

McCrocklin, S. , & Link, S. (2014). What is identity? ELL and bilinguals' views on the role of accent. In J. Levis & S. McCrocklin (Eds). *Proceedings of the 5<sup>th</sup> Pronunciation in Second Language Learning and Teaching Conference* (pp. 137-144). Ames, IA: Iowa State University.

## WHAT IS IDENTITY? ELL AND BILINGUALS' VIEWS ON THE ROLE OF ACCENT

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Many researchers and theorists have proposed a connection between accent and identity (Celce-Murcia, Brinton, Goodwin, & Griner, 2010; Ochs, 1993; Setter and Jenkins, 2005). Some, however, have gone beyond this, indicating that students fear obtaining a native speaker accent. “To speak an L2 like a native is to take a drastic step into the unknown, accompanied by the unconscious fear of no return...” (Daniels, 1995, p. 6). Yet, this comment may strike many teachers and researchers as surprising because as Sobkowiak points out, “in my whole teaching career I have not met a [student] who would not like to sound like a native, or who would fear to step on this ‘road of no return’” (2005, p. 144). Perhaps the difference in perspective can be explained by a difference in language learning group, those that have successfully spoken English like a native and those that have not. This research study examines the perceptions of English Language Learners (ELLs) and English speaking bilinguals. Subjects participated in a semi-structured interview to discuss their experiences interacting with others and their perceptions of accent and identity. Findings from the interviews suggest that these two groups have very different ideas about accent and identity. Results from this study provide insights into the possible misconceptions and assumptions that underscore our work as educators and researchers and can hopefully be used to inform future teaching in the field of pronunciation.

## INTRODUCTION

Many researchers and theorists have proposed a connection between accent and identity, not only for first language accent but also for second language or foreign accents. Some, however, have gone beyond this, indicating that students fear obtaining a native speaker accent because they might lose part of their identity. Yet, previous research seems to indicate the students overwhelmingly want to obtain a native accent. Research is needed to see the issues of identity, accent, and fear not only from the perspective of English Language Learners (ELLs), but also from the perspective of bilinguals who have successfully obtained a native accent in English.

### Background Information

Identity, “a range of social personae, including social statuses, roles, positions, relationships, and institutional and other relevant community identities one may attempt to claim or assign in the course of social life” (Ochs, 1993, p. 288), is a complex issue due to its non-static, negotiated nature (Marx, 2002). An important component of this definition is the construction of identity through social interaction (see Haslam, 2001 for a discussion of the social identity approach), suggesting that identity is shaped through overlapping circles of internalized group memberships. That is, social identity is not one personal self, but rather by individual-based perception and

self-knowledge of how one relates to various groups, enabling the development of multiple social identities.

Many researchers and theorists have proposed a connection between accent and identity (Celce-Murcia, Brinton, Goodwin, & Griner, 2010; Ochs, 1993; Setter and Jenkins, 2005). This link has been discussed not only for first language accent (Levon, 2006; Johnstone & Kiesling, 2008), but also for second language or foreign accents (Marx, 2002; Rindal, 2010). According to Derwing and Munro (1997), a foreign accent indicates that the sounds are being produced in a way outside of the norm of English. This is not the same as intelligibility, which refers to the ability to understand the words and phrases being spoken. Despite prevailing beliefs that a strong accent would lead to intelligibility issues, Derwing and Munro point out that research has shown that a person can have a strong and noticeable accent without losing intelligibility. This is supported by other research as well (Munro & Derwing, 1995; Flege, Takagi, & Mann, 1995; Munro, Flege, & MacKay, 1996). For example, a native accent could represent identification with or memberships in a group (Celce-Murcia, Brinton, & Goodwin, 2010) or a foreign accent could be a signal that someone is different (Bresnahan, Ohash, Nebashi, Liu, & Shearman, 2002).

Some, however, have gone beyond this, indicating that students fear obtaining a native speaker accent. “To speak an L2 like a native is to take a drastic step into the unknown, accompanied by the unconscious fear of no return...” (Daniels, 1995). In terms of teacher responsibility, Porter and Garvin (1989) further argue:

...A person’s pronunciation is one expression of that person’s self-image. To seek to change someone’s pronunciation—whether of the L1 or of an L2—is to tamper with their self-image, and is thus unethical—morally wrong. (p. 8, as cited in Dalton & Seidlhofer, 1994)

Yet, these attitudes may strike many teachers and researchers as surprising because as Sobkowiak points out, “in my whole teaching career I have not met a [student] who would not like to sound like a native, or who would fear to step on this ‘road of no return’” (2005). Research supports the notion that most students want to sound like native speakers (Andreasson, 1994; Derwing, 2003; Yamaguchi, 2002). For example, Derwing (2003) found that 95% of ELL immigrant respondents in Canada would choose to speak like native speakers if they could.

Previous research into language learning goals, however, has primarily looked at the goals of current language learners. Perhaps the difference in perspective can be explained by a difference in language learning group, those who have successfully spoken English like a native (bilinguals) and those who have not. For the purpose of this study, it is important to note that we are defining a bilingual as a person who, due to having learned two languages from childhood, is fully competent in both languages. Further, regarding pronunciation, “fully competent” is considered to mean having a native or native-like accent. Bilinguals may present a unique view of accent and identity as they often have two very different cultural groups that they interact with. Some of the previous research with bilinguals has examined their expression of dual identities through code-switching (Auer, 2002) or how allegiance to one particular group can affect the view of the usefulness of being bilingual (Norton, 1997). To our knowledge, no studies have been conducted to examine bilinguals’ attitudes towards native accents or fear of identity loss due to a native accent.

## Research Questions

To examine the links between accent and identity further, we wanted to examine the question, “Do bilinguals view the relationship between accent and identity the same as ELL students?” Specifically, we wanted to address the two following research questions:

1. What attitudes and expectations do ELLs and bilinguals hold toward native-like accents?
2. How do ELLs and bilinguals perceive a link between their accent in the L2 to their identity?

Findings from this study hope to provide insights into the possible misconceptions and assumptions that underscore our work as educators and researchers and can hopefully be used to inform future teaching in the field of pronunciation.

## METHODS

To examine the attitudes of both the ELLs and bilinguals, a basic interpretive qualitative research design (Merriam, 2002) was employed. In depth semi-structured interviews were conducted to examine perceptions of the connection between accent and identity and its influence on language learning goals.

### Participants

The study took place at a major culturally diverse, mid-western university in the United States located in a primarily monolingual, white, medium-sized city. All participants were undergraduate students at the university. Eight ELL students participated, seven Chinese students and one Kuwaiti. All of the ELL students had lived in the U.S. for less than two years and had a noticeable foreign accent in English. Five bilinguals participated, two Mexicans, one Albanian, one Nigerian, and one Vietnamese. All of the bilinguals had lived in the U.S. since early childhood and lacked a noticeable foreign accent in English.

### Interviews

To examine participants’ beliefs about the link between accent and identity, participants were interviewed for 30-40 minutes. The interview was semi-structured with 21 basic questions. The first 16 questions were about language background (adopted from Shin, 2010). The final five questions asked about accent and identity. Some of these questions had to be slightly altered to fit the language learning backgrounds of each group, but the questions were paired in meaning. For example, the ELLs were asked, “If you could sound like a native speaker, like right now wave my magic wand, would you take that native accent?” whereas the bilinguals were asked, “If you could add an accent to your English speech right now, one that would show where you are from, would you take it?” Where needed, interviewers paraphrased questions if the participants seemed to struggle to understand the initial question asked. The interviewers also followed-up on questions as needed to get more information and details.

Responses were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. Each individual researcher first did an exploratory analysis, coding for patterns and themes related to the research questions, as well as

a confirmatory analysis, coding for indications of a link between accent and identity. Finally, the researchers peer debriefed, checking emerging themes and conclusions.

## RESULTS - ATTITUDES AND EXPECTATIONS

To understand students' attitudes towards a native accent and answer the research question, "What attitudes and expectations do ELLs and bilinguals hold toward native-like accents?" the ELLs were asked, "If you could sound like a native speaker, like right now wave my magic wand, would you take that native accent?" All of the students said yes. Jing, a Chinese L1 student, stated in response the following:

**Jing:** Yeah.  
**Interviewer:** Ok Why?  
**Jing:** Why not?

To distinguish between issues of accent and intelligibility, students were then asked, "If starting today you would never be misunderstood again, would you still want to sound like a native speaker?" All students retained their previous position, saying yes. One Chinese student said, "Actually, if I have a native speaking accent, I'm very proud..."

The bilinguals were asked the converse question "If you could add an accent to your English speech right now, one that would show where you are from, would you take it?" All students said no. One student said, "I don't think so because that way I could communicate with English speaking people and I could communicate with Hispanics because that way you don't have troubles understanding what I'm saying."

Because of the claims by Daniels (1995) that students would fear obtaining a native accent, the interviewers asked both groups, "Do you feel any fear towards obtaining a native accent?" All of the ELL students said no, many expressing surprise or shock that we would think to ask such a question. One student responded, "No, totally not because I've studied somewhere and gaining that accent doesn't really do anything bad to me. It's like more beneficial." While all of the bilinguals also clearly said no, some hesitated or showed some concern about their other language. Maria said, "Um I don't think I have a fear of it... the only thing right now is the problem...that that native accent is really pushing that other language...so as long as I can balance both of them I wouldn't be worried about it."

Overall in terms of attitudes and expectations for native-like accents, both ELLs and bilinguals gave similar answers. Both ELLs and Bilinguals recognized the advantages of having a native accent. The ELLs considered this to be a goal of their language learning and the bilinguals were not willing to forfeit their native accent in order to show more of their cultural identity. Neither group feared obtaining a native accent. While the ELLs found this question strange to even ask, it is important to note that bilinguals did show some hesitation relating to this question and some mentioned concern for maintaining their other language. Table 1 summarizes the findings for attitudes and expectations.

Table 2  
*ELL and Bilinguals Attitudes and Expectations*

ELL Students	Bilinguals
Prefer to sound like native speakers	Prefer to sound like native speakers
No fear towards obtaining native accent	No fear towards native accent as long as other language is maintained
Would take native accent	Would NOT take a foreign accent

### Accent and Identity

To explore the way that students viewed the link between accent and identity and to answer the research question, “How do ELLs and bilinguals perceive a link between their accent in the L2 to their identity?” the ELLs were asked, “If you sounded like a native speaker tomorrow, do you think some of your cultural identity would be lost?” All students said no. Some of the responses are included below.

**Min:** Umm... I think no.

**Jing:** Nope. (I: No, why?) Yeah, it’s umm I like my culture and then I just want if possible I wanna pull them together, combine them.

**Gang:** I don’t think so (I: Can you explain?) Because it is just the way you talk and not, like cultural identity is just something in your mind but your talk is something in your mouth, so it’s not very influential.

**Xia:** I don’t think so actually. Although my accent has been changed to local, but my face and my body language can reflect my Chinese cultural background as well.

The bilinguals were asked the converse question, “Do you ever wish that someone would recognize you as having a foreign accent? Why or why not?” Bilinguals shared mixed responses to this question, three students said no, but two said yes. For example, Tran said, “Not really because then they would start assuming random stuff...rather than just going up to me and asking ‘Hey, what’s your name...?’” while Zamir said, “Yeah kinda because it does bring up the fact that they know I am Albanian”

Students were also asked directly, “Do you think that your accent in English reflects your cultural identity?” The ELLs all said no. Yang responded, “I think it’s...um...how to say it... the culture influence the accent, but accent not really reflect back to culture.” Bilinguals, when asked the very similar question, “Do you think that a person’s accent reflects their cultural identity?” again shared mixed responses. Three bilinguals clearly said yes, while two shared somewhat mixed feelings about the topic. For example, while Manny gave a limited recognition of the link by saying, “It gives you an indication of where they are from, and it gives you an idea of how long they have been staying in the U.S...” Adanya gave a clear yes saying, “I’d say [my accent] represents who I am, but I dunno since I don’t have it as thick anymore maybe I am kinda losing- I’m definitely losing it so maybe my identity is going away with it...”

Overall, when looking at the link between accent and identity, differences between the two groups emerge. The ELLs perceived their accent as separate from their identity, mentioning their own perception of identity or appearance as more important to identity. The ELLs saw a native accent as facilitating conversation and relationships with Americans, but did not think that a native accent in English would inhibit or deteriorate relationships with their cultural group. The bilinguals recognized much more of a link between their accent and identity. Many of them saw it as one of the indicators of their cultural identity. While bilinguals agreed with the ELLs that a native accent can help connect with Americans, some stated that the native accent can also inhibit their connection with their cultural group. Table 2 summarizes the findings regarding accent and identity.

Table 3

*ELL and Bilinguals Views on Accent and Identity*

<b>ELL Students</b>	<b>Bilinguals</b>
Perceive their accent as separate from their identity	Give more recognition to their accent as part of identity
Native accent helps connect with Americans	Native accent helps connect with Americans
Native accent DOES NOT inhibit connection with cultural group	Native accent CAN inhibit connection with cultural group

## **DISCUSSION**

Although Daniels (1995) argued that students must fear obtaining a native accent, this is not supported by the results of this study. Neither group expressed fear of a native-like accent. Instead both groups acknowledged the benefits of obtaining a native-like accent. The experience, however, of obtaining a native accent in English did seem to alter the perceptions of many of the bilinguals regarding the link between accent and identity. The bilinguals overall recognized more of a link between accent and identity. Generally, bilinguals did recognize that accent can serve as an indicator of identity, but many pointed to other features that also contributed to their identity, such as knowing the second language, group affiliations on campus, choices of material goods such as clothing and cars, meeting society's expectations for the cultural group (comparing themselves to stereotypes of the cultural group), and appearance.

Bilinguals also realized that having a native accent in English could impede their ability to connect with their cultural group. While the bilinguals all valued knowing two languages, some missed being able to make immediate connections with their cultural group (for example, when meeting a new person on campus the bilingual might recognize due to accent that the other person is from the same country, but the other person is not able to make the same recognition).

While these results do begin to shed light on the differences between these two populations, there are limitations to this study that must be recognized. First, this study was only able to interview a total of 13 students, a small sample. Additionally, the ELL group was largely from a Chinese background. While this is representative of the international student population at the university,

these students may not be representative of the whole ELL population. Further, the ELL students were all students that had already chosen to study in an English speaking country. This may have affected the way that students saw the benefits of a native accent.

In the future, it would be useful to replicate this study on a much larger scale. More participants should be interviewed from more language learning backgrounds (e.g. heritage learners). Further, it would be useful to interview different generations. With technology changing opportunities for language study and the role of English as a lingua franca, older and younger generations may hold different views regarding the usefulness of a native-like accent.

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Shannon McCrocklin is an assistant professor at the University of Texas-Pan American. She earned her Ph.D. in Applied Linguistics and Technology at Iowa State University in Ames, IA. She holds an M.A. in Teaching English as a Second Language from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign where she developed an interest in pronunciation teaching and applied phonetics and phonology. Shannon has taught English pronunciation to undergraduate and graduate students as well as to international faculty at Iowa State and the University of Illinois. Her research focuses on improving pronunciation training for students and CAPT (Computer-Assisted Pronunciation Teaching). She has presented at CALICO, NCTE, PSLLT, and AAAL. Stephanie Link is a doctoral student in the Applied Linguistics and Technology program at Iowa State University. Her research interests are in the use of developmental SLA theory and systemic functional approaches to the design of CALL technologies and automated writing evaluation for assessing students' writing development. Currently, she is a research assistant for the graduate college, working on discourse analysis and tool validation. She is also an instructor of Introduction to Linguistics and Preparing Publishable Thesis Chapters. Her secondary research interests involve pronunciation acquisition, specifically the development and construction of identity through L2 accent and the influence of native versus nonnative speaker pronunciation instructors on students' comprehensibility/accentedness and material development.

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