The influence of ethnic group affiliation on L2 pronunciation accuracy

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Overview of the study

The study investigates the influence of ethnic group affiliation on L2 pronunciation accuracy. Ethnic group affiliation is defined as a sense of belonging to one's ethnolinguistic group, and pride in being part of a particular group. To examine the relationship between L2 pronunciation accuracy and ethnic group affiliation and the behavioral consequences associated with it, the researchers conducted two studies over 30 years apart, involving L2 learners from two ethnic groups in two different sociopolitical contexts, a conflictual and a non-conflictual.

Research method

The first study, conducted in the 1970s, examined the attitudes of 24 Francophone learners of English toward their peers learning English in Quebec at a pivotal time for Quebecois nationalism. In this conflictual sociopolitical context, the researchers investigated whether Francophone learners would use pronunciation as a means to gauge their degree of affiliation to the Francophone ethnic group. The Francophone learners had to listen to stimulus tapes, each containing 1 nonaccented, 1 moderately accented, and 1 heavily accented speaker. After hearing each tape, the listeners completed the speaker version of the ethnic group affiliation questionnaire and the behavioral scales. At the end of the 30-minute session, they completed a biographical data questionnaire and self-rating version of the ethnic group affiliation scales. Although the method was similar in the second study, the researchers investigated the attitudes of 84 Chinese learners of English toward their peers learning English in Montreal when the two language groups involved were not in conflict.

Results

In a conflictual sociopolitical context (Study 1), listeners responded differently to different accents. Learners thought that nonaccented speakers were significantly less pro-Francophone than heavily accented speakers. Therefore, L2 accent was seen as an indicator of the degree of ethnic group affiliation. Similar results were found in a nonconflictual sociopolitical context where there was no apparent threat to the learners' ethnic group identity (Study 2). However, several findings differed depending on the sociopolitical context. For instance, Chinese raters favored nonaccented speakers in homogenous and heterogenous group settings (Study 2). Thus, the researchers were able to establish a stable link between the degree of accentedness of a learner's speech and their perceived ethnic group affiliation.

Pedagogical Implications/Significance

The results in this article reveal that L2 learning entails the choice between the reward of being efficient in the L2 and the cost of not marking the right identity. Through this study, the researchers urged teachers to practice tolerance in their classroom, by steering clear of the belief that accented speech is inferior. They also emphasized

the importance of becoming aware of the potential role of social forces in the acquisition of L2 pronunciation and the pressures that can exist in their classroom.

Original Text: Gatbonton, E., Trofimovich, P., & Magid, M. (2005). *Learners' ethnic group affiliation and L2 pronunciation accuracy: A sociolinguistic investigation*. TESOL Quarterly, *39*(3), 489-511.