

Learning experiences of international students with non-native English accent

Introduction

Accent Bias Britain (2020) conducted a survey and confirmed that there is a hierarchy of accents in British society. The study asked people to rate different accents regarding how prestigious and pleasant they perceived each accent sounded. It included 38 different British accents including 'standard English' accent, non-native accents (e.g. French, German, New Zealand and Australia) and ethnic accents (e.g. Indian and West Indian) and different regional UK accents (e.g. Liverpool, Birmingham). The study found that 'standard English' accent (received pronunciation), Queen's English, French-accented English and one's own accent were perceived to be most prestigious and pleasant to listen to. Historical industrial urban accents such as Liverpool, Cockney and Birmingham accent and ethnic accent were rated lowest for prestige.

An accent may be identified with the locality where its speakers reside (a regional or geographical accent), the socioeconomic status or class of its speakers (a class accent), their ethnicity (an ethnic accent), or influence from their first language (a foreign accent). Accents of Britain's highest classes are perceived to be 'standard', "accentless" and 'correct' while those that deviate from the 'standard' accent are perceived to be 'not good enough' or inferior and are often stigmatised (Blommaert, 2013; The Conversation, 2020).

Accentsim (accent prejudice) is a language-based bias and can result in linguistic discrimination. Linguistic discrimination occurs when individuals are unfairly treated, judged or commented because they speak with a distinguished (salient) accent which is deemed to be 'non-standard', 'unintelligent' or inferior. This kind of accentsim permeates through educational systems at different levels in different countries (Dovchin, 2020; Kayaalp, 2016; Snell & Andrews, 2017) and could have significant implications for learners' perception of self and their life opportunities, especially among international students who do not have a standard native English accent (Hajar & Mhamed, 2021).

International students

In recent years, there is a rapid growth of international students pursuing their degrees in the UK. According to 2020/2021 statistics from the Higher Education Statistics Agency, there were 605,130 international students enrolled in higher education institutions in the UK. International students are made up of different nationalities, racial and cultural backgrounds. They experience many challenges when transitioning from their home country to pursue their degrees in the UK, particularly in the areas of language proficiency, cultural adjustment and social relationships (Hajar & Mhamed, 2021; Taylor & Ali, 2017; Zhu, 2016). The process of negotiation and adjustment to these challenges can cause a lot of anxiety and stress to students, which could impact on their learning experience and mental health wellbeing.

Linguistic racism

Linguistic racism can be presented through racial microaggressions. Racial microaggression is described as “brief, everyday exchanges that send denigrating messages to people of colour because they belong to a racial minority” (Sue et al., 2007, p.73). In Dovchin’s (2020) study, he talked about international students’ experience of ‘linguistic racism’ in Australia. ‘Linguistic racism’ manifest in two different forms; the linguistic stereotyping and ethnic accent bullying. ‘Linguistic stereotyping’ refers to predefined negative perceptions imposed on students based on their race, ethnicity, and nationality. These students are perceived to be speaking ‘incomprehensible’ or ‘low proficient’ English regardless of their actual language competence in English.

‘Ethnic accent bullying’ refers to bullying in the forms of ‘laughing’, ‘joking’, ridicule and making fun of students who do not speak with a native English accent and have ethnically and linguistically different backgrounds. For example, social work students in England who do not have a native English accent talked about the experience of being laughed at by white students when they shared their views in the classroom (Douglas et al., 2021). More worryingly, students remarked that there was a lack of an inclusive environment to encourage and support them to participate in learning activities, instead white students were rewarded to have a dominant voice in the classroom.

Research evidence suggests that when adult immigrants in Canada perceive themselves not speaking good English because of their ‘unintelligent’ accent, they would be less respected by others (Drewing, 2006). Conversely, study shows that people holding accent stereotypical view are more reluctant to communicate with non-native English speakers because of their perceived communication anxiety (Montgomery & Zhang, 2018).

The experience of linguistic racism often instigates feeling of inferiority, international students could become socially withdrawal, have low self-esteem and experience heightened level of anxiety when speaking English (Dovchin, 2020). In Hajar & Mhamed’s (2021) study, Kazakhstani students undertaking postgraduate programmes in the UK reported feeling of ashamed and inadequate because they were not able to speak in an English accent. Additionally, students can become demotivated and less inclined to participate in classroom activities. The cumulative effect of raciolinguistic microaggressions (Ramjattan, 2020) can lead to feelings of isolation and non-belonging, leaving international students feeling like outsiders in a learning environment (Dovchin, 2020; Masocha, 2015).

Snell and Andrews (2017) and Ramjattan (2020) assert that attempts to correct or erase non-standard accent can potentially damage self-image and sense of self of non-native English speakers. Such kinds of language modification and accent reduction practice only serve to confirm and normalise the uneven linguistic power between language users. It may further discourage learners from participating in educational activities in various learning settings. We assert our position that ‘difference is not deficiency’; diversity in accent and speech should be appreciated and celebrated for what they are. As educators, we play a vital role to get a deeper understanding of the impact of linguistic discrimination on students’ learning experience and promote a more inclusive learning environment to support their learning.

Context of the proposed study

In the University of Hertfordshire, there are over 25,130 students in 2021, including more than 5,200 international students who come from 100 countries. International students from the School of Health and Social Work may experience additional challenges as they are required to undertake practice modules to meet the course requirement. This means they may encounter other difficulties when they are on placement as they are expected to communicate with different service providers, professionals and service users/patients.

Aim and objectives of the study

Aim: To enhance the learning experience of international students who are non-native English speakers

Objectives:

- To gain a deeper understanding of the impact of non-native English accent on the classroom learning experiences of international students
- To gain a deeper understanding of the impact of non-native English accent on practice learning experiences of international students
- To identify challenges international students experience in classroom and practice learning
- To explore and develop different strategies to address the above challenges experienced by international students

Study design

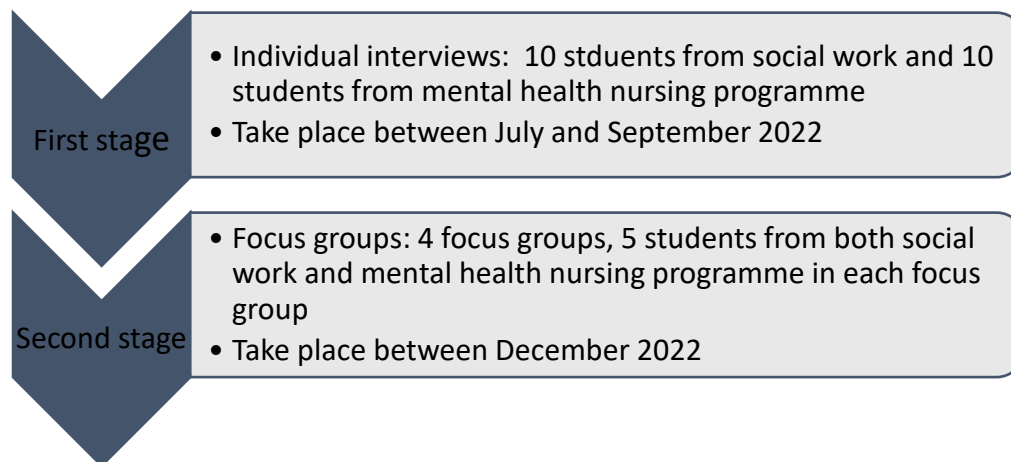
Research team

Four social work academics (Echo Yeung, Carol-Ann Howson, Lynette Lee-Messenger and Careen Hanson) and one mental health nursing academic (Godfrey Muchena) of different racial and ethnic backgrounds are involved in the study. This study is informed by the intersectional positioning of the research team; we are aware of the reflexive relationship which exists between our social positions, values and perspectives which informs our methodological approach.

Research Method:

This is a two-stage study (see figure one), using a qualitative approach to capture and understand the learning experience of international students. We will use ethnographic interview to elicit students' perspective and their discursive realities of their classroom and practice learning experience (Nadan, 2019). We will use an interactional and conversational approach to co-create the meaning of students' learning experience and develop strategies to help them overcome the challenges they experienced because of their non-native English accent. International students undertaking social work and mental health nursing programme will be invited to take part in the study. In the first stage, individual interviews will be conducted with 10 social work students and 10 mental health nursing students. In the second stage, we will invite all interviewed participants to join the focus groups.

Figure one: Two-stage study



Data collection

First stage: Individual interviews

We will invite international students (final year students who are close to completion or students who recently completed the course) from the BSc and MSc Social Work programme and BSc and MSc Mental Health Nursing programme to take part in the study. This is to ensure that students with rich classroom and practice learning experiences are included in the study. Also, as all the researchers from the research team are involved in the delivery and assessment of the programme, students who are near the end of or recently completed the programme will feel more at ease to talk about their experience because of the potential power dynamics.

Additionally, to manage participants' and researchers' bias, academics in the research team will not interview students whom they have taught and assessed. This means that social work students will be interviewed by the researcher from the mental health team (Godfrey) and a researcher from social work team (Carol-Ann), who joined the teaching team in 2021 and has not taught potential participants from the social work programme. The other three researchers from the social work team will only interview mental health nursing students

Inclusion criteria:

- Final year students or students who recently completed the programme
- International students enrolled on the BSc and MSc social work and mental health nursing programme

As many international students may have returned to their home countries at the time when data collection starts, interviews will be conducted via an online platform such as zoom. Participants will be given instructions on how to access the online platform. Each interview will last about between 40 and 60 minutes. We will use the recording functionality on zoom to transcribe individual interviews. All transcripts generated from zoom will be checked for accuracy before data analysis commences. Challenges international students faced because of their non-native English accent

and possible strategies to help them overcome these challenges will be identified. We will then provide a summary of the findings and share it with participants in focus groups.

Second stage: Focus group

We will invite all interviewees to take part in follow up focus group meetings. We will share the initial data analysis of interviews and invite the students to engage in dialogue and interpretation. The focus groups will be used to revisit and clarify interview data, to validate the findings from the interviews and generate new understanding. We aim to conduct four focus group meetings, about five students from both social work and mental health nursing will be involved in each focus group. This will allow students from different programme to share and learn from others' experience.

For the same reasons for individual interviews, focus groups will take place via an online platform such as zoom. The focus group will be convened and managed by two researchers and all participants will be actively encouraged to share their experiences and perceptions, and engage in dialogues with their peers. All participants will be given instructions on how to access and engage in the groups. Each focus group is expected to last approximately one hour. We will record and transcribe focus group meetings, using the recording functionality on zoom.

Data analysis

The data will be analysed through thematic analysis approach. Each interview transcript will be read and key themes will be identified. We will share initial data analysis of interviews in the focus groups, and then explore new meanings and insights from focus group discussion. Adjustments will be made to the original analysis. Data analysis will be completed by data synthesis to formulate composite textural accounts based on the participants' experiences.

Implications of the study

Findings of the study will help us get a deeper understanding of challenges faced by international students and identify possible intervention models to promote a more inclusive learning environment for students from our school as well as other international students in the university.

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Gantt Chart

Tasks	Person responsible	June 2022	July 2022	Aug. 2022	Sept. 2022	Oct. 2022	Nov. 2022	Dec. 2022	Jan. 2023	Feb. 2023	March 2023	April 2023	May 2023	June 2023
Preparation for ethics application	Echo													
Recruitment	Team													
Data collection (individual interviews)	Team													
Data collection (focus groups)														
Data analysis (initial analysis of interviews)	Team													
Data analysis (individual interviews and focus groups)	Team													
Writing up report / dissemination	Echo ?													