hold in-depth knowledge of English as a discipline. The writer selected the college because she is a tutor in the college and lives within the same municipality. The main tool used for the collection of data was the semi-structured interview. Participants were interviewed individually at their convenience. The main questions that were asked at the interview were:

- Do you like your English accents?
- Will you be concerned if your accent is recognized by people as being influenced by your L1?
- What do you think about the native and non-native English speakers’ accents?
- Which English accent would you like to have if you were able to choose?

The qualitative data was analysed by the use of the interpretative technique based on the themes arrived at during the data collection from the interview.

3. Findings

3.1. Participants' Response to Research Question 1 (Do you like your English accents?)

Kwadwo (a Twi speaker): "Yes, I like it. I'm happy with my pronunciation. I also want to sound intelligible to all, thus both native and non-native speakers".

Eric (a Twi speaker): "Well, I want to be understood when I speak, that is the most important thing, but when I am speaking with native speakers, I try to imitate them unconsciously".

Tony (a Twi speaker): "I like my Asante accent even when I decide to imitate the native speakers, my tongue will betray me".

Evelyn (a Twi speaker): "Yes, I like my Twi accent. I don't have to speak like an American or a British".

Florence (a Twi speaker): "Yeah, I like my L1 accent, because I have not been to US or Britain, so I can't force myself to speak like them".

Mawuena (an Ewe): "Yeah, I like my Ewe Accent, even when I try to imitate them, it does not work".

Sandra (a Twi speaker): "Yes, I like my Twi accent, why should I aspire to speak like an American or British when I've not even been there".

Yawson (a Fante): Yes, I like my Fante accent and I am proud to speak like a Ghanaian speaking English".

Others were much less certain, or even negative towards their English accent:

Joel: "Well, I don't know but I hope to speak like a Native American. (He has Native American friends)"

Mike: "As for me, I don't know if I like it".

About eighty per cent of the participants said: "They liked their own L1 accents but twenty per cent said they were not sure".

3.2. Participants' Response to Research Question 2 (Will you be concerned if your accent is recognized by people as being influenced by your L1?)

The attitude of most of the participants changed when they moved on to consider how concerned they would be if their accents were recognized by people as being influenced by their L1. This is owing to the way some people are derided over their pronunciation of English words. L1 has a tremendous influence on L2 pronunciation. For example, among some ethnic groups in the northern parts of Ghana "children" is pronounced "chilren" (omission of "d"), and the challenge with words that begin with "sh" (e.g., shoe, shore, shine, – the 'sh' is replaced with 's') instead, they will pronounce the words as (soe, sore, sine). "man" is pronounced "maen" by some Twi speakers; the wrongful placement of "r" and "l" among some Akan speakers (e.g., crass instead of class; 'Dola' instead of Dora; 'dilector' instead of director; 'sride' instead of slide). Some Gas also have problems with the omission and addition of 'h' in their pronunciation, (e.g., heat., house, home etc.) will be pronounced as (eat, ouse, ome, etc.). This problem differs from one ethnic group to the other. The derogatory looks, giggles and comments made by people who hail outside

these ethnic groups when they hear how these words are pronounced make people apprehensive when they are asked about the influence of their L1 on their L2 spoken English.

Some of the respondents said they are not concerned about comments people make about their accents. Their main objective in using the English language is to help them communicate with others, and they become satisfied if they can do this despite their accent. Others said that they do not take it kindly if they hear people making unsavoury remarks about their pronunciation. One of them remarked, "After all, every ethnic group has its peculiar challenges with pronunciation of English words. Why single me out for ridicule?"

3.3. Participants' Response to Research Question 3 (What do you think about the native and non-native English speaker's accents?)

One of the most prevalent beliefs, and one that was articulated by every one of the participants in one way or the other was that a Native Speaker's English accent is 'good' and a Non-Native Speaker's accent is 'acceptable'. Although a wide range of adjectives were used to describe Native Speaker's English accents as favourable, for example, 'good', 'proper', 'perfect', 'competent', 'proficient', 'standard', 'accurate', 'correct' and the like, the majority of participants in this study preferred to use their non-native accents to attempting to adopt those of the native speaker. To them, there is only one distinction or classification of English accents, it is either you are native or non-native.

3.4. Participants' Response to Research Question 4 (Which English accent would you like to have if you were able to choose?)

In almost all cases, those who had been positive about their English accent never expressed any desire for a US English accent, either British or American. Participants Joel and Mike were less certain, *they were young and they had friends who were Americans and that gave them the desire to speak like them*. Participants Kwadwo and Eric, were emphatic that *"so far as they were understood by both Natives and non-Natives, they were okay with their local accents"*. Participants Tony, Evelyn, Frances, Sandra, Mawuena and Yawson who had said that *"they loved their local English accent continued that even if they decided to speak like the Native speakers, their L1 accent would betray them so they won't even try it"*.

4. Discussion of the Findings

Most participants revealed positive attitudes towards their own English accents. These emerged in response to questions asking them whether they liked their own English accents, whether they were concerned if their accent was recognized by others as being influenced by their L1 (for example, Akan (Twi, Fanti and Bono, etc.) and Ewe, and which English accent they would most like to have if they were able to choose. In response to the question of whether they liked their accent, eighty per cent were reasonably positive. In some cases, however, the use of prosodic features such as rising pitch (often associated with tentativeness), laughter, and the word 'quite' suggests that they had reservations or, in the case of some participants, they felt that 'loving' their NNS (Non-Native Speaker's) English accent is something that should be admitted easily because when you are born and bred in Ghana, you do not expect to sound or accent like a native speaker. Even if you decide to sound like a native speaker, your grammar may be okay but your pronunciation will betray you.

The native speakers have retained ways of thinking about the English language that were more suited to empire than they are to this modern, globalized world. That was at a time when the United Kingdom had a colonizing power and directed the spread of English around the world. The native speakers are now just one of many shareholders in the asset that the English language represents. There is now the realization that people learn the English language on their terms and to their ends and these do not necessarily relate to the UK or any other country of which English is the mother tongue. Writers supported

the findings of the study that "Policies must be sensitive to a global population of English speakers. English is more a family of languages than a single language with set rules and orthodoxies" [16].

It has been established that those who speak English as a second language are more comprehensible at international conferences than native speakers because they can adjust the way they speak for the different speakers of the language [17]. When Korean Airlines wanted to install flight simulators it was reported that they selected a French supplier because its 'offshore' international English "was more comprehensible and clearer than that of the UK competitor" (Observer Business Supplement, July 2005). This is what (a writer refers to as "The native speaker problem." [18]. The English spoken by native speakers at home is not always an internationally acceptable one. A similar study posits that "there exists a cosmopolitan English - a lingua franca ... that is different from what native English speakers use unconsciously in their daily life ... We non-natives are desperately learning English; each word pronounced by us represents our blood, sweat and tears" [6] Native speakers have the challenge of making themselves understood in international settings. Second language speakers should not try to speak and sound like them, they should only make sure they are understood by all, be they native or non-native.

5. Conclusion

English language has become a global language due to first, the results of British colonial expansion and, secondly, global commercial interests. It has become a lingua franca in many countries, including Ghana. Ghanaians are often faced with the challenge of which accent to use when communicating with each other and with outsiders. Most of the tutors from Offinso College of Education who participated in this study expressed positive responses to their non-native speaker's accents. Not only did the idea of having a native speaker's accent hold no attraction for them but they also found it strange because it would not represent their L1 identity. The majority of participants in this study preferred to use their non-native accents in attempting to adopt those of the native speaker.

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