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Perceptions of the Students of the English Language Degree of the Higher Institute of Languages About the American, British, and Paraguayan Accents of English

Percepciones de los Estudiantes de la Carrera Lengua Inglesa del Instituto Superior de Lenguas Sobre los Acentos Estadounidense, Británico y Paraguayo del Inglés

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ABSTRACT

This exploratory research aims to understand the perceptions that students of the English Language Degree of the Higher Institute of Languages (Instituto Superior de Lenguas), situated in Paraguay, have over the American, British and Paraguayan accents of English. Following a mixed-methods approach, 55 students from first, second, third, and fourth year answered a survey in which they first listened to audio recordings of each of the mentioned English accents and then answered Likert-scale questions rating them. Then, they specified whether they wanted to sound like a native speaker or not and why. The results show that, when rating these accents, there is a slight bias towards the British and American accents of English: while the Paraguayan accent scored higher for the categories 'clear', 'easy to understand', and 'not harsh', participants showed a preference for native accents in the categories 'attractive', 'beautiful', and 'correct'. Furthermore, when asked how they would like to sound, a majority of students answered wanting to sound like a native speaker. When comparing the answers of first- and second-year students to third- and fourth-year students, there were no significant differences, except for the reasons they provided as to how they would like to sound. First and second year students seem to have stricter ideas as to how speakers of English should sound like, idealizing native speakers and worrying about understandability, while third- and fourth-year students show a strong sense of awareness in regard to accent discrimination.

Keywords: English; native accent; Paraguayan accent; non-native accents; non-native speaker.

RESUMEN

Esta investigación exploratoria apunta a entender las percepciones que los estudiantes de la carrera de Licenciatura en Lengua Inglesa del Instituto Superior de Lenguas (ubicado en Paraguay) tienen sobre los acentos de inglés estadounidense, británico y paraguayo. Siguiendo un enfoque de métodos mixtos, 55 estudiantes de primer,

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segundo, tercer y cuarto año respondieron una encuesta en la cual primero escucharon grabaciones de audio de cada uno de los acentos de inglés ya mencionados y luego respondieron preguntas del tipo escala de Likert calificando los mismos. Luego, especificaron si les gustaría sonar como un hablante nativo o no y por qué. Los resultados demuestran que, al calificar a estos acentos, hay una ligera inclinación hacia los acentos estadounidense y británico del inglés. Si bien el acento paraguayo tuvo calificaciones más altas en las categorías “claro”, “fácil de entender” y “fuerte”, los participantes mostraron preferencia hacia los acentos nativos en las categorías “atractivo”, “hermoso” y “correcto”. Asimismo, al ser preguntados cómo les gustaría sonar, una mayoría de los estudiantes respondieron querer sonar como un hablante nativo. Al comparar las respuestas de los alumnos de primer y segundo año con las respuestas de los alumnos de tercer y cuarto año, no hay diferencias significativas, excepto por las razones mencionadas al por qué les gustaría sonar de tal manera. Los alumnos de primer y segundo año parecen tener ideas más estrictas sobre cómo los hablantes de inglés deberían sonar, idealizando a los hablantes nativos y preocupándose por la inteligibilidad, mientras que los alumnos de tercer y cuarto año mostraron un fuerte sentido de percepción en cuanto a la discriminación por acentos.

Palabras clave: Inglés; acento nativo; acento paraguayo; acentos no nativos; hablantes no nativos.

Introduction

There seems to be a general belief among English as a Second Language speakers that a ‘native accent’ is desirable or what they aspire for (Sung 2016). This leads some of them to view different accents as unattractive, or to correlate them to a low English proficiency or low level of intelligence (Szymańska-Tworek 2013, Sung 2016, Shah 2019), which is generally not true. The existence of accent reduction courses or English courses whose advertisements state ideas similar to “sound like a native speaker”, as well as the negative experiences of immigrants (Piller 2002, Hosoda 2012) and students (Chin 2010) who speak English as a Lingua Franca or English as a Second Language motivates us to explore the topic. Since there are no published studies about the perceptions of different accents of English in Paraguay, this study aims to shed light on the topic and contribute to the body of literature to further understand how accents are perceived in this country.

Lippi-Green (2012) defines an L1 accent as something everyone has, a structured variation of a language closely related to the phonological side of it. It’s something that varies from person to person, and ‘accent’ is a very fluid category. Likewise, she defines L2 accent in relation to how the speaker’s L1 influences the way they speak their L2 accent—in the case of this book and this research, how the L1 influences the way their English sounds.

L2 accents are typically scrutinized. People with an L2 accent tend to not have as many opportunities to climb up their workplace (Hosoda 2012), tend to not be believed (Lev-Ari and Keysar 2010), and are targets of accent discrimination based on ethnocentrism (Chakraborty 2017). This scrutiny is born out of the belief of a standard English accent; the idealized ‘native speaker’, marking it as a benchmark for learning English (Szymańska-Tworek 2013). It is important to explore this topic as it shines a light on the standards and pressure L2 students have to meet the idealized ‘native’ English accent. We find ourselves in a very specific situation regarding it: we are students of an English bachelor in a country that does not have English as any of its main languages, therefore, the way we view our accents can vary from the findings in the literature.

Literature review

This literature review goes over the different uses attributed to the English language, accents, and experiences of speakers of this language. It explores how its different uses and users face different realities and perceive the language, standards for speaking it, and other speakers differently. It aims to shed light on the topic of accent-based discrimination and the

experiences of immigrants and members of educational communities as speakers of English as a Second Language in a country such as Paraguay, where speakers are bilingual, but English is not one of the main languages.

English Language

The English language is nowadays widespread, and its uses and users cannot be reduced in a unique, universal way. This language, according to Mahboob (2014), varies even for monolingual speakers, in what he calls different ‘Englishes’, as it is used according to the situation these speakers find themselves in. In this review, we explore English as a First Language (EL1), English as a Second Language (EL2), and English as a Lingua Franca (ELF), as well as recognizing the existence of ‘standard’ varieties of this language and ‘non-standard’ varieties. Lippi-Green (2012) makes a distinction between First and Second Language, explaining that a First Language is the language that is first acquired by children from a very young age, and that a Second Language is any language learned after the first language acquisition. As for the standard varieties, the ‘Standard American Accent’ and ‘Received Pronunciation’ are mentioned in this study. The ‘Standard American Accent’, as explained by Kretzschmar and Meyer (2013), is the standard taught in grammar books and in school, which Americans are reinforced to correct their spelling and speaking to. The ‘Received Pronunciation’, also known as ‘The Queen’s English’, is what corresponds to the standard for British English. Crystal (2022) explains how this Received Pronunciation dates back to the 18th century and represented prestige and pertaining to the upper class. Finally, Jenkins (2009, p. 25) quotes Seidlhofer (2011, p. 7), who defines English as a Lingua Franca as “English being used as the common language of choice, among speakers who come from different linguacultural backgrounds” which allows for a better understanding of the experiences explained below in this literature review.

Accents

Lippi-Green (2012) describes L2 accent as the “breakthrough of native language phonology into the target language,” thus, influencing the way speakers pronounce everything in English. Regarding accent perceptions, Jenkins (2008) discusses the perceptions of ELF speakers’ perceptions of their accents in her study, not before reminding that there is no such thing as a ‘correct’ English, which is what ELF students constantly need the pressure to achieve.

Jenkins (2008) conducted a study where she interviewed different non-native English speakers groups. In the first part of the study, she asked them to rank the United States, United Kingdom, Australian, Swedish, Indian, New Zealand, Japanese, Canadian, German, Chinese, and other variations of English. For this part of the study, accents that were closer to a native speaker one ranked first or very high. For the second part of the study, she tested likeability, correctness, pleasantness and familiarity; and again, the US and UK English resulted with high scores. For the final part of the study, participants were asked to describe these accents, and native accents were met with praise. On the other hand, accents that were further from the perceived normative were described as ‘harsh’, ‘aggressive’, ‘choppy’, ‘incomprehensible’, ‘broken’, ‘appalling’, and more (Jenkins, 2008).

Fayer and Krasinski (1987) studied this topic from a different perspective: instead of focusing on ‘attractiveness’ as a criteria, they focused on ‘irritation’ in native and non-native speakers whose L1 was Spanish. While native speakers scored a lower level of irritability, non-native speakers found the Hispanic-accented English to be severely irritating, and had a higher

tendency of noting errors done when speaking English. Fayer and Krasinski (1987) then theorize that perhaps non-native speakers find themselves more embarrassed by mistakes done by other non-native speakers struggling with (in this context specifically) English than a native speaker would feel.

Immigrant experiences with L2 accents

Immigrants whose countries made them take English as their Lingua Franca face different kinds of situations. For instance, reducing their accents in order to ‘pass’ as a native speaker, being met with condescension after revealing English was their L2 (Piller, 2002), being less likely to be hired, to be promoted, and being rated as less competent than a native speaker (Hosoda, 2012), being not listened to when speaking, being asked to speak properly, being laughed at, being purposely misunderstood with no effort to communicate (Derwing, 2003), and other forms of accent-based discrimination. These experiences and situations do not only shape how they socialize, but also how they perceive different accents and theirs.

Students’ experiences with L2 accents

When asked about whether they prefer either native or non-native speaker teachers, students have not shown a certain preference. However, when asked about fluency and pronunciation, they stated preferring a native speaker teacher (Santana-Williamson, 2002; Levis et al., 2017). In these studies, students were also asked to differentiate between native and non-native speakers. After being exposed to audio recordings, in neither of the studies were students able to correctly discern a native speaker from a non-native speaker.

In another note, McCrocklin and Link (2016) explore ESL students’ perspectives on their accents and its ties to their identity, where they showed feeling neutral about their accent. However, when being asked about obtaining a native-like accent, they expressed desire for it because of reasons that ranged from believing it would mean higher proficiency, better understanding, to believing their native peers would like or understand them better.

The study

Research objectives

The general objective of the study is to explore the perception bilingual university students of an English bachelor in Paraguay have of native and non-native English accents. The specific objectives of the study are to determine the causes that might lead to having certain perceptions towards native or non-native accents and to establish the differences between first and second year students’ perceptions towards native and non-native accents, and third and fourth year students’ perceptions towards native and non-native accents.

Hypothesis

The participants of this study show preference towards native English accents over the Paraguayan English accent.

Limitations, delimitations, and ethical concerns

This study presents some limitations related to the sample size as well as the generalizability. This research focuses on a group of students from a specific university in Asunción. It is difficult to gauge a generalized sentiment from this alone, as it does not take into account students learning English in English institutes, students of this same career in different universities, and non-students who utilize English as their second language. Another weakness of this study is that it can have a certain degree of response bias, however, the questions have been adapted from previous questionnaires utilized throughout the literature of this topic, so as to lessen the bias and make it more objective. Likewise, the final questions of the survey allow the interviewee to explain their answer in-depth.

The participants of this study will be protected by the anonymity of the survey. The authors of this thesis cannot access the respondents' personal information or e-mail. There is a question where the respondents are asked for their email address if they would like to be part of a follow-up group, but this is entirely optional and up to each person to give their contact information if they wish to do so. Regardless, their personal information will remain confidential and their answers anonymous.

Methodology

Type of study

This study follows a mixed-methods explanatory approach (Creswell and Creswell, 2017). We believe this is the most suitable approach for the study, as it has not been explored in the country yet. It will allow for a larger sample size, surveying all the English Degree students at the Instituto Superior de Lenguas (ISL), while still being able to delve into their thoughts and opinions.

Setting and participants

The participants of the study are all ISL students of the English Language Degree. For the first part of the study, participants will be provided with an online survey link and a QR code to it during class hours but being given the opportunity to answer whenever they feel more comfortable to do so. Class representatives will also be asked to share the survey in their respective WhatsApp groups. For the second part of the study, students who voluntarily left their emails to be part of focus groups and that show extreme preference towards the American and British or Paraguayan English accent, as well as neutrality towards all accents in the survey, were selected to be part of focus groups. They were interviewed online following a semi-structured interview based on their answers.

Data collection

First, an online survey was conducted. This online survey has five sections. The first section asks what year they are currently in the English Degree. The second, third, and fourth sections are similar: they all have 7 Likert-scale questions where they are asked to rate the accent they have just listened to based on how clear, harsh, easy to understand, correct, beautiful, attractive, and elegant it is. Students need to rate these from 1 (not at all) to 5 (very). The second section deals with American English, the third with British English, and the fourth with Paraguayan English. The fifth and final section has one yes/no question, asking whether they would like to speak like a native speaker or not, followed by an open-ended question,

where they need to explain why. Lastly, there is an optional prompt where they are asked to leave their email in case they want to be part of a follow-up. The adjectives used on the Likert-scale questions were chosen based on the answers participants provided in two of the accent perception studies quoted in this research: Jenkins (2008) and Szymańska-Tworek (2013).

Second, 4 participants with the preferences stated above were chosen. These participants were interviewed online via Gmail. These were semi-structured types of interviews, and the questions were adapted to the answers these specific students provided in the first part of the study.

Data analysis

Our study follows a mixed-methods methodology, thus, data analysis is divided into two parts, quantitative and qualitative. For the quantitative part of the study, we organized and processed the results from the Likert scales and the yes/no question obtained through Google Forms in Google Spreadsheets. We used descriptive statistics to express the results of what the respondents expressed. The results were expressed on bar graphs for easier understanding of the data obtained. For the qualitative part of the study, we followed an inductive double coding system and analyzed the answers on Google Spreadsheets. For the focus groups, we followed a holistic approach to qualitative analysis and expressed conclusions in order to understand our respondents' opinions better and communicate results as clearly as possible.

Results

As mentioned previously, the participants were asked to complete a survey which consists of closed-ended questions and an open-ended question. The survey has five sections. In the first section, they were asked about the course they were currently attending. In the second, third, and fourth section, students were asked to first listen to a voice recording of an English speaker (a native American English speaker, a native British English speaker, and a Paraguayan English speaker correspondingly), and then answer 5 point Likert-scale questions (1 being not at all and 5 being very) with their opinion of each accent. Finally, in the fifth section, they first answered a yes/no question, followed by an open-ended question. After processing their answers, four students were chosen to participate in semi-structured interviews.

In order to have a clearer image to help answer and to better understand the objectives of this research, the results will be presented in two parts. The first part will present the general answers, showing the quantitative answers provided by all the participants involved in the study. The second part will compare the answers provided by first and second year students, and third- and fourth-year students.

General answers

There are a total of 55 participants in this study. There are respondents of all different courses of the English Bachelor's degree, from first through fourth year during the 2023 academic period. Out of the 55 participants, 18 (32.7%) were in first year, 9 (16.4%) were in second year, 15 (27.3%) were in third year, and 13 (23.6%) were in fourth year.

As for the second section of the survey, the American accent was rated by a majority as very clear, very easy to understand, not harsh at all, and correct. For the last few categories, students are mostly neutral on how beautiful, how attractive, and how elegant it is. Despite this, it's worth noting that the positive votes on these categories are still outweighing the negative

ones. The one exception is its elegance, where people are split exactly with seventeen voters divided between considering it very elegant and elegant, and not elegant and not elegant at all.

Table 1. American accent in the general results

	1	2	3	4	5
Clear	0	0	10	16	29
Harsh	30	13	8	3	1
Easy to understand	0	0	5	16	34
Correct	0	1	9	22	23
Beautiful	3	3	18	17	14
Attractive	4	4	26	12	9
Elegant	5	12	21	10	7

As for the third section of the survey, the British accent is considered to be very clear, not harsh at all, somewhat easy to understand, and very correct, but there are still a number of votes in each category that veer away from the majority. It was also considered by the majority of students to be very beautiful, very attractive, and very elegant. The negative and neutral votes are few compared to the positive votes.

Table 2. British accent in the general results

	1	2	3	4	5
Clear	1	4	13	17	20
Harsh	18	13	10	10	4
Easy to understand	0	4	20	13	28
Correct	0	4	13	13	25
Beautiful	2	1	11	17	24
Attractive	2	2	11	17	23
Elegant	2	2	8	17	26

As for the third section of the survey, the Paraguayan accent is considered to be very clear, not harsh at all, and very easy to understand. Although the correct category might be mainly neutral, there are still a good amount of votes rating it with a four and a five. Students were neutral about its beauty, its attractiveness, and its elegance. While more people thought it was beautiful, for the remaining two categories, it's split evenly on the people who voted as it being not attractive and attractive, as well as the people who voted it to be not elegant and elegant.

Table 3. Paraguayan accent in the general results

	1	2	3	4	5
Clear	1	1	9	17	27
Harsh	17	12	15	7	4
Easy to understand	0	0	8	21	26
Correct	0	2	21	15	17
Beautiful	1	7	19	16	12
Attractive	4	7	25	13	6
Elegant	4	10	26	9	6

As for the fifth section of the survey, when asked if they would like to sound like a native speaker, 33 (60%) of them answered yes, while 22 (40%) of them answered no.

Qualitative results

The responses of students who mentioned that they would like to sound like a native speaker (33 total) fell under the following categories: benchmark of the language, fluency, native speaker idealization, understandability, accent discrimination, preference, and professional requirement. Amongst these categories, 11 responses were related to the benchmark of the language, which refers to their desire to elevate their accent, pronunciation or their English as a whole to a certain standard which is considered “good” or “better.” Some of these students mentioned a native accent being “the goal;” wanting to have “a good english;” to “sound as good as possible;” and for their accent to be “super accurate.” Within this category, 3 responses also match fluency, where students mentioned wanting to “be fluent” and “to be able to pronounce fluently,” as something they would like to achieve. The next category, native speaker idealization, recorded 9 responses. This category expresses students’ beliefs of native accents or native speakers sounding good, being better, or superior in comparison to non-native accents. Some of these students mentioned wanting to sound “good,” “natural,” or “neutral;” or that “it would be nice to sound like them, without an accent when speaking.” One of the answers in this category states the following:

I want to do things correctly, and I want to be great at everything I do. If I speak a language I want to sound like a native speaker because I want to hear myself and be sure that I'm just as good speaking a language as a native speaker is. And even though I know that I wasn't born around other native speakers, I also know that it is an achievable goal (to sound native). It might sound bad, but I believe that those who speak with an accent are not trying hard enough (though I understand that accents are not something bad at all, and what matters here is that you're speaking a language).

Likewise, there were 8 responses in understandability, which refers to students' intention of being understood by others. Some answers mentioned it would make them sound "clear," while others mention the ability "to express exactly what I want," the feeling that "the full meaning of the word can be found when you sound like a native speaker," that others, including native speakers, would understand them better, and that "it would give more credibility to my words." Furthermore, 6 answers fit into the accent discrimination category, which refers to students wanting a native accent in order to avoid being victims of accent discrimination. A student mentioned wanting "to pass better as one" in case they decide to travel or work in an English-speaking job, while other answers read that "usually people have prejudices against people with accents," or that "people judges you base[d] on your accent and intonation" and being closer to a native speaker accent could open more professional opportunities, as well as wanting to avoid situations such as being a victim of racism, as "sometimes a non-native speaker suffers from racism." In this category, two responses also corresponded with the benchmark of the language category. The first response that matches both categories states that "Speaking like a native speaker is important for effective communication, social integration, professional opportunities, academic success, enhanced credibility, reduced misunderstandings, improved listening and comprehension, and increased cultural awareness. It fosters clearer understanding and better relationships, offering competitive advantages in various fields." The second response reads:

Sounding like a native speaker is, for many, the ultimate goal of language learning. To sound and express yourself like you grew up in that country, speaking as if the language is your mother tongue. Personally though, I suppose the reason why I want to sound native-like is mostly about external perception. Native-like pronunciation lets other people know you have a high level of language mastery (which you may not have, but it's how people perceive you). And because I'm going to work as a teacher in the future, developing a native-like accent is important. Unfortunately, people who sound native tend to be regarded as "better at English" and therefore are hired more. And I say unfortunately because there are some amazing ESL teachers who are skilled educators and are often disregarded because they don't sound like a native speaker. This native-speakerism happens mostly overseas though. I haven't seen it happen here in Paraguay. But that is essentially why.

Furthermore, 5 answers denote personal preferences or reasons. These answers stated: "for me it will be important," "because I think it sounds really nice," "I feel it would be more enjoyable for me to sound like one," "I like native accents." One of these five answers explained how this person wanted to dominate different English accents, in order to be able to switch to a specific context depending on where and who they are speaking to:

Although most native speakers may [not] speak well the English language, I'd rather sound as a Native Speaker who knows well the language, and by that I mean a native speaker that has a domain of the English language. If I speak English in the US I'd rather sound as an American [speaker]. If I speak English in Great Britain I'd rather sound as a British [speaker] and so on. Every accent has its beauty and I like to acquire that beauty depending on the place I go. (I don't know if that makes sense).

Finally, 1 student mentions wanting to achieve a native-like accent due to a professional requirement, as they have expressed working in the dubbing industry, which requires them to imitate characters' accents to the best of their abilities.

On the other hand, the responses of students who mentioned that they would not like to sound like a native speaker (22 total) fell under the following categories: identity, preference,

pride, being content, and exceptions. Amongst these responses, 10 match the category of identity. This category represents those students who mentioned that their accent was part of their identity or made their English unique. Some of these responses stated as follows: “I like my accent and what it embraces, my accent reflects that I had to learn a whole new language. That doesn't mean that I don't want to sound correct and clear, but I don't mind if my accent is noticeable;” “Having our own way to express ourselves and “sound” makes every person unique and perfect. Doesn't matter what others may think as long as what one's trying to communicate is clear;” “I want people to know, or to be aware, that I am latin american.” Another response stated:

Because I've made peace with the fact that I may never reach the pronunciation of a native speaker, and although I understand that due to power relations, I might be better perceived if I were to speak without my Paraguayan accent, I still believe it's an essential part of my identity. I understand that having an accent doesn't mean I cannot be advanced or proficient in English, or even bilingual. Therefore, I don't place much importance on accents.

Likewise, 5 students expressed finding pride in their accents, the majority of them having expressed it being part of their identities, thus, being part of the previous category too. These answers said: “Before I wanted to sound as native as possible but then it hit me that I’m always gonna have an accent of a non native speaker as I am bilingual. Now I’ve come to peace with it and I’m proud of it;” “I have no interest in such a thing because I'd much rather have my own way of speaking the language, rather than trying to have a sanitized approach at it;” that they treasure their way of speaking and that “[their] accent is beautiful as it is, the whole concept of a native accent is very conflicting.” Furthermore, 4 students mentioned being content with their accent. These respondents stated that, as long as they were understood, they did not see the need in changing their accents; that accents are diverse on their own; and that they would like to improve their speaking skills but not change their accent. Moreover, 4 responses correspond to students’ personal preferences. These students mentioned that sounding like a native is “not incredibly important” or “not necessary” and that they like the way they speak. Finally, there were 3 exceptions. The first one is a student who, despite having answered that they would not like to sound like a native speaker, they then proceeded to clarify that they “would like to sound like a native speaker, but [they] think pronunciation, intonation, fluency and accuracy are more important than having a native accent.” The second exception is a student who mentioned being a native English speaker, who stated as follows:

I'm native in English and for the longest time, I wanted to not have a prominent accent when speaking it. As the years went by, I've met numerous people that have complimented it (whether it was real or not, I don't know) and I've grown to be quite fond of it.

Lastly, the third response which falls under these exceptions stated: “Almost sounds like native language, but not.” We believe this person may have either stated that they do not speak with a native accent, would like to do so, but cannot; or that they have an almost native-like accent, but would rather not speak that way.

Focus groups

After collecting and processing all 55 answers in the survey, we proceeded to choose 4 students who would be part of focus groups. We chose 2 students who showed preference towards native accents of English, 1 student who showed preference towards the Paraguayan English accent, and 1 student who showed a neutral stance towards the accents presented in the survey. These students were interviewed via Gmail individually. Out of the four students, three answered the questions sent to them: one who showed preference towards the American accent, one who was neutral towards the accents presented in the study, and one who showed preference towards the Paraguayan accent. These responses will be presented below under pseudonyms. These pseudonyms were randomly chosen, using fruit names in Guaraní, one of the official languages in Paraguay.

On one hand, we have Mbokaja, who showed preference towards native accents of English. Mbokaja mentions that they have not received any remarks or comments about the way their accent sounds or English not being their first language. Mbokaja mentioned that they use English for work and communication purposes, as their job involves translating administrative documents and their friends speak English. Mbokaja was then asked about the factors which influence their preference towards the American accent over the Paraguayan, to which they responded that being a perfectionist is a reason why. Mbokaja stated that, when they were small, they were expected to speak English like a native speaker, so the Paraguayan accent “would grate on [their] nerves” as Mbokaja believed everyone around them should speak like a native speaker as well. Finally, Mbokaja was asked the reasons why they felt the way they did about the three accents in the survey. Mbokaja then explained that the American accent sounds more neutral to them as that is the one they speak, and for this reason, they do not feel it to be particularly sophisticated or similar. The British accent presented in the survey “sounds more posh” to them as the media they consume suggests so, despite there not being anything “inherently classy” about it. Despite Mbokaja stating that they “know that native-like pronunciation is not part of communicative proficiency,” they feel that the Paraguayan accent “sounds like someone is not trying.”

On the other hand, we have Pakova and Arasa, who previously responded not wanting to have a native-like accent. Firstly, Pakova mentioned not having received any remarks or comments about their accent or English not being their L1. Pakova then explained that their primary goal in using any language is “to express ideas and emotions about and emanating from the world around [them],” always prioritizing the ability to express, leaving its practical applications in professional fields as a secondary goal. When asked about the factors that influence their preference towards the Paraguayan accent of English, Pakova stated that they do not like the British nor the Americans, preferring listening to “an accent that is firmly planted elsewhere other than the, let’s say, ‘native lands’ of the language.” The factor which makes them prefer the Paraguayan accent over the others is “not because it’s Paraguayan, but because it’s not American nor British.” Finally, the reason why they “show tolerance” towards certain English accents or “actively enjoy listening to” them is rooted in Pakova’s lived experiences and their perception and knowledge about the world surrounding them.

Lastly, Arasa did mention having received comments and remarks about their English accent, though they were “not necessarily negative.” Arasa works in a bilingual school, so they use English for work and communication. When asked about their reasons for their accent preferences, Arasa stated that, for them, “learning a whole new language is a major achievement, even more so when it comes to learning after talking practically your whole life in your mother language,” which is why they consider that, as long as others can understand what one is saying, having an accent other than a native-like should not be a problem. Arasa

asked for clarification for one of the questions, which sought to understand the factors that influenced their neutrality towards the accents presented in the survey. They were provided with a clarification, but there was no further response.

Discussion

The results of this study indicate that, despite there not being a strong negative sentiment towards the Paraguayan English accent, students show a preference for native speaker-like accents. The adjectives on this survey were based on past research utilizing these factors to measure perceptions of accents (such as Szymńska-Tworek, 2013). In this study, participants seem to hold a neutral stance—oftentimes leaning to negative—towards the Paraguayan accent when it comes to measurements of beauty. When measuring criteria like ‘clear’, ‘easy to understand’, and ‘not harsh’, the Paraguayan accent garnered positive responses. To compare, when asked to rank the harshness of the accents, the Paraguayan accent was favored over the British accent, which was largely perceived as harsh. Likewise, the Paraguayan accent was voted as easier to understand than the British accent. However, when it comes to the more specific criteria, such as ‘beautiful’, ‘correct,’ ‘attractive’, and ‘elegant’, the results show a bigger bias towards native-speakers being perceived in a more positive light than the Paraguayan accent. This is in line with the results of Jenkins (2008), where in similar categories like correctness and pleasantness, the US and UK accents seemed to be favored among the speakers. It seems as though despite the Paraguayan accent not being necessarily ranked, the trend of native speakers being favored can also be found in these results. Likewise, Jenkins’ study points out that the participants found their accent to be fine, but ideally, it would be better to sound like a native speaker. The Paraguayan accent is not perceived as something terrible or awful, rather, the sentiment that it’s ‘fine’ but the native accents are ‘better’ are in agreement with Jenkins’ findings.

Steward et al. (1985) talked about the perceptions of American and British accents, and in his study, the participants had agreed that the British accent demonstrated a higher class, despite it not being as likable as its American counterpart. Likewise, American accents were considered lower class, but more likable. Similarly, in this study, the British accent is considered harsh, i.e, not as likable. The American accent also meets a neutral stance when faced with the criteria of attractiveness or beauty. And yet, both of these are still placed higher than the Paraguayan accent. To be more specific, the British accent was unanimously considered as ‘correct’, ‘beautiful’, ‘elegant’, and ‘attractive’, despite it being mixed in criteria such as ‘easy to understand’ or ‘very clear’, as well as being considered a ‘harsh’ accent. With the American accent, while generally receiving a neutral response in most responses except ‘not harsh’ and ‘very clear’, the positive votes in the remaining categories are greater than Paraguayan votes. The Paraguayan accent was perceived as clear, not harsh, unanimously considered easy to understand, but it differs with the native speaker counterparts in beauty, attractiveness, correctness, and attractiveness. For example, whilst both American and Paraguayan accents have the majority of voters take a neutral stance regarding its attractiveness, more people still considered the American accent to be more attractive than the Paraguayan one.

It can be said that the particular reasons related to likability are why students would have a desire to show like a native speaker. Given the majority would rather sound like a native speaker, and that the native accents are favored while the Paraguayan accent tends to be received with a neutral stance, it shows a preference for the British and American accent.

Moving on to the qualitative aspect of the survey, the answers provided by the respondents as for why they would or would not like to sound like a native speaker help shed light on what Paraguayan speakers of English might feel in regards to different accents. The reasons mentioned by students from both different perspectives are similar to what has been presented in the literature.

On one hand, the students who mentioned wanting to sound like a native speaker idealize native English accents and view it as a benchmark they should or must achieve, while also seeking to be understood by others and to not be discriminated against in foreign environments. The students who manifested wanting to achieve a “better” English, wanting “to sound good” or wanting to sound “without an accent” might hold these ideas because they were taught that native-speaker performance should be “the goal,” as was mentioned in the studies of Szymańska-Tworek (2013) and Butcher (2005). Colonialism and bias against Hispanic accents (Butcher 2005; Shah 2019; Nelson et al. 2016) could potentially be factors influencing the way non-native English speakers feel, especially those who idealize native speakers and native accents. Some students did mention that they were well aware that a native-like accent does not equal proficiency, and that there is nothing wrong with diversity within accents, yet one of them could not help but feel that those who do not speak in a native-like accent are just not trying hard enough.

In regards to students who mentioned wanting to avoid accent discrimination, most of them showed awareness (with some showing strong awareness) of how their accent could cost them work positions, credibility, and make them targets of discrimination (Lev-Ari and Keysar 2010; Hosoda 2012; Piller 2002). What motivates them is not an aversion towards their own accent, but the desire to avoid unpleasant situations and experiences.

On the other hand, the results of students who mentioned not wanting to sound like a native speaker were not much different from the findings in Sung’s studies (2013; 2016). Most of these students mentioned their identity being the reason why they did not want to change the way they speak. This majority expressed that their accents represent where they are from, who they are, the fact that they had learned an entirely different language from their mother tongues. Some students also base the decision of using their own English accent because they strongly reject American and British people and culture. In regards to students being content with their accent and those proud of it and their identities too, some did clarify that they still wanted to improve the grammatical aspects of their English.

Regarding the focus groups, Mbokaja, Pakova and Arasa provide insight about how they feel towards different English accents. Some of their attitudes were found in previous research, with other students expressing feelings similar to theirs. For instance, Pakova’s disgust towards the American and British people leading them to dislike their accents is an experience also mentioned in Sung’s (2013) study, where participants mentioned preferring speaking with a non-native accent as they did not want to be compared with or related to the national identities of native English speakers. Mbokaja’s unpleasantness with the Paraguayan accent despite being aware that someone’s accent does not define their proficiency is also a product of colonialism and courses which emphasize on “correcting” accents (Butcher, 2005), which installs the belief that perfection equals native-like accents. Lastly, Arasa also mentions reasons similar to what McCrocklin and Link (2016) found in their study. Despite showing neutrality when rating accents in the Likert-scales, Arasa did not want to speak with a native accent because they find pride in the effort it takes learning a language apart from your mother tongue.

Comparative answers

For this part of the analysis, the answers of all 55 participants will be divided in two different groups by the courses they are attending. Group A, represented by color teal in charts, will show the answers from first and second year students, which are 27 total. Group B, represented by color yellow in charts, will show the answers from third and fourth year students, which are 28 total.

Table 4. Comparative results of the American accent

Group A	1	2	3	4	5	Group B	1	2	3	4	5
Clear	0	0	7	9	11	Clear	0	0	3	7	18
Harsh	11	10	5	1	0	Harsh	19	3	3	2	5
Easy to understand	0	0	5	9	13	Easy to understand	0	0	0	7	21
Correct	0	1	4	14	8	Correct	0	0	5	8	15
Beautiful	2	1	9	11	4	Beautiful	1	2	9	6	10
Attractive	2	2	14	6	3	Attractive	2	2	12	6	6
Elegant	2	8	10	5	12	Elegant	3	4	11	5	5

For the American accent, while the overall result does not diverge from the ones mentioned before, there are instances where Group B votes more positively than Group A. This is emphasized in the categories of Easy to understand, correct, beautiful, elegant, where Group A is more reserved about voting with a 5 than Group B is. For example, we have fifteen people in Group B who voted ‘very correct’, but we have fourteen people who voted simply ‘correct’ in Group A.

Table 5. Comparative results of the British accent

Group A	1	2	3	4	5	Group B	1	2	3	4	5
Clear	1	2	9	11	4	Clear	0	2	4	6	16
Harsh	7	9	5	5	1	Harsh	11	4	5	5	3
Easy to understand	0	4	13	7	3	Easy to understand	0	0	7	7	15
Correct	0	1	4	14	8	Correct	0	1	8	5	14
Beautiful	0	0	6	10	11	Beautiful	2	1	5	8	13
Attractive	0	1	6	10	10	Attractive	2	1	5	8	13
Elegant	0	2	3	8	14	Elegant	2	0	5	9	12

With the British accent, a similar pattern is observed. Group A is less charitable with their votes than Group B in the categories for clear, easy to understand, and correct. However, an exception can be found in the last categories: beautiful, attractive, and elegant, where Group A rates it more positively than Group B.

Table 6. Comparative results of the Paraguayan accent

Group A	1	2	3	4	5	Group B	1	2	3	4	5
Clear	1	1	5	11	9	Clear	0	0	4	6	18
Harsh	8	6	8	4	1	Harsh	9	6	7	3	3
Easy to understand	0	0	4	15	8	Easy to understand	0	0	4	6	18
Correct	0	2	13	7	5	Correct	0	0	8	8	12
Beautiful	0	5	10	7	5	Beautiful	1	2	9	9	7
Attractive	1	4	16	5	1	Attractive	3	3	9	8	5
Elegant	1	8	13	3	2	Elegant	3	2	13	6	4

For the Paraguayan accent, while similar, there are more categories where Group A rates it more negatively than the other two accents. Group A rates the Paraguayan accent more negatively in the clear category, where it outright has negative votes compared to Group B. Next, the Correct votes are more neutral, and there are two votes for not correct, which Group B does not have. For attractive, the difference is huge—the neutral votes and the extremely low positive votes directly contrasts Group B’s assessment. Lastly, for Elegant, despite having the same amount of neutral votes, A shows more of a negative perception than Group B.

As for the fifth section of the survey in the comparative results, for Group A, 16 students answered yes, while 11 students answered no. For Group B, 17 students answered yes, while 11 students answered no.

Table 7. Comparative results of yes, I would like to sound like a native speaker

Reason	Group A	Group B	Total
Benchmark of the language	5	6	11
Native speaker idealization	3	6	9
Understandability	8	0	8
Accent discrimination	2	4	6
Fluency	2	1	3
Preference	2	3	5
Professional requirement	0	1	1

Table 8. Comparative results of no, I would not like to sound like a native speaker

Reason	Group A	Group B	Total
Identity	5	5	10
Pride	2	3	5
Preference	3	1	4
Content	2	2	4
Exception	1	2	3

As for the reasons mentioned by students regarding why they would or would not like to sound like a native speaker, there are no significant differences between Group A and Group B, both in the affirmation and negation, except for one of the reasons. Only Group A mentioned

understandability. There were 0 students in Group B that mentioned wanting to achieve a native accent in order to be understood by others.

The study shows a slight bias toward native speakers' accents over the Paraguayan accent. Although the margin of difference is not huge, it is present enough for a preference to exist, and it does not mean the Paraguayan accent is lesser than the other two—simply that it is not as favored. Sung (2016) has its participants reporting that they would like to sound like a native speaker, claiming that it would give them a 'higher prestige', as well as facilitating their fluency, comprehension, and more. The study shows a discrepancy in regard to how clear and easy to understand the native speakers' accents are compared to the Paraguayan one, however, the likability criterion wins over it. For the British accent specifically, since it was rated higher in the 'elegant' category, the claim that it gives them a higher prestige seems to be among the students.

The results of this study, specifically when viewing it through Group A's perspective, bears a resemblance to Fayer and Krasinski's (1987) study where they used irritability as a grading criteria. Fayer and Krasinski prove a past hypothesis that non-native speakers tend to be harsher to their non-native speakers peers, another sentiment that is present in the participants. Even when American and British accents had negative votes, the Paraguayan accent would have a higher number of negative votes, or less positive votes in the same categories. It can be said participants are likely to be more critical of a Paraguayan speaker given their position being the same. Likewise, given Group A's preference for the British accent, colonialism is a key factor in the preference. Reinforcing that it's the standard of language and therefore preferring it, echoes back to Butcher (2005) and Chakraborty (2017). The preference of the American accent over the Paraguayan accent also coincides with Levis et al. (2017), where the native speaker's way of talking is considered to be the "right way", or "the proper English." The overall preference of sounding like a native speaker in the final results coincides with the themes of biases for native speakers that are heavily featured in most studies of the literature review.

As for the reasons mentioned by students regarding why they would or would not like to sound like a native speaker, there are no significant differences between Group A and Group B, both in the affirmation and negation, except for one of the reasons. Amongst students who said they would like to sound like a native speaker, it was only in Group A that students mentioned understandability. There were 0 students in Group B that mentioned wanting to achieve a native accent in order to be understood by others. This opens a new question which could be addressed in future research: is there a correlation between the university level of English speakers and whether they aim to use English to communicate or for professional purposes?

Conclusion

This study aimed to explore the perception bilingual university students of an English bachelor in Paraguay have of native and non-native English accents. By utilizing a mixed-methods approach, it sought to determine why certain biases and perceptions towards the accents exist, likewise, to determine if there is a pattern to be found in the answers when dividing the group of students into two groups: 1st and 2nd year, and 3rd and 4th year. The study also hypothesizes that the participants show a preference towards native English accents over the Paraguayan English accent.

The overall results do not show a major difference in how the accents were perceived. The accents were rated similarly, without a single one being favored the most. Although there

are categories where the positive votes for the native accents outweigh the Paraguayan ones, there were numerous instances where the native accents were met with neutral or negative stances, such as when discussing if the accent is easy to understand, harsh, beautiful, and so on. Despite this, the number of students who would prefer to sound like a native speaker outweigh the ones who do not by a small margin of votes. This preference to sound like a native speaker does not imply that the Paraguayan accent is viewed negatively; instead, it simply implies a preference to native-accented English.

Furthermore, the Paraguayan accent is better perceived in some aspects over the American and British English. For example, the Paraguayan accent was unanimously considered to be easy to understand, clearer, and not harsh. Likewise, the American accent and the Paraguayan accent had similar neutral perceptions when it came to the categories of ‘beautiful’, ‘elegant’, ‘correct’, and ‘attractive’: highlighting a rather similar response towards them, while the British accent had more positive reception. Despite this, when comparing the American accent to the Paraguayan one in the aforementioned categories, the American accent still had more positive votes than the Paraguayan one. No matter how easy to understand it is, or how clear it can be, when it came to expressing personal taste in categories like ‘beautiful’ and ‘attractive’, the Paraguayan accent came a bit short compared to the American and British ones. This factor, combined with the number of participants that wanted to sound like a native speaker, proves the hypothesis that there is a preference towards native accents of English over the Paraguayan accent.

When analyzing the results by comparing it in two groups, it appears students that have just started the career (1st and 2nd year students) have stricter standards for what the language should sound like than students who are about to finish it (3rd and 4th year students). Given that 1st and 2nd year are still the early phases of the career, it is possible that they harbor an idealization for native speakers. This group is also more concerned with being understood when speaking to others, especially native speakers, and with how they present themselves to others. Compared to them, students from 3rd and 4th year were more lenient with their grading of the accents. Starting from 3rd year, the subjects given in class take a more critical lens, as well as opening a broader sociological discussion on languages. It is also possible that since they are closer to finishing the career, taking into account everything they learn, that they are aware of how there is no ‘standard’ of language and are conscious about accent discrimination. This is very likely: in the qualitative section of the study, the students from 3rd and 4th year are the ones that mention the most awareness of accent discrimination its manifestations when they are explaining why they want to sound like a native speaker. The awareness of these topics makes them more likely to vote for accents in a more positive manner than their younger counterparts, probably more aware of the ramifications that exist in the language, even if the sentiment of wanting to sound like a native speaker remains. Regardless, comparing the results between them in the question “Would you like to sound like a native speaker?” does not show any real glaring differences.

Aspects that could cause a negative perspective of the Paraguayan accent on the students are colonialism, a benchmark of the language, and native speaker idealization. In the qualitative section of the study, participants have pointed out reasons for wishing to sound like a native speaker being that “it is the standard of the language”, implying it sounds “better”, and therefore developing negative perspectives towards the accent itself and its speakers—some participants believe the native accents are the goal of learning English, some participants imply it’s what all ESL speakers want to achieve, and some believe ESL speakers with an accent are not “trying hard enough” to not have an accent. Of course, as specified before in previous literature, colonialism and its reinforcement of a Standard English is what makes non-native

speakers want to let go of their L1 accent in order to adapt the ‘acceptable’ one—the ‘native speaker’ accent (Tomic, 2013). On the other hand, the acceptance of one’s accent could be linked to a strong self of identity, as well as the pride one feels from the hard-work they put into learning another language—especially one that is not an official language in Paraguay. These positive views are seemingly rooted in a place of self-acceptance: students mentioned thinking that their accent is beautiful as it is, coming to realize that they are fine with how they sound, accepting their identity as bilingual individuals, and wanting others to know when they speak that they are Latin American.

The key differences in these results lie in the details of this investigation. Future researchers could take note of how, in the qualitative section of the research, a trend shows the code of “understandability” is mostly present in Group A (1st and 2nd year). Eight participants mentioned wanting to be understood as a reason for wanting to sound like a native speaker, but zero participants from Group B had this reason for wanting to sound like a native speaker. This could be further explored in future studies, to find out why older students do not have this concern of being ‘understood’, but it is present in younger students.

Likewise, this is an exploratory study. It opens the possibility to continue researching this topic in Paraguay, varying the perspectives and the approaches. This is a small sample, not meant to represent the entire English-speaking community in Paraguay, nor the entirety of the students of this degree. Further research could look into more universities and compare them to the results of this study. Since this study covered adults in a university, there is no research done about teenage English speakers, which constitute a big number of English speakers in Paraguay. This study also does not account for English students at English institutes, which has a different set of rules from university as well as a more diverse amount of students (in terms of age, ethnicity, and more) and tends to have a different ELF environment. Studies could also be made in Paraguayan Bilingual schools, where the curriculum is carried out in English. Another approach for this study could be swapping the sampling from students to teachers.

Future research could also change elements from the instruments and approach it similar to past research: having the students listen to the audios without specifying which audio is a native speaker, and which isn’t, then gather their answers and ask them to identify the speakers (Santana-Williamson, 2002) (Levis et al., 2017). This could help bring further perspectives, since this study labeled the speakers accordingly, and might have influenced the listeners on what to expect from it. Likewise, because of budgeting, all of our speakers were female-presenting. Previous research shows that on top of having a Spanish-accented English, participants were highly influenced if the Spanish-accented English also sounded feminine (Nelson et al., 2016). It is possible that this study could have different results if all the speakers in question were male-presenting, or if they had all been mixed. It could also open the conversation in regard to gender performance in Paraguay, and how the different genders are perceived. It should also be mentioned that all the speakers in this study were in the same age range, which could be another factor influencing the results.

Another approach could be utilizing McCrocklin and Link (2016)’s study on ‘Accent, Identity, and a Fear of Loss’ in order to conduct a deeper, sociological aspect of this study. Paraguayans are intrinsically connected to their indigenous roots, from an identity level to a linguistic one. Research could delve into what it means for Paraguayans to keep their identity afloat when speaking a foreign language, how their learning English links to how they learn Guaraní (or the lack of it), and delving further into what exactly is a Paraguayan identity from an ESL/ELF standpoint. Likewise, it can dive deeper into what it’s like to pass as an English native speaker when one considers the roots of colonialism that accent discrimination has: Paraguay, as a country, is founded on indigenous roots. The nuance and layers that comes with

passing as a speaker of a foreign language, and what it means to mask such a rich culture that has been tried to be erased multiple times like Guaraní in order to 'be accepted' by the 'White people', the same way Tomic (2013) spoke of with Latin Americans in Canada.

This study was also not encompassing all the variations from the selected accents: for example, the reactions could vary if the American English accent had a Southern inflection or the 'valley girl' accent; if the British speaker was from a different part of England or did not sound as 'posh'; if the Paraguayan speaker had a different level of English/an accent closer to the stereotypical 'latino' accent. Likewise, different criteria could be used to measure them in order to gauge more specific responses.

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