EXAMINING INNER CIRCLE TEACHER BELIEFS ABOUT NATIVE-LIKE AND COMPREHENSIBLE SPEECH IN LEARNERS OF ENGLISH

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While SLA researchers have long argued that comprehensibility is a more productive speech goal for L2 learners than native-like accent, the question remains whether ESL/EFL teachers similarly reject native-like accent as a goal for learners. Previous studies have shown that outer/expanding circle English teachers favor both native-like accent and comprehensibility, while inner circle teachers largely reject native-like accent as a speech goal. The present study examines two questions: (1) Do inner circle ESL teachers believe that comprehensibility is a more important speech goal for learners than native-likeness? And (2) What are their reasons for their beliefs? Using a combination of Likert scale questionnaire items and short-answer questions, teachers rated their agreement with 12 statements related to learner speech goals and provided explanations for their selections. Survey data revealed a significant preference for comprehensibility over native-likeness ($t(43.72) = -9.67$, $p < 0.001$). Short answer responses revealed more nuanced views on native-likeness and comprehensibility, with some participants stating that native-like accent may be important in some contexts. The present study helps illuminate to what extent the shift in the discourse has translated to inner circle teacher beliefs and provides crucial information around the reasons for teachers' beliefs related to learner speech goals.

INTRODUCTION

SLA research into the intelligibility, comprehensibility, and accentedness of second language (L2) speech has shifted significantly in recent decades with a greater emphasis on intelligibility and comprehensibility as productive speech goals for learners over modifying accentedness. According to Derwing and Munro (2009), *accentedness* can be defined as the degree to which an L2 speaker's speech pattern is different from the "local variety;" *comprehensibility* is "the listener's perception of how easy or difficult it is to understand a given speech sample;" and *intelligibility* refers to the degree to which listeners are actually able to understand the speech of an L2 speaker (p. 478). Formerly, discourse around learner speech goals emphasized native-like accent as an important speech goal (e.g., Griffen, 1980; Greene & Wells, 1927). This framework is often referred to as the native speaker (NS) model, which refers to the standard that positions NS models as the ideal toward which nonnative speakers (NNSs) should strive. However, research documenting the difficulty of achieving a native-like accent as an adult (e.g., Lenneberg, 1967; Long, 1990) cast doubt on the productiveness of native-like speech as a goal for L2 adult learners. Additionally, research such as the study by Munro and Derwing (1995), which established that individuals can be rated as being heavily accented while still being highly

intelligible, also called into question the purpose of modifying accentedness of NNSs. If accent does not impede communication, there may be little reason to modify it. And indeed, many within the field have argued that the realm of teaching English as a second language (TESL) must shift away from treating native-like speech as a benchmark for L2 learners (e.g., Cook, 1999; Jenkins, 2002; Levis, 2005). However, one important question that arises from this shift is whether these findings have translated to the classroom. More specifically, do teachers believe that learners of English should strive for native-like speech or comprehensible speech? Answering this question may help us begin to understand the current status of ESL instruction with regards to L2 learners' speech.

Previous research has shown that teacher beliefs about L2 learner speech goals may depend on whether English is considered an inner or outer/expanding circle variety in the country of instruction (e.g., Alsofyani & Algethami, 2017; Foote et al., 2012; Macdonald, 2002; Sifakis & Sougari, 2005). Kachru's (1985) World Englishes framework can provide helpful context for understanding teacher beliefs. Kachru established the notion of World Englishes to refer to the different varieties of English around the world as well as their varying perceived statuses and uses. World Englishes, according to Kachru (1985), are broken into three groups: inner circle English, which refers to English in contexts where it is the primary language (e.g., the U.S., the U.K., Canada); outer circle, which refers to countries where English may be a lingua franca or even an official language, but the variety is not commonly recognized as standard (e.g., India, Nigeria); and expanding circle, which refers to countries where English is used regularly for communication, but does not have official status (e.g., China, Russia). Recent work has recommended a shift to teaching World Englishes or English as an International Language (EIL) in both ESL and EFL classrooms (Jenkins, 2000; Kubota, 2001; Matsuda, 2003).

Compared to ESL teachers in the inner circle, outer/expanding circle teachers are more likely to consider both native-like accent and comprehensibility to be important speech goals (e.g., Alsofyani & Algethami, 2017; Çeçen & Serdar Tülüce, 2019; Diab, 2009; Lazoroska & Guskaroska, 2020; Moradkhani & Asakereh, 2018; Sifakis & Sougari, 2005). In their study of teacher beliefs about EIL and the NS model, Sifakis and Sougari (2005) asked EFL teachers about their beliefs around the importance of L2 learners acquiring native-like speech in a questionnaire that employed both Likert-type scale items and short-answer responses. They found that 78% of teachers believed it was either extremely, very, or fairly important for their learners to acquire a native-like accent.

While there are far fewer studies examining teacher beliefs about learner speech goals in an inner circle context, the results point to a contrast from what has been found in outer and expanding circles. Foote et al. (2012) surveyed teachers in Canada about their beliefs about pronunciation teaching. One question asked teachers to rate their agreement with the statement, "The goal of a pronunciation program should be to eliminate, as much as possible, foreign accents" (p. 14). Of the respondents, 12% agreed with this statement and 83% disagreed. Similar conclusions were reached by Breitkreutz et al. (2001) and Macdonald (2002), who also found teachers in inner circle settings (Canada and Australia, respectively) favored intelligibility over native-like accent.

So, why do inner circle and outer/expanding circle teachers differ in their beliefs regarding learner speech goals? One way to abswer this question may be to use qualitative data so teachers

can explain their reasons for their beliefs. Studies such as those by Diab (2009), Lazoroska and Guskaroska (2020), and Moradkhani and Asakereh (2018) may shed light on the reasons for these differences. When outer/expanding circle teachers were asked to state reasons for their beliefs, they pointed to several factors related to the perceived benefits of native-like speech, including greater professional opportunities, better comprehensibility, and more confidence in their abilities as non-native users of English. While these studies contribute greatly to our understanding of outer/expanding circle teacher beliefs about learner speech goals, further research in an inner circle setting, using a mixed methods approach that elucidates the reasons for teachers' beliefs around L2 learner speech goals, is needed.

Research Questions

1. Do inner circle ESL teachers consider comprehensible speech to be a more important goal for learners of English than native-like speech?
2. What are inner circle ESL teachers' self-reported reasons for their beliefs about native-like and comprehensible speech?

Note that the original study included a third research question: "Do self-identified native and nonnative speaking ESL teachers differ in their beliefs about native-like and comprehensible speech as a goal for learners of English?" However, this question as well as results related to this question are not discussed here due to an insufficient number of nonnative-speaking participants.

METHODS

Participants

Twenty-eight teachers of adult ESL students, teaching either through the University of Utah or through a community ESL school in Utah, were recruited using convenience sampling. All participants reported either present or past experience teaching English in an inner circle setting. Table 1 includes all participant demographic data collected. Demographic data were collected solely for the purposes of providing participant information and were not used for analysis.

Materials

Both quantitative and qualitative data were gathered through a questionnaire (see Appendix), which rated participants' levels of agreement on a 5-point Likert scale with 12 statements related to the issue of comprehensibility and native-like speech of L2 learners of English. The items were originally adapted from a similar questionnaire created by Sifakis and Sougari (2005). Directly following each item, participants were required to provide a short answer explaining their selection. The final section of the questionnaire asked participants about their background and demographic information.

Procedure and Data Analysis

Participants accessed the questionnaire remotely through Qualtrics. Upon completion, they were redirected to a separate Qualtrics questionnaire for compensation with a $10 Amazon gift card.

Table 1

Participant demographic data

Category	Number of participants
Self-identified NS-status	
NNS	4
NS	24
Age	
18-30	13
31-40	7
41-50	5
51-60	2
61-70	1
71+	0
Gender identity	
Man	7
Woman	19
Prefer not to say	2
Nonbinary	0
Other	0
Years teaching	
Less than 1	1
1-5 years	12
6-10 years	6
11-20 years	5
21-30 years	3

Quantitative data analysis was completed in R (R Core Team, 2020) using RStudio (RStudio Team, 2020). Descriptive statistics, including mean, median, mode, and standard deviation, were calculated for individual items and for composites. Odd and even items were grouped together for analysis: agreement with odd items (referred to as accent items) was analyzed as demonstrating a favorable belief toward L2 learners of English striving to achieve a native-like accent (e.g., Item 1 = "It is important for learners of English to strive for a nativelike accent"); agreement with even items (referred to as comprehensibility items) was analyzed as demonstrating a favorable belief toward learners striving to achieve comprehensibility (e.g., Item 2 = "It is important for learners of English to strive for comprehensible speech"). Most of the items were paired, meaning they were almost the same for accent and comprehensibility, as demonstrated by Items 1 and 2. For RQ1, a two-sample *t*-test was used to analyze whether there was a significant difference in preference for comprehensible speech over native-like speech.

Qualitative data analysis for RQ2 was conducted by a single coder using NVivo. NVivo was used to help organize and quantify the themes that were manually identified. To identify themes, open coding was used, meaning themes were established from the data rather than using

predefined codes. Following Saldaña's (2009) guide to qualitative analysis, the data was coded from the short response section in several stages. In the first stage, all ideas and beliefs that emerged from the data were noted. In the second stage, the data were categorized into different values to develop a hierarchy of codes for the purpose of organization and conceptualization of the themes. Finally, all the entries in each of the established themes were read again to make sure that they were consistent and true to the original meaning of each statement.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

Quantitative Data

The present study examined inner circle teacher beliefs about the importance of comprehensible speech and native-like accent as a goal for L2 learners of English. Supporting predictions for RQ1, results indicate that participants overwhelmingly demonstrated a preference for comprehensible speech over native-like accent as a goal for L2 learners. Across all Likert-scale items, participants typically rated the accent items between *Somewhat Disagree* and *Neither Agree nor Disagree* (rank $M = 2.67$, $SD = 0.84$), whereas they rated comprehensibility items between *Somewhat Agree* and *Strongly Agree* (rank $M = 4.46$, $SD = 0.49$). A two-sample *t*-test revealed a significant difference between accent and comprehensibility items ($t(43.72) = -9.67$, $p < 0.001$), demonstrating that teachers indicated a significant preference for comprehensible speech over native-like speech as a goal for learners. Figure 1 provides a visual representation of the frequency of all item rankings.
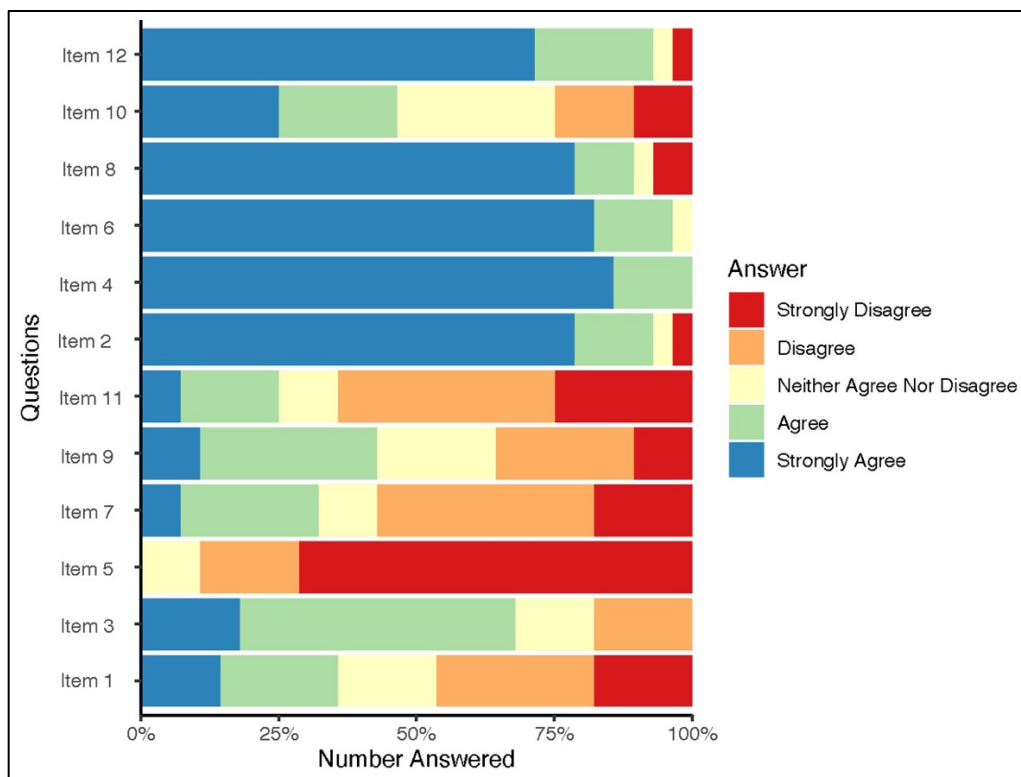

Figure 1. Frequency of rankings to all Likert items

Note. Odd-numbered items demonstrate favorability to native-like accent and even-numbered items demonstrate favorability to comprehensible speech.

The finding that ESL teachers demonstrate a preference for comprehensible speech over native-like accent confirms previous research conducted in Canada, which found that ESL teachers did not value the "[elimination of] a foreign accent" (Breitkreutz et al., 2001, p. 55; Foote et al., 2012, p. 14). As expected, overall disagreement with native-like accent as an important goal for learners contradicts findings from similar studies that were conducted in outer/expanding circle contexts (e.g., Diab, 2009; Lazoroska & Guskaroska, 2020; Moradkhani & Asakereh, 2018; Sifakis & Sougari, 2005).

In addition to analyzing teachers' preferences in the composite scores for comprehensibility items and accent items, analysis of the paired items showed that teachers always rated the comprehensibility items (e.g., "Learners of English should focus their efforts on attaining comprehensible speech") higher than their paired accent item (e.g., "Learners of English should focus their efforts on attaining a native-like accent"). That is, teachers rejected the idea that accent could be more important that comprehensible speech. And indeed, we see this in the ranking for Item 5 ("It is more important for learners of English to strive for a native-like accent than to strive for comprehensible speech"), which garnered the highest level of disagreement among all items, with 89% of participants disagreeing (see Figure 2).
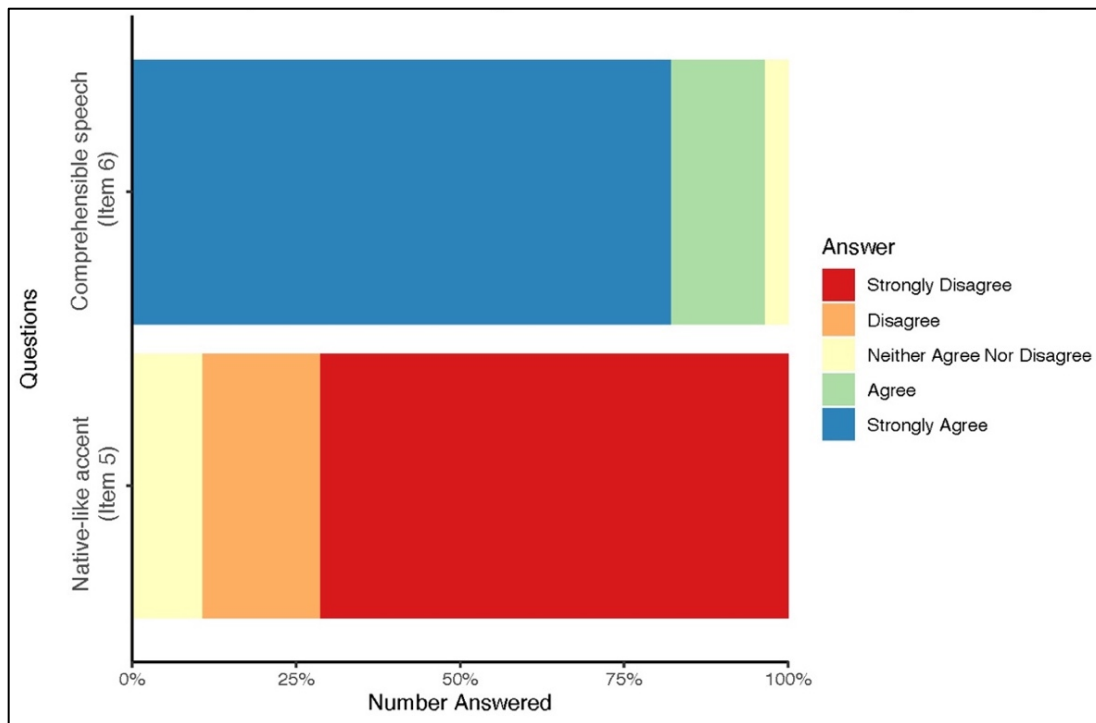
Figure 2. Paired rankings across participants for Items 5 & 6 ("It is more important for learners of English to strive for [a native-like accent/comprehensible speech] than to strive for [comprehensible speech/a native-like accent]")

Qualitative Data

The qualitative data revealed that participants' reasoning for their responses closely corresponded to their Likert-scale rankings. Accordingly, a greater number of comments indicated favorability toward comprehensible speech as a goal for L2 learners over native-like speech. In fact, the theme that appeared most in the qualitative data was *Being understood/being able to communicate is key*. Additionally, many responses specifically indicated disagreement with native-like accent as a goal (e.g., *Native-like accent is not an important goal for learners*).

However, teachers' short answer responses also revealed nuances in their attitudes toward native-like speech that were less evident in the quantitative data. For example, one participant selected *Strongly Agree* to Item 3 ("Acquiring a nativelike accent is possible for learners of English"), but in their explanation stated the following:

> It's not easy to acquire a nativelike accent, and I don't believe everyone can even work their way up to that point, but I have met non-native speakers of English that sounded exactly like a native speaker, so it is possible. (Participant 3)

Additionally, one key theme that arose from the qualitative data was *Native-like accent isn't the most important goal for learners*. That is, the qualitative data revealed that participants may believe that a native-like accent can be beneficial to learners in certain circumstances, such as accessing professional opportunities, increasing learner confidence, and even improving their comprehensibility. For example, one participant stated,

> Comprehensibility is more important than passing for a native from a functional standpoint. That said, some employers may (consciously or otherwise) create barriers to hiring based on accent. This is unfair and should not happen, but may be a reality in some cases. (Participant 26)

In fact, several participants explicitly problematized the roles of speakers and listeners, highlighting that learners may encounter listeners who are biased against non-native speech. Participants' comments indicated an awareness that interlocutors, in their role as listeners, may be biased toward accented speech. Teachers noted that accented speech could be an obstacle to communication even for those who are highly comprehensible. However, teachers also articulated solutions for the dilemma, with some teachers making the case that it is the listener's responsibility to equip themselves for a communicative exchange with NNSs, and with others suggesting that learners should strive for native-like speech to ensure successful communicative encounters. It is important to consider these responses in the context of studies such as Rubin (1992) and Kutlu et al. (2021), which indicated that listeners' judgments of speech, as well as their ability to successfully process speech, depended on their own assumptions about, and expectations of, the speaker.

Finally, teachers emphasized the importance of learner goals, stating that it was up to the learner to determine the best course of action to achieve their individual speech goals. This is an important consideration in light of the multiple studies that have found that L2 learners demonstrate a preference for attaining native-like speech in their L2 (e.g., Derwing, 2003; McCrocklin & Link, 2016; Timmis, 2002). This potential contradiction in overall beliefs

between teachers and learners about striving, or not striving, for a native-like accent, has important implications for L2 instruction, including to what extent teachers (recognizing the unfair expectations placed on NNSs) should prioritize students' own speech goals, and to what extent teachers should attempt to increase student awareness around these biases, as well as inform them of models, like World Englishes, that recognize the legitimacy of nonstandard accents.

LIMITATIONS & FUTURE RESEARCH

While all attempts were made to ensure that qualitative data were coded systematically and reliably, one of the principal limitations of this study was the inability, due to time and resource constraints, to guarantee intra- and inter-rater reliability. Future research on this topic could employ multiple coders for the qualitative analysis. Additionally, it is possible that participants' responses were partially influenced by a desire to be perceived in a favorable light; that is, participants may have responded in a way that indicates a preference for comprehensibility over native-like accent because they perceive it to be the more socially acceptable response. This may have partially occurred due to the fairly transparent nature of the survey questions, which may have revealed the overall intent of the study and therefore influenced participants. Future research may attempt to mitigate the impact that social desirability may have on participants' responses to items by including additional, broader questions around learner speech goals. Future studies could also include classroom observations to determine to what extent teachers' explicit beliefs are reflected in their practices. Finally, the present study did not consider the effects that pronunciation and other teacher training may have had on teacher beliefs. Including these variables could help explain the differences in beliefs between inner and outer/expanding circle teachers.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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APPENDIX

QUESTIONNAIRE

This survey is completely anonymous. Please answer the following questions based on your own background and personal beliefs.

In the following questions, the term *comprehensible* refers to speech that listeners perceive as easy to understand according to features such as sounds and intonation, grammatical features, lexicon, and overall fluency.

Items were rated along the scale: 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = somewhat disagree, 3 = neither agree nor disagree, 4 = somewhat agree, 5 = strongly agree

1. It is important for learners of English to strive for a native-like accent.
   Explain your response in a few sentences:
2. It is important for learners of English to strive for comprehensible speech.
   Explain your response in a few sentences:
3. Acquiring a native-like accent is possible for learners of English.
   Explain your response in a few sentences:
4. Acquiring comprehensible speech is possible for learners of English.
   Explain your response in a few sentences:

5. It is more important for learners of English to strive for a native-like accent than to strive for comprehensible speech.
    Explain your response in a few sentences:
6. It is more important for learners of English to strive for comprehensible speech than to strive for a native-like accent.
    Explain your response in a few sentences:
7. Learners of English need a native-like accent in order to access professional opportunities.
    Explain your response in a few sentences:
8. Learners of English need comprehensible speech in order to access professional opportunities.
    Explain your response in a few sentences:
9. Acquiring a native-like accent is important to help learners of English feel confident when they speak English.
    Explain your response in a few sentences:
10. Learners of English can maintain a connection to their culture by retaining an accent.
    Explain your response in a few sentences:
11. Learners of English should focus their efforts on attaining a native-like accent.
    Explain your response in a few sentences:
12. Learners of English should focus their efforts on improving comprehensibility.
    Explain your response in a few sentences:
13. Please share any additional thoughts you have on the issue of comprehensibility and native-like speech in learners of English: