



Purpose

This study had three main Research Questions: 1. To what extent is it possible to identify specific phonological features that differentiate native English speaking (NES) teachers from non-native English speaking (NNES) teachers? 2. How do educational stakeholders (i.e., students, parents, and teachers) evaluate NES and NNES teachers based on comprehensibility, accentedness, and perceived teaching suitability and how do these evaluations compare or contrast? and 3. Do any of the phonological features analyzed predict listener ratings on these three constructs?

Summary

Educational stakeholders evaluated the brief speech of NES and NNES K12 teachers on accentedness, comprehensibility, and perceived teaching suitability. The evaluations were compared to the extensive phonological analysis conducted on the speech of the 10 teachers. Distinct sets of phonological features were found to predict each construct.

Implications

The findings suggest that listener evaluations of NNES teachers can be explained, in part, by biased perceptions and other speaker-irrelevant factors rather than objective phonological characteristics.

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Arizona Teachers' Speech: Phonological Features and Listener Perceptions

By Meghan Moran

Motivation

In 2010, amidst a prevalence of misguided initiatives regarding language minority students in Arizona (e.g., underidentification of ELLs, AZELLA's questionable validity, *Horne v. Flores*, and the existence of SEI), the Arizona Department of Education (ADE) proposed an administrative practice that had the potential to prohibit "heavily accented or ungrammatical" (Jordan, 2010) teachers from teaching English Language Learners (ELLs). However, "[heavily] accented" was neither defined nor operationalized. In response to this proposed practice, a citizen stated, "In the case of Arizona, it is no secret that many language-minority students are struggling academically; yet, the public is blind to the fact that academic difficulties also take place in classrooms led by teachers without accents. Instead of looking at the linguistically oppressive education language policy in Arizona (i.e., Proposition 203) that continues to structure this context of failure (Johnson, 2008), the ADE insists on blaming teachers—especially those it deems to have an accent (Blum & Johnson, 2012, p. 177). The aim of this study was to investigate the dynamics (both linguistic and perceptual) of teacher accentedness within the classroom.

Featured Study

It has been shown that students' attitudes regarding teachers' speech (particularly accent) can affect comprehension of that teacher (Ahn & Moore, 2011; Rubin, 1992), which could have profound implications for non-native English speaking teachers and their students. However, less research has investigated the specific linguistic features that contribute to favorable or unfavorable perceptions of teaching suitability (Kang, 2012), especially in a high school context (Boyd, 2003). Likewise, there is another gap in the related research: While undergraduate students are often the evaluators of instructors' speech, other educational stakeholders have been generally overlooked. To address these weaknesses, this study explored three main areas. First, brief (1.5-2 minute) speech samples from ten currently certified Arizona teachers underwent an extensive phonological (i.e., sentence and word-level pronunciation) analysis in order to investigate linguistic features that differentiate native English

speaking (NES) teachers from non-native English speaking (NNES) teachers with Spanish as a first language. Then, these 10 speech samples were evaluated by 141 listeners (32 current teachers, 46 teacher candidates, 30 parents of middle or high school students, and 33 students in grades 8-11) on comprehensibility (i.e., the ability to be understood), amount of accent (accentedness), and perceived teaching suitability. The listener groups' evaluations of the 10 teachers' speech samples were examined as a whole and compared across listener groups. Last, the way in which certain phonological features predicted listeners' ratings on comprehensibility, accentedness, and perceived teaching suitability was examined.

Statistical results showed that NNES and NES teachers' speech samples were indistinguishable in many suprasegmental (sentence-level) features, only being significantly different in percent rising tone choices. In other words, native English speakers were more likely to end their sentences with rising intonation, a feature that has been shown to foster student engagement (Pickering, 2001). However, despite the fact that NES and NNES speech were overwhelmingly similar in many phonological features, listeners rated NNES teachers as significantly less comprehensible, more accented, and less suitable to teach than NES teachers. Further, there were significant differences among the listener groups in terms of ratings. Specifically, high school students rated NNES teachers as significantly less comprehensible (harder to understand) than the three other listener groups, teacher candidates rated NNES teachers as significantly less accented than the three other listener groups, and parents rated NNES teachers as significantly

less suitable to teach than teacher candidates. Finally, many of the phonological features analyzed (on both NES and NNES teachers) were found to predict comprehensibility, accentedness, and perceived teaching suitability, but each of the three latter constructs was predicted by a distinct set of features. Because NES teachers' and NNES teachers' speech samples did not differ significantly on most phonological features analyzed, the findings suggest that listener evaluations of NNES teachers can be explained, in part, by biased perceptions and other speaker-irrelevant factors rather than objective phonological characteristics, a phenomenon that should be accounted for before any policies are enacted that would restrict the responsibilities of non-native English speakers.

Implications for Practice

Although the stereotyping of speech is common, it is not unproblematic. In Arizona alone, 30% of the population is Hispanic; Arizona is 4th in the nation for its percentage of Hispanic students, with 43% (Pew Research Center, 2011). Students continually interact with people of different speech varieties and accents regularly, whether in person or through the ever globally-connecting internet. Thus, it is clear that additional efforts are needed to mitigate this perceptual difference. Not only is it important to increase ease of communication within K-12 classrooms, we also need to prepare Arizona students to be international citizens in a world in which there are significantly more non-native English speakers than native English speakers. Thus, listeners need to be educated with regard to non-native speech.

This study also has implications

with regard to speech perception research. Educational stakeholders took into account distinct sets of phonological features when making judgments about not only a speaker's comprehensibility and accentedness, but also their perceived teaching suitability. This lends support to the idea that a person may be judged on their professional acceptability based on their particular speech features. Future research needs to be conducted on other professions in an applied context to determine whether this is true across professions or is relegated to the pedagogical arena.

About the Author

Meghan Moran received a PhD in Applied Linguistics at Northern Arizona University in May, 2016. She now works as a Research Coordinator for Dr. Trina Spencer at the Institute for Human Development. This study was completed as her doctoral dissertation with incredible support from her co-chairs, Dr. Okim Kang and Dr. Mary McGroarty.

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