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# Does accent matter? Investigating the relationship between accent and identity in English as a lingua franca communication



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## ABSTRACT

This paper reports on a qualitative inquiry into the under-researched relationship between accent and identity in English as a lingua franca (ELF) communication from the perspectives of second language (L2) speakers/learners of English. Using data collected via in-depth interviews with a group of students at a Hong Kong university on their ELF communication experiences, the paper reveals that participants' perceptions of the relationship between accent and identity in ELF communication are highly complex and that their accent preferences appear to be driven by a range of identity-related and practical reasons. In terms of identity-related reasons, participants' desire to speak English with a native-like accent was found to be related to their wish to express their identities as competent L2 speakers of English, whereas participants who indicated a preference to speak English with a local accent tended to emphasize the need to project their linguistic identities and avoid native speaker associations. Further, participants' concerns about intelligibility in ELF communication were found to be among the main pragmatic considerations in their accent preferences. The findings demonstrate the role of L2 speakers' accent preferences in shaping their pursuit of desired identities in ELF communication and have important implications for pronunciation instruction in ELT.

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## 1. Introduction

English as a lingua franca (ELF) is considered 'the world's most extensive contemporary use of English' (Jenkins, 2014, p. 2). As defined by Seidlhofer (2011), ELF refers to 'any use of English among speakers of different first languages for whom English is the communicative medium of choice, and often the only option' (p. 7). As a result of the widespread use of ELF, there is an increasing awareness among applied linguists of the diversity of English around the world and the ever-changing sociolinguistic uses of English by people from different first language (L1) backgrounds. In the field of English Language Teaching (ELT), the role of ELF 'challenges some of the fundamental assumptions of ELT and requires that we revisit our pedagogical practices' (Matsuda & Friedrich, 2012, p. 17), especially with respect to the continued deference to native-speaker norms. In particular, there exist repeated calls to move away from a monolingual paradigm targeting a monolithic native-speaker norm towards a multilingual paradigm prioritizing communicative competence in a repertoire of multilingual resources in ELT (Canagarajah, 2006; Jenkins, 2007). Instead of emphasizing the need to approximate a native-speaker variety of English, ELF

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scholars argue that it is important for second language (L2) speakers/learners to be able to adjust their speech in order to be intelligible to interlocutors from a wide range of lingua-cultural backgrounds (Jenkins, 2007; Walker, 2010). More specifically, they suggest that achieving international intelligibility should be prioritized over mastering a native-speaker accent for ELF communication (Jenkins, 2000, 2007; Levis, 2005; Walker, 2010).

In view of the current emphasis on intelligibility over mastery of native-like pronunciation in ELT (see Jenkins, 2000; Walker, 2010), it would be worthwhile examining whether accent matters to L2 speakers/learners of English and to what extent identity plays a role in their accent choices and preferences in ELF communication. While recent empirical studies on ELF point to the relevance of identity to ELF communication, challenging the view of ELF as cultural and identity neutral (e.g., Baker, 2009, 2015; Jenkins, 2007; Kalocsai, 2014; Zhu, 2015), relatively little is known about the role of accent in identity construction through ELF (e.g., Jenkins, 2007). For this reason, this paper reports on a qualitative inquiry that investigated the under-researched relationship between accent and identity in ELF communication from the perspectives of L2 speakers/learners of English. It seeks to offer insights into the complexity of identity and its relationship with accent in ELF communication and shed light on pronunciation instruction in ELT for ELF communication in the global context.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Identity and ELF communication

With the importance of ELF in today's globalized world, there is a growing interest in understanding the role of identity in ELF communication, given the close connection between language and identity (Joseph, 2004). In our current understanding, identity describes the relationship between the individual and the wider social and cultural world (Norton, 1997, 2000; Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004). According to Norton (1997), identity refers to 'how people understand their relationship to the world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space, and how people understand their possibilities for the future' (p. 408). Taking a post-structuralist view of identity as situated, multiple and dynamic, Norton (2000) puts forward the notion of 'investment' to understand the multifaceted nature of L2 learners' identity. It 'signals the socially and historically constructed relationship of learners to the target language, and their often ambivalent desire to learn and practice it' (p. 10). As Norton (2000) argues, if L2 learners invest in a target language, they will expect a good return on their investment, including access to previously unattainable resources, and hope to acquire a wide range of material and/or symbolic resources (Bourdieu, 1991). In other words, an investment in a target language, including a particular accent, can be seen as an investment in one's identity.

While ELF was once thought of as an identity neutral form of communication (House, 2003), a growing body of empirical studies provides evidence that identity is as relevant an issue in ELF communication as in any other form of communication and can serve as a valuable lens to understand ELF (Baker, 2011, 2015; Jenkins, 2007; Kalocsai, 2014; Zhu, 2015). In particular, it was found that ELF communication could open up spaces and resources for varied identity options, whereby multiple identities are made relevant, constructed and negotiated (Baker, 2015). As Baker (2015) suggests, identifications and identities through ELF could operate at multiple scales moving between local, national and global cultures and may be created and negotiated *in situ*.

### 2.2. Accent, identity and ELF communication

Accents, according to Lippi-Green (1997), are defined as 'loose bundles of prosodic and segmental features distributed over geographic and/or social space' (p. 42). As perhaps the most immediately tangible characteristic of a particular variety in spoken language (Walker, 2010), accents are powerful markers of identity in speech (Moyer, 2013; Sung, 2013). More specifically, accents can index speakers' individual and social identities, since accents identify people not only as individuals, but also as members of particular groups or communities (Smit & Dalton, 2000; Walker, 2010). Further, individuals' accents can be related to others' perceptions about their identity (Morgan, 1997; Sifakis & Sougari, 2005). For instance, an L2 speaker's accent may index a particular identity (including national, racial or socioeconomic identity) for interlocutors who may then evaluate the individual on the basis of the identity associated with the accent and any stereotypes it calls up (Lippi-Green, 1997).

Accent is an issue of particular relevance to ELF communication. As Jenkins (2007) points out, 'accents are highly salient to ELF speaker-hearers, possibly even more so than in communication among NSs [native speakers] of English' (p. 78). In the context of globalization and the international use of ELF, language variation, including phonological variation, is a fact of life, as interlocutors from different lingua-cultural backgrounds are likely to communicate with each other with a wide range of L1 and L2 accents. Of particular importance to note here is that ELF scholars see accent variation as a means to allow L2 speakers to express their identity (Jenkins, 2000, 2007; Walker, 2010). As accents are seen to constitute part of L2 speakers' identities, they argue that accents should not be modified against L2 speakers' desires. Jenkins (2000, 2007), in making a case for the importance of 'global phonological intelligibility', points out that certain 'non-core' phonological features of native-speaker English pronunciation are unnecessary for intelligibility in ELF communication (e.g., word stress placement). Based on the proposal of a 'Lingua Franca Core' which includes a list of phonological features that are deemed essential for mutual intelligibility in ELF communication among L2 speakers of English, Jenkins (2000) argues that L2 speakers/learners of English should be allowed to pronounce English with their own L1 accent influence instead of striving for native-speaker

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