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# The evaluation of lecturers' nonnative-accented English: Dutch and German students' evaluations of different degrees of Dutch-accented and German-accented English of lecturers in higher education



Berna Hendriks<sup>\*</sup>, Frank van Meurs, Ann-Katrin Reimer

Radboud University, The Netherlands

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## ABSTRACT

The increase in non-native English (NNE) instructors involved in English-medium instruction (EMI) in higher education has led to growing concerns about the evaluation of lecturers' NNE accents. Potentially important considerations that have largely been unexplored thus far are the impact of lecturers' accent strength and of shared L1 background between lecturers and students. The purpose of the present study was to investigate how Dutch and German students evaluate Dutch and German lecturers with moderate and slight non-native English accents in terms of speaker competence and likeability, teaching quality and intelligibility. In an experiment, 293 Dutch students and 274 German students evaluated fragments recorded by moderately accented, slightly accented Dutch and German speakers and native English speakers. Findings showed that, generally, lecturers with moderate non-native English accents were evaluated less positively whereas lecturers with slight non native English accents were evaluated similarly to lecturers with native English accents. The Dutch moderately accented speakers were evaluated more positively than the German moderately accented speakers. The findings indicate that it is advisable for NNE lecturers involved in EMI to engage in pronunciation training to minimize features of a moderate non-native accent and that it is important to challenge nonnative students' ideas about pronunciation standards.

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## 1. Introduction

The last two decades have seen a substantial increase in the use of English as a medium of instruction (EMI) in higher education in countries where English is not the native language. In Europe, for instance, the educational reforms that are part of the so-called Bologna process, aimed at increased educational compatibility by the introduction of comparable degree systems in various EU countries, have led to increased mobility among students and staff, and as a result, many universities have since started offering English-taught courses (Coleman, 2006). In 2017, German universities, for example, offered 918 English-taught bachelor and master programmes (DAAD, n.d.), and in the Netherlands, students were able to choose from as many as 1201 bachelor and master programmes taught in English (EPnuffic, n.d.).

<sup>\*</sup> Corresponding author. Communication & Information Studies, Radboud University, P.O. Box 9103, 6500 HD Nijmegen, The Netherlands.  
E-mail address: [b.hendriks@let.ru.nl](mailto:b.hendriks@let.ru.nl) (B. Hendriks).

### 1.1. Pronunciation issues for non-native English teachers

It has been pointed out that EMI may present problems for teachers whose first language is not English, including 'inadequate language skills' (Coleman, 2006, p. 6). One of the problems teachers involved in EMI identify is that they lack adequate pronunciation skills (Lehtonen & Lönnfors, 2001). Surveys and experiments among students have shown that lecturers' pronunciation may interfere with the comprehensibility of their speech (Bolton & Kuteeva, 2012) and also with how teachers are evaluated with regard to status and likeability (Chan, 2016; Dalton-Puffer, Kaltenböck, & Smit, 1997).

The majority of studies on the effect of accentedness in a teaching context have focussed on the evaluation of non-native accented teaching assistants by native English students (e.g. Bresnahan, Ohashi, Nebashi, Liu, & Morinaga Shearman, 2002; Kang, Rubin, & Lindemann, 2015; Rubin & Smith, 1990).<sup>1</sup> There are fewer studies on the evaluation of non-native accented teachers by non-native speakers of English. Such previous studies have shown that non-native English (NNE) teachers or teaching assistants are generally evaluated negatively. Studies using survey methodologies have shown that NNE students report comprehensibility problems when listening to lecturers with a non-native accent in English (Bolton & Kuteeva, 2012; Hellekjær, 2010). Hellekjær (2010), for example, found that students in Norway and Germany found vocabulary items in EMI lectures unclear due to pronunciation issues. Studies using experimental methodologies have demonstrated that NNE students have more negative attitudes to EMI teachers if they have non-native English accents than when they have NE accents (Buckingham, 2014; Butler, 2007; Dalton-Puffer et al., 1997; Kelch & Santana-Williamson, 2002). Dalton-Puffer et al. (1997), for example, found that Austrian students downgraded non-native lecturers with an Austrian accent in English compared to NE lecturers.

### 1.2. Comprehensibility of non-native accents

With respect to comprehensibility of non-native speech in general, experimental studies have found that both native and non-native listeners find native accents easier to understand than non-native accents (the so-called 'native speech intelligibility benefit', e.g. Major, Fitzmaurice, Bunta, & Balasubramanian, 2002; Smith & Bisazza, 1982). Another, contradictory effect that has been found is that non-native listeners with the same L1 background as the speaker find a non-native accent easier to understand than a native accent (the so-called 'matched interlanguage speech intelligibility benefit', e.g. Bent & Bradlow, 2003; Munro, Derwing, & Morton, 2006; Stibbard & Lee, 2006; Wang, 2007). Previous research has also identified a so-called 'mismatched interlanguage speech intelligibility detriment': NNE listeners may find NNE speakers with a different L1 background more difficult to understand than NNE speakers with whom they share an L1 (Stibbard & Lee, 2006). However, other studies have found that these benefits and detriments do not always occur (Hendriks, van Meurs, & de Groot, 2017; Bent & Bradlow, 2003; Hayes-Harb, Smith, Bent, & Bradlow, 2008; Munro et al., 2006).

### 1.3. Accent strength

One factor that may determine the evaluation of NNE teachers is accent strength. To date, few studies have investigated the effect of accent strength in a teaching context (but see Hendriks, van Meurs, & Hogervorst, 2016). Studies about such effects in other contexts have shown that stronger non-native accents are evaluated more negatively than weaker non-native accents on attitudinal dimensions (e.g. Hendriks et al., 2017; Cargile & Giles, 1998; Carlson & McHenry, 2006; Dragojevic, Giles, Beck, & Tatum, 2017; Nejari, Gerritsen, Van der Haagen, & Korzilius, 2012; Nesdale & Rooney, 1996; Roessel, Schoel, Zimmermann, & Stahlberg, 2017). In a teaching context, Hendriks et al. (2016) found that moderately Dutch-accented lecturers were evaluated as less competent and dependable than slightly Dutch-accented lecturers.

Studies investigating the effect of non-native accent strength on comprehensibility have shown mixed findings. Speakers with strong non-native accents have been found more difficult to understand than speakers with weaker accents (Stibbard & Lee, 2006) but also as equally easy to understand as speakers with weaker accents (Hendriks et al., 2017; Munro & Derwing, 1995a, 1995b; Nejari et al., 2012).

A moot point is whether NNE listeners are able to distinguish different degrees of NNE accentedness. While L1 listeners have been shown to be able to distinguish different degrees of NNE accentedness (e.g. Brennan & Brennan, 1981), Hendriks et al. (2017) found that NNE listeners (with different L1 backgrounds than the speaker, i.e. German, French and Spanish) did not distinguish strong Dutch English accents from slight Dutch English accents.

The issue of the evaluation of non-native English teachers by non-native listeners can be seen against the background of the debate about the desirability of the native norm. A number of researchers have argued that the native speaker norm has become obsolete in the context of other models, such as the English spoken by proficient L2 speakers or World Englishes (Cook, 1999; Davies, 2013; Paikeday, 1985). Specifically with respect to pronunciation, some studies (Jenkins, 1998, 2000; Setter & Jenkins, 2005) have suggested that users of English as a lingua franca need not adhere to native English norms. The

<sup>1</sup> In the literature the distinction native – non-native has been contested (e.g. Brutt-Griffler & Samimy, 2001). In our study, we use Davies (2013) definition of a native speaker as "a person who has early acquired the language" (p. 4). The current study does not use the terms 'native' and 'non-native' to imply that native speech be the norm. Rather, it is concerned with the extent to which the native speaker (here of English) is *perceived* as a norm by non L1 speakers of English, and to what extent degrees of L2 accentedness are perceived as acceptable.

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