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An Analysis of ESL Learner Preferences for Native Accent Retention and Reduction

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Abstract

Though most ESL learners desire a "native-like" pronunciation, researchers have observed that some may want to retain features of their L1 accents as a means of maintaining identity. This raises important questions about the best ways to teach L2 pronunciation. Therefore, the aims of this study were to discover how pervasive a preference for accent retention may be and to identify possible reasons learners exhibit this preference. To accomplish this, a scale was designed to assess a preference for accent retention, and potential explanatory variables were identified. Analyses of 350 ESL learners identified varying levels of a preference for accent retention, and revealed three significant predictors of this tendency. This article explores possible reasons for the observed results, including an effort to unify the findings through what is referred to as a *propensity for proximal linguistic status*. Some considerations for ESL pronunciation pedagogy are also discussed.

Keywords: Pronunciation pedagogy, accent retention, accent reduction

1. Introduction

In recent decades, many researchers have challenged long-held assumptions associated with traditional approaches to pronunciation instruction for those learning English as a Second Language (ESL). One of the most salient transformations is illustrated by the many who reject the view that ESL learners should strive to develop native-like pronunciation (e.g. Crystal, 1997; Dauer, 2005; Derwing & Munro, 2005; Jenkins, 2000, 2002, 2006; Kachru, 1997; Levis, 2005; Munro, 2008).

While researchers and practitioners cite a number of compelling reasons for advocating this view, the focus of this study rests on the assertion that some ESL learners seem to exhibit a preference for accent retention as a means of maintaining their identity (e.g. Gatbonton, Trofimovich & Magid, 2005; Golombek

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& RehnJordan, 2005; Jenkins, 2005; Porter & Garvin, 1989). *Accent retention* as used here simply refers to learners' desires to use pronunciation patterns influenced by and characteristic of their L1. Conversely, this study also examines what some have termed *accent reduction*, simply defined here as the antithesis of accent retention or the general desire to achieve native-like pronunciation by seeking to reduce or eliminate pronunciation patterns characteristic of the L1. In addition to raising compelling questions about how ESL pronunciation should be taught, the suggestion that some learners maintain a preference for accent retention is fraught with ethical implications for curriculum development and pedagogy.

Therefore, it seems that second language teachers and researchers would benefit from a greater understanding of those who may demonstrate a preference for accent retention. It was assumed that such findings would not only be vital to the ethical underpinnings of ESL pedagogy, but that they would also provide a meaningful contribution to the current international dialogue about ESL pronunciation instruction. Thus, the purpose of this study was to analyze learner preferences for accent retention to determine how pervasive this phenomenon may be compared to those favoring accent reduction and to identify factors that might help explain this tendency.

2. Relevant Literature

2. 1. The Native Standard for Pronunciation

At the outset, we consider just of few reasons scholars have rejected or supported a native target for ESL pronunciation instruction. Perhaps the most obvious argument against the pursuit of native-like production is the simple fact that it has not been attainable for the overwhelming majority of ESL learners (e.g., Flege, Munro, & Mackay, 1995; Scovel, 2000).Thus, some have contended that "there is no reason to believe that [native-like pronunciation] is achievable in typical ESL classrooms" and that "it may do more harm than good for teachers to lead learners to believe that they will eventually achieve native pronunciation" (Derwing & Monro, 2005, p. 384). Moreover, with numerous learners around the world who use English without ever communicating with a native speaker, many scholars advocate pedagogy that emphasizes intelligibility or "the degree of a listener's actual comprehension of an utterance" (Derwing & Monro, 2009, p. 479) rather than emphasize accent reduction (e.g., Dauer, 2005; Derwing & Munro, 2005; Jenkins, 2000, 2002; Levis, 2005; Munro, 2008).

Despite these reasonable perspectives, some practitioners continue to strive to help their students develop native-like pronunciation. For example, some scholars or practitioners cite studies spanning more than a half century which suggest that nonstandard pronunciation can lead to a plethora of negative social consequences for ESL learners (e.g., Flege, 1988; Giles, 1970; Lambert, Hodgson, Gardner & Fillenbaum, 1960; Lippi-Green,1997; Morely, 1998; Munro, 2003; Munro, Derwing, & Sato, 2006; Purcell & Suter, 1980). Perhaps even more pressing for practitioners and program administrators is the fact that a majority of ESL learners continue to clamor for curricula designed to help them sound like native speakers (e.g., Derwing, 2003; Simon, 2005; Timmis, 2002).

Yet, amid this growing cry for accent reduction is the emerging observation that some learners may want to retain their L1 accent as a means of preserving their identity. If true, this notion suggests important ethical considerations for pedagogy. For example, with so many learners seeking native-like pronunciation, a curriculum that caters to these requests may be problematic for those learners whose use of accent may be closely tied to an identity they are striving to preserve. Though it seems clear that accent may not be easily manipulated at the volition of the learner (Derwing & Munro, 2009), it also seems worth verifying if some students deliberately intend to retain an L1 influence in their speech rather than attempting to speak with more native-like pronunciation.

2. 2. Identity and Pronunciation

In order to place this discussion into its broader framework, it is necessary to examine the notion of identity more closely. Drawing from socio-cultural theory, Marx (2002) refers to "the choice of which role we will play and which identity will be displayed in an interaction" (p. 2). This reflects how thinking about identity has evolved over the past few decades from a fairly fixed sense of self to a notion much more complex and dynamic. Rather than exhibiting a single identity, there is growing evidence that suggests that individuals tend to construct and present multiple identities to various groups (e.g., Cerullo, 1997; Norton, 2000), and that this is often done in strategic ways that bring the greatest social benefits in a given context (e.g., Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004).

A few examples of this selective identity may be useful. Bailey (2000), for instance, demonstrated that speech patterns can be used to negotiate identity. He observed that black Dominican teenagers who had immigrated to the United States used specific speech patterns strategically in ESL contexts to maximize social benefits by emphasizing a black identity in some settings while emphasizing a Latin identity in others. Gatbanton, Trofimovich, and Magid (2005) also studied the notion of identity in terms of ethnic group affiliation and its effect on ESL pronunciation. They concluded that in some scenarios, L2 learners need to make a choice between communicative efficiency with their L2 group on one hand and the risk of not adequately marking their L1 identity on the other. They observed that those who fail to use their L2 speech to mark their identity appropriately run the "risk of being labeled disloyal" (p. 504).

Other researchers in foreign-language contexts have also noted identity problems associated with learners who may be perceived as too native-like. For example, Lybeck (2002) analyzed the Norwegian pronunciation of American women living in Norway. She found that all of her subjects "were hindered in speaking Norwegian to some extent by their own American identities" and that some of them feared losing their "American identity through the loss of foreign accent" (p. 181). She also noted that one of her subjects even criticized those nonnative speakers whose pronunciation was too native-like, referring to it as "fake" (p. 181). Similarly, others such as Rajadurai (2007) have observed that in some contexts "speaking English with [native-like] patterns is likely to be met with suspicion, derision, and even disgust at the inferred lack of national pride and identity" (p. 94). These observations seem consistent with those of Jenkins (2005), who noted that some learners "wish unequivocally to use their accented English to express their L1 identity" (p. 541).

With this background in mind, Gatbanton, Trofimovich, and Magid (2005) have offered suggestions for the ESL classroom. First, they have advocated greater awareness on the part of teachers and cautioned that low achievement in the accuracy of L2 pronunciation should not automatically be interpreted as a lack of ability or motivation on the part of the students. They have stressed that this is because accented speech may be the learner's way of dealing with social or cultural pressures from L1 peers. They also cautioned that while the goal of instruction is to help learners to achieve the most accurate pronunciation possible, teachers should avoid the suggestion that accented production is somehow inferior to more native-like utterances. Rather, they encouraged teachers to practice tolerance for such speech.

While these are laudable suggestions aimed at protecting legitimate learner interests, many practitioners may continue to be perplexed about the best ways to meet the needs of these two divergent groups of learners—those who exact instruction, practice, and feedback aimed at a native-like goal and those who desire to retain their L1 accents in an ESL context. Thus, the intent of this study was to provide practitioners and researchers with additional insights that may help inform practice and theory regarding those learners who exhibit a preference for accent retention.

Research Questions

This brief review of literature raises questions that may be of interest to both practitioners and researchers. For example, while the literature provides evidence that some learners may have a preference for accent retention, it seems unclear how pervasive this phenomenon is. If ethical considerations would suggest significant changes to curricula or pedagogy to accommodate these students, it would be helpful to understand the relative number of students that may exhibit this preference in a typical population of ESL learners.

Although the literature points to various reasons why individual students may exhibit a preference for accent retention, it tells us very little about such learners. One is left to wonder whether there might be psychological, sociological, ethnographic, demographic, linguistic or a host of other factors that might help explain this tendency. If discovered, such insights might not only help instructors prepare to meet the specific needs of their individual students, but they might also help researchers and theorists understand possible differences between those who tend to favor accent retention and those who may favor accent reduction. With this rationale in mind, two broad research questions were articulated:

1. How pervasive is a preference for accent retention? Is there a difference in the proportion of students who demonstrate a preference for accent retention versus those who are more inclined toward accent reduction?
2. Is there any evidence that a preference for accent retention is a systematic phenomenon? Are their external factors that might help explain or predict a preference for accent retention?

3. Method

3. 1. Participants

This study analyzed the responses of 345 ESL learners from 37 nations who spoke 23 different native languages. All of the participants were students enrolled in the same intensive English program associated with a large university in the United States. Table 2 provides a breakdown of the number of individuals by L1 and gender. Ages among these learners ranged from 17 to 57 with a mean of 26 years. Residency in a country where English was the primary native language ranged from no residency to 12 years with a mean of 8 months. In addition to seven students who were assessed as true beginners, the remaining 238 students were placed into one of five proficiency levels ranging from novice-mid to intermediate-high according to the following breakdown: Level 1 (46), Level 2 (75), Level 3 (79), Level 4 (86), and Level 5 (52).

3.2. Methods of Measurement

Since traditional measures of linguistic performance would tell us very little, if anything, about a possible preference for accent retention, this construct was viewed as a latent trait associated with the affective domain. Based on the affective characteristics described by Anderson and Bourke (2000), it was assumed that a preference for accent retention might be best described as a value. This is because learners may connect their opportunities to reduce or retain accent with emotions linked with their current sense of identity (Dauer, 2005; Golombek & Rehn Jordan, 2005; Lybeck, 2002; Pennington & Richards, 1986; Rajadurai, 2007), who they hope to become in the future (Golombek & Rehn Jordan, 2005; Norton, 2000), or how they feel they are perceived by others (Gatbonton, Trofimovich & Magid, 2005; Lybeck, 2002; Rajadurai, 2007).

Rokeach (1973) defined a value as "an enduring belief that a specific mode of conduct or end-state of existence is personally or socially preferable to an opposite or converse mode of conduct or end-state" (p. 5). Anderson and Bourke (2000) added that values manifest themselves in a sense that something is right or wrong and that they are rooted in idea-related targets that remain fairly stable over time. We might depict this construct as a continuum ranging from a position of valuing accent retention to a position of valuing accent reduction. With this framework in mind, we now consider how best to identify the latent variables that are associated with a preference for accent retention.

3. 2. 1. Scale Development

Since there were no known instruments designed to assess a preference for accent retention, an attempt was made to develop an instrument that could be used to elicit the kind of data needed to answer the research questions. Devellis (2003) described measurement scales as "instruments that are collections of items combined into a composite score" which are designed to "reveal levels of theoretical variables not readily observable by direct means" (p. 9). Though scale construction is complex and proper validation may require multiple studies over an extended period, the intent here was to provide enough preliminary evidence to inform hypotheses and guide theorizing about phenomena associated with a preference for accent retention. Though such analysis may be provisional, it was assumed that it would be beneficial to practitioners and researchers.

3. 2. 2. Validity and Reliability

As we consider the validity of a scale designed to measure a preference for accent retention, we should keep in mind that there are a number of types of such evidence and that no single evaluation of validity should be reduced to a simple assertion of whether or not a particular scale is valid. Rather, validity should be viewed as the extent to which an instrument measures what it was designed to measure. Various types of evidence are often examined to help determine the validity of an instrument and the contexts in which it is used.

In its broadest sense, construct validity refers to the extent to which an instrument appropriately measures a specific construct. It also refers to the expectation that the instrument will reflect relevant theory and that the interpretations and applications of scores will be appropriate. The development of the scale used in this study was based on ideas that emerged from the available literature. To determine how well these reasons for accent retention identified in the literature matched the views of current learners, students responded to open-ended questions regarding the contexts in which they or their peers might desire accent retention. Though this process revealed that most learners actually expressed a much stronger desire to speak with native-like pronunciation, all of the major reasons for accent retention generated by the literature resurfaced independently in student responses. Thus, the fact that the content of the scale items used in this study were derived from the literature and were corroborated independently by students provides at least some support for the claim of construct validity.

Another type of evidence closely associated with our conceptualization of the construct is content validity. The primary question examined for content validity is whether the items in the scale collectively constitute an adequate representation of what it means to have a preference for accent retention. The literature not only suggested that some learners exhibit a preference for accent retention, but it also revealed a variety of contexts or reasons why this preference may be manifest. Therefore, it followed that the scale under construction needed to include a sufficient sample of these various contexts. Thus, the expectation was that the final version of the instrument would not merely suggest that a particular learner may be inclined toward a preference for accent retention, but it was intended that the scale show the

extent to which a learner demonstrated the most salient reasons for this preference.

The most common of these reasons seemed to fit within one of three broad groups of indicators: (a) values associated with personal identity, (b) values associated with nationality or culture, and (c) values associated with how the learner was perceived by of others. Nevertheless, as preliminary statements were developed for the scale, it seemed clear that there would be fairly extensive overlap among these indicators. Thus, no attempt was made to ensure that statements were mutually exclusive to a single indicator.

Over 50 preliminary statements were generated with these three indicators in mind. A Likert scale was also used to determine the extent to which students agreed or disagreed with the statements. Eight scale categories were used, ranging from *very strongly disagree* to *very strongly agree*. Statements were presented to two independent experts and then to small groups of students for their feedback. Early versions of the scale were carefully analyzed to identify items that needed to be improved. Items that were unclear, redundant or simply functioned poorly were modified or discarded. After many iterative refinements with small groups of students, 11 statements targeting a preference for accent retention remained that were based entirely on notions presented in the literature and that recurred independently in student commentary. These 11 statements are displayed in Figure 1.

Analyses of preliminary data suggested that these items were fairly well correlated, that the scale measured a single construct, and that it appeared to function adequately. It is quite probable that additional refinements could have been identified and implemented to improve the scale. Nevertheless, since the aim of this study was to answer the research questions, rather than to create and validate the perfect instrument, it was determined that such efforts would be beyond the purpose of this study.

Figure 1. Statements by indicator targeting a preference for accent retention.

Statements by Indicator	①	②	③
My native accent is an important part of my personal identity.	✓		
Speaking with my native accent is a way for me to stay connected to my culture.		✓	
I don't want my teachers to make my English sound just like a native speaker's English.			✓
When I speak English, I prefer to use some of my native accent.	✓		
Speaking English with my native accent helps me show love for my country.		✓	✓
I don't want to have English pronunciation that is just like a native speaker's.	✓		
I like to speak English with my native accent so people know where I am from.		✓	✓
The amount of native accent I use when speaking English depends on who I talk to.	✓		✓
Speaking with my native accent is a way to show my national pride.		✓	✓
Speaking with my native accent makes me feel unique in America.	✓	✓	
I want others to know what my native language is by my accent.	✓	✓	✓

① = Personal Identity ② = Culture & Nationality ③ = Perceptions of Others
✓ = Statement was designed to target the corresponding indicator

In addition to content validity, evidence of criterion-related validity is often examined in scale development. Criterion-related validity simply refers to the expectation that the scale is correlated with a particular criterion that shares some kind of association with the construct of interest. Providing empirical evidence of this kind can be relatively straightforward when one has valid instruments that measure the same construct as the one targeted by the scale being developed.

However, since there were no known instruments that might be used to establish convergent or divergent validation for a preference for accent retention, an attempt was made to analyze the construct empirically using factor[1] analysis. Based on preliminary analyses of the scale items, two a priori hypotheses were formed. First, it was assumed that analysis would identify only one factor. This would suggest the unidimensionality of the scale, a necessary condition for evaluating the scale's reliability. Second, it was expected that each item would provide an appropriate contribution to the scale overall. This would be based on factor loadings, which represent the correlations between each statement and the theoretical construct. Hair, Anderson, Tatham, and Black (1998) established a minimum threshold of .40 for factor loadings.

Before conducting the factor analysis, the responses from the 350 students who completed the survey were reviewed carefully for any evidence of indiscriminate responses that might undermine the validity of these data. This process revealed five cases where students may have provided simple response sets without regard for the item content. For example, despite the fact that the first two Likert items presented opposite information (i.e. items 1 and 2 in the elicitation instrument included in the appendix), three respondents indicated that they *very strongly disagreed* with all of the statements and two respondents indicated that they *very strongly agreed* with all of the statements. Thus, data from these respondents were eliminated and the subsequent analyses were based on the remaining 345 learners.

The factor analysis[2] confirmed our first hypothesis regarding the unidimensionality of the scale. In addition, factor loadings ranged from .66 to .86, each of which would be considered high by the standard presented by Hair, Anderson, Tatham, and Black (1998). These findings help confirm the expectation that each of the factor loadings would exceed .40. Table 1 presents the scale statements in order of their communalities (h^2), which are calculated as the square of the factor loading coefficients. These communalities suggest the proportion of variance for each statement that is explained by the latent trait. For example, an estimated 74% of the variance from the first statement and 44% from the last statement should be attributable to our construct of a preference for accent retention. The table also includes means (*m*), standard deviations (*sd*) and initial communalities for each item.

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[1] Common factor analysis identifies the smallest number of factors that account for the shared variance in a group of variables. Though a number of extraction methods exist, principal axis factoring was used for this scale as recommended by Fabrigar, Wegener, MacCallum, and Strahan (1999) since early analyses with smaller data sets presented non-normal distributions.

[2] Only one factor was identified with an initial eigenvalue of 6.86, accounting for 62.38% of the variance. This finding was underscored by a sharp point of inflection between the first and second factor in a scree plot generated for these data.

Table 1. Scale Statements for Accent Retention by Commonalities

Scale Statements	m	sd	initial	h²
1. My native accent is an important part of my personal identity.	3.15	1.94	.74	.74
2. I like to speak English with my native accent so people know where I am from.	3.11	1.92	.68	.71
3. Speaking with my native accent is a way for me to stay connected to my culture.	2.94	1.93	.69	.67
4. Speaking with my native accent is a way to show my national pride.	3.29	2.01	.67	.66
5. Speaking with my native accent makes me feel unique in America.	3.31	2.04	.63	.64
6. Speaking English with my native accent helps me show love for my country.	3.07	1.99	.62	.63
7. I want others to know what my native language is by my accent.	3.51	2.04	.61	.54
8. The amount of native accent I use when speaking English depends on who I am talking to.	3.61	1.99	.50	.51
9. I don't want to have English pronunciation that is just like a native speaker's.	2.92	2.00	.49	.46
10. When I speak English, I prefer to use some of my native accent.	3.56	2.11	.49	.44
11. I don't want my teachers to try to make my English sound just like a native speaker's English.	2.54	1.93	.44	.44

Assuming that these analyses provided sufficient evidence of the validity of the scale, a Cronbach's alpha was calculated to estimate the reliability of the scale and produced a coefficient of .94 for the eleven items in the elicitation instrument. Thus, the scale was deemed sufficiently valid and reliable for the purposes of this study.

3. 2. 3. Operationalizing the research questions

Two research questions were articulated. The first addressed the pervasiveness of preferences for accent retention and accent reduction and whether there were differences in the proportion of students demonstrating a preference for accent retention and accent reduction. It was determined that these preferences would be based on a summation of the scaled items divided by 11 to provide an overall average indicator that corresponded to the eight Likert-scale categories. It was assumed that category labels associated with each numeric value of the Likert scale could be interpreted as indicating various levels of preference for accent retention or accent reduction. For example, *strongly agree* could be interpreted as a strong preference, *very strongly agree* could be interpreted as a very strong preference and so on. Conversely, it was determined that options showing varying levels of disagreement would be interpreted as preferences for accent reduction. It was assumed that this frequency data and a chi-square goodness of fit test could help answer the first research question.

The second research question represented an effort to identify whether a preference for accent retention was a systematic phenomenon and whether there might be associated factors that could help

explain or predict this phenomenon. However, unlike the first research question, which required an analysis of all the available data, it was determined that the best way to answer the second question would be to compare only those learners with the strongest preferences for accent retention and accent reduction. Otherwise, group differences could be diluted and rendered meaningless. Therefore, the intent was to compare only those who were categorized as having very strong preferences. Since the goal was to include at least 30 learners in each group to ensure an adequate sample size, it was decided that adjacent groups would be collapsed if the number of learners in the extreme categories were too small to analyze.

3. 2. 4. Explanatory Variables

In order to answer the second research question, it was necessary to identify factors that might help us understand preferences for accent retention. Piske, MacKay, & Flege (2001) presented a number of variables from a broad survey of the literature that have had an influence on accent. Potential variables were drawn from this list including learner age, gender, L1, L2 proficiency, level of motivation, residency in an L2 environment, and the amount of experience the learner has had with the L2.While many other variables might have been included, practical constraints necessitated limiting these factors.

Though attempts to measure some of these variables were fairly straightforward, others were more complex. Let us consider the simplest cases first. While age and gender need no additional explanation, the amount of experience with ESL was operationalized as the total number of months of ESL study as reported by the student. Proficiency level was based on a battery of placement tests used by the intensive English program (IEP) in which the students were enrolled. These included commercial and in-house resources and assessed all four language skills resulting in student placement into one of six proficiency levels.

It was intended that L1s be analyzed in terms of very general categories of language distance. Researchers have long suggested that language distance or the relative differences between an L1 and an L2 may account for some of the comparative difficulty a learner may experience in acquiring the L2 (e.g., Corder, 1981; Odlin, 1989). However, there is no widely accepted method for determining language distance. Many scholars tend to agree with Crystal (1987), who concluded that "quantifying linguistic difference proves to be highly complex, because of the many variables involved" (p. 371). Nevertheless, Chiswick and Miller (2005), devised and tested an approach for identifying language distance based on the number of weeks of language instruction that would be required at the U.S. Foreign Service Institute (FSI) for a native English speaker to achieve a specified level of proficiency.

The FSI has identified three different categories of language difficulty for native English speakers. For example, courses for languages such as French, Italian, Portuguese, and Spanish last for 23 to 24 weeks, more difficult courses for languages such as Armenian, Mongolian, Russian, Thai, Turkish, and Vietnamese last for 44 weeks, and courses for the most difficult languages such as Arabic, Chinese, Japanese, and Korean last for 88 weeks (Tokuhama-Espinosa, 2008). Thus, the number of weeks nearly doubles with each level of increased difficulty, suggesting substantial differences between the three groups. Since in this method no adjustment is made when English functions as the L2 rather than the L1, it could not be used as a precise indicator of language distance. Nevertheless, Chiswick, & Miller (2005) provide useful statistical evidence of the efficacy of their method when used to identify a very general indicator of language distance. Thus, it seemed well suited for the purpose of this study. For our analysis, the languages perceived to be the closest to English based on weeks of instruction in FSI classes were coded as a "1," those more distant were coded as a "2," and those the most distant were coded as a "3."

A simple test for examining motivation was also devised. It dealt with the relative importance of pronunciation to the learner. It was determined that the priority placed on pronunciation would be derived from the learner's rank ordering of six areas of language learning including reading, writing,

listening, speaking, grammar, and pronunciation. Each student was given a score, between 1 and 6, depending on the relative priority of pronunciation to the learner. For example, the learner was assigned a "6" if pronunciation was the student's top priority and a "1" if it was the lowest priority among the options. It was assume that a value of "1" should not be interpreted to mean pronunciation was not important to the learner but simply that it was relatively less important compared with the other priorities.

The final factor for consideration was the residency in an ESL environment. Since this study was based on learner perceptions, including perceptions of the learner's current identity (e.g., Dauer, 2005; Golombek & Rehn Jordan, 2005; Lybeck, 2002; Pennington & Richards, 1986; Rajadurai, 2007) as well as future identity (e.g., Golombek & Rehn Jordan, 2005; Norton, 2000), a question of great interest was the perceptions of future residency on a preference for accent retention. To avoid confounding current residency as an ESL student with plans for future residency, a ten-year space was provided in the following survey question: "In ten years, do you plan to live in a country where English is spoken as a native language?" Response options included "no," scored as "1," "maybe," scored as "2," and "yes," scored as "3."

3. 2. 5. Elicitation Procedures

Data for this study were elicited during a battery of placement tests for students newly enrolled in an intensive English program. Since the survey sought information intended to inform curricular changes, it was presented to all of the new students, each of whom agreed to participate. The completion rate was approximately 98%. The instrument consisted of an untimed survey. Information about each learner's age, gender, and L1 was obtained previously and was not elicited that this time. Though L1 translations of the survey were not provided, teachers helped ensure understanding for their lower-proficiency learners as needed. On average, students completed the survey well within 10 minutes. Though several students who demonstrated strong preferences for accent retention were targeted for brief interviews, only two participated (see the appendix for the interview questions).

4. Results

4.1. Research Question 1

We now examine the findings designed to answer each research question. The first question addressed the pervasiveness of preferences for accent retention and accent reduction. This information is displayed in a histogram in Figure 2, where the Likert scale categories run vertically, indicating a preference for accent retention in the top half and a preference for accent reduction in the bottom half. The number of respondents aligned with each category and its percentage run horizontally. Scores in Figure 2 were grouped based on the scale category to which they were the closest. For example, scores ranging from 3.50 to 4.49 were counted as a "4," scores ranging from 4.50 to 5.49 were grouped as a "5," and so on.

Table 2. Learners by Native Language and Gender

Native Language	Gender		Number of Individuals
	Male	Female	
Albanian	0	1	1
Arabic	0	1	1
Armenian	0	1	1
Bambara	3	2	5
Belorussian	0	1	1
Chinese	12	21	33
Creole/French	2	0	2
French	3	4	7
German	0	1	1
Italian	1	1	2
Japanese	6	16	22
Korean	39	49	88
Malagasy	1	2	3
Mongolian	1	4	5
Persian	0	1	1
Portuguese	16	17	33
Romanian	0	1	1
Russian	2	9	11
Spanish	46	74	120
Thai	3	1	4
Turkish	1	0	1
Ukrainian	0	1	1
Vietnamese	1	0	1
Totals	137	208	345

The 345 students who completed the survey produced a mean response (m = 3.23, sd = 1.56) that fell between *somewhat disagree* and *disagree* on the Likert scale. This indicates that while 278 students (80.58%) exhibited a preference for accent reduction, 67 students (19.42%) expressed a preference for varying degrees of accent retention. If we only consider those without any equivocation (i.e., a combination of the top three categories in Figure 2), this number is reduced to 31 respondents (8.99%). Only one student (.29%) indicated a very strong preference for accent retention. As expected, this difference between those identified as having a preference for accent retention versus those with a preference for accent reduction was statistically significant, χ^2 (1, N = 345) = 172.82, p< .001, V = .61.
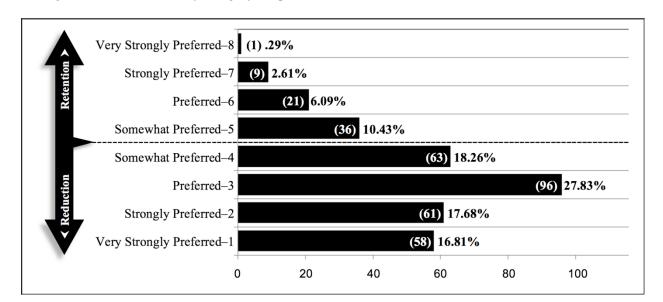
Figure 2. Endorsements by category for preferences for accent retention and reduction

4. 2. Research Question 2

The purpose of the second research question was to guide an analysis of factors that might help explain a preference for accent retention. Since the objective was to compare those with the strongest preference for accent retention and accent reduction on a variety of potential explanatory variables, two extreme groups needed to be identified. The 58 students categorized as having a very strong preference for accent reduction formed one group. However, to ensure an adequate sample size, all 31 students who demonstrated a preference for accent retention without equivocation formed the other group (i.e., all those identified in categories 6, 7, and 8 in Figure 2). To help answer this question, a stepwise multiple linear regression was used. The same indicator of preference for accent retention based on the scale instrument described earlier served as the dependent variable. The explanatory variables included age, gender, language distance, months of ESL study, ESL proficiency, the relative importance of pronunciation to the learner, and the likelihood of future residency in a country where English would be spoken as a native language.

The results of the linear regression are displayed in Table 3. Of the seven variables examined in this study, four were excluded from the regression model. These included age (p = .893), gender (p = .284), months of ELS study (p = .601), and the relative importance of pronunciation to the learner (p = .402). On the other hand, three factors were included in the model and were identified as statistically significant predictors of a preference for accent retention. These included ESL proficiency level, language distance, and the likelihood of future residency in a country where English is spoken natively. Collectively these factors accounted for approximately one third of the observed variability (R^2 = .356, adjusted R^2 = .333, p = .008).

Table 3. Results of Multiple Linear Regression Analysis

Preference for Accent Retention	*B*	*SE*	*β*	*Sig*
Step 1: *df* = 1, 87				
(Constant)	5.683	.566		
Proficiency Level	-.872	.164	-.495	< .001
Step 2: *df* = 2, 86				
(Constant)	4.557	.696		
Proficiency Level	-.880	.159	-.500	< .001
Language Distance	.666	.254	.237	.010
Step 3: *df* = 3, 85				
(Constant)	2.653	.974		
Proficiency Level	-.805	.156	-.457	< .001
Language Distance	.677	.245	.241	.007
Future Residency	.863	.320	.239	.008

5. Discussion

The aims of this study were to determine the pervasiveness of a preference for accent retention and to identify those factors that might help explain this phenomenon. We will begin with a discussion of the second question first.

Though four of the variables analyzed provided no meaningful insight to help answer our research question (i.e., age, gender, months of ESL study, and relative importance of pronunciation), three factors offered highly significant contributions to the regression model. We now examine each of these variables. We begin with language proficiency level, which exhibited nearly twice the effect on the model compared to the other statistically significant variables. These results show that the greater the proficiency level, the less likely learners were to have a preference for accent retention. Similarly, as proficiency decreased, a preference for accent retention became more likely. Though this pattern may not fit every individual learner, this finding is rather striking in that it suggests that, on average, a preference for accent retention may be associated more with lower rather than higher proficiency levels.

In addition to language proficiency, language distance was also shown to be a significant predictor of a preference for accent retention. As language distance grows, the preference increases. As language distance decreases, so does the preference for accent retention. While a student's proficiency level is likely to increase with ongoing study over time, this notion of language distance would be expected to remain constant. This suggests that on average native speakers of languages such as Chinese, Japanese, or Korean might be more likely to have a preference for accent retention when compared to similar proficiency speakers of languages such as Spanish, French, or Italian.

The last factor shown to be a significant predictor of a preference for accent retention was the likelihood of future residency in a country where English is spoken natively. Findings suggest that as the likelihood of residency increases, so does the preference for accent retention. Two potential explanations are mentioned here. The first is the possibility that many learners who anticipate living in a native English environment in the future may also have a desire to use their accent as a means of preserving and marking their L1 identity as discussed previously. This may be particularly true in cases where learners

expect to continue to interact closely with others from the same L1 cultural background (see Gatbonton, Trofimovich, &Magid, 2005). The deliberate nature of these decisions may be exemplified in the following statements from learners who exhibited a strong preference for accent retention. One such student stated: "I change my accent depending on who I am talking to." He also indicated, "If I am talking to someone important, I will be more careful with my pronunciation."

Despite this possibility, not all learners who expect to live in a native English environment may be able to plan to live or work with others who speak their L1. Therefore, an additional explanation might be that some of these learners may have a desire to use their L1 accent to be marked as socially special, distinctive, or unique. In support of this notion, one student who demonstrated a strong preference for accent retention observed: "Some people say 'I like the way you speak.' I think it's cool that some people like my accent." Thus, it is conceivable that in certain contexts some L2 learners may perceive some kind of social advantage to retaining their L1 accent when communicating with native speakers of English.

While these reasons for a preference for accent retention may be entirely independent from each other, a closer analysis of the three significant factors suggests some possible similarities that may provide support for a more unified explanation. Simply stated, on average, the learners in this study appear to favor their current linguistic context over something further from their present state. This hypothetical construct could be referred to as a propensity toward a preference for proximal linguistic status. Each of the three factors shown to be significant predictors of a preference for accent retention could be seen as contributing to this propensity. For example, lower proficiency and greater language distance were both associated with and increased preference for accent retention. These factors could be viewed as a type of gap between the learner's current linguistic status and a native standard.

While this propensity may be more obvious for factors such as proficiency and language distance, its relation to the likelihood of future residency may not be as straightforward. Nevertheless, it is possible that as the prospect of future residency increases, those expecting to live in environments where English is spoken natively may, in anticipation, project themselves into that context psychologically. Thus, for them, the gap between their own linguistic status and a native standard may become more real when compared to the learner who plans to return to his home country and may not be as invested or cognizant of this gap.

Though this propensity for proximal linguistic status and its relationship to a preference for accent retention is merely hypothetical and in need of additional examination, it seems useful for these data since it appears to unify an explanation of those factors shown to be associated with a desire for accent retention. Nevertheless, the question remains why this propensity would result in a greater preference for accent retention. Though the underlying phenomena are likely to be complex, it seems probable that the further the native standard is from the learner, the greater the relative psychosociological affinity the learner may feel toward linguistic features of theL1 when compared to the L2. However, as this gap may be reduced through additional linguistic development, psychological adjustment, or increased cultural awareness, it may be possible that the linguistic affinity learners feel may expand toward an increasingly greater inclusion of the features of the L2, such as more native-like pronunciation in contexts where minimizing accent may bring greater rewards.

Though there may be many other processes that go beyond these possibilities, if the notion of a propensity toward proximal linguistic status accurately describes some of the underlying phenomena, then aspects of having a preference for accent retention may be relatively systematic. Rather than simply occurring randomly, it may largely be a function of this propensity. If this is true, a preference for accent retention may be more descriptive of a developmental stage for some learners than a permanent state. Additional study of longitudinal data would be needed to identify whether systematic shifts can be observed in learner preferences for accent retention over time.

We now return to a discussion of the first research question dealing with the pervasiveness of a preference for accent retention. These observations suggest some considerations for pedagogical and programmatic practice. First, while it may not be possible or practical for many programs to make special accommodations for learners with the strongest preference for accent retention, in most settings, such adjustments may not be necessary since these learners may be rather atypical. Nevertheless, the safest approach for classroom curricula may simply be to focus on intelligibility since such an emphasis should minimize possible conflict between the aspirations of those who favor accent retention and those who favor accent reduction.

However, it seems clear that more may need to be done to help the many students who continue to cling to strong expectations for accent reduction. First, we need to better educate students so they understand that native-like pronunciation will be improbable for the vast majority of learners, if it can be attained at all. Similarly, there also may be a need for practitioners and administrators to increase their understanding of what exactly their students really want from their pronunciation instruction. Though most students say they want to sound like a native speaker, practitioners and administrators should seek to clarify what this actually means in terms of curricular outcomes. For example, they should consider whether native-like pronunciation will be needed for their students' future employment or continuing educational pursuits in English-medium institutions. Though the future aspirations of some very few may demand native-like speech, it will not be needed for the vast majority. Thus, it may not be necessary for most curricula to attempt to target native-like pronunciation.

At the same time, there may be more we can do to improve teaching and learning methods and technologies to bring this unlikely goal of native-like pronunciation a little closer for those who may be capable of achieving it. Whether native-like speech may be accessible to only 1 out of 1000 adults (Scovel, 1988) or as many as 1 out of 100(Block, 2003), it seems clear that those with the strongest preference for accent retention and those who yearn for and may be able to achieve native-like pronunciation both represent extreme minorities. In an ideal world, it seems that learning would be focused on the needs and goals of the individual. Those with a preference for accent retention could learn to maximize their intelligibility while conscientiously retaining key features of their L1 when and how they wish, and those who aspire to achieve native-like pronunciation would be given the resources and opportunities to progress as far as their motivation and ability would take them.

If institutions or individual practitioners have the resources and disposition to heed those who have appropriately advocated that we seek to accommodate learners with a preference for accent retention (e.g. Gatbonton, Trofimovich & Magid, 2005; Golombek & Rehn Jordan, 2005; Jenkins, 2005; Porter & Garvin, 1989), perhaps this level of attention and consideration should be extended toward both those minorities with the strongest preference for accent retention as well as for those with the strongest preference for accent reduction.

6. Limitations and Future Research

As with any research, there are limitations in this study that need to be considered. First, all the informants were newly admitted students in an IEP. While it was intended that this study focus exclusively on this single ESL context, no attempt was made to differentiate those with more EFL experience from those with more ESL experience. This may be an important factor to consider in future studies. Also, though this study was largely quantitative in nature, it would be very useful to gather much more qualitative data from students exhibiting a preference for accent retention. In addition, future studies might examine the effects of various social or cultural variables on a preference for accent retention. For example, how might the quality of friendships with native speakers or the feelings of discrimination in the L2 society shape learner preferences for accent retention? Similarly, future study

should consider how the quality of pronunciation from learner output may be associated with a preference for accent retention. Finally, future research should seek additional longitudinal data that might help support or refute the notion of a propensity for a preference for proximal linguistic status.

7. Conclusion

The findings of this study should be of interest to both practitioners and researchers. The purpose was to identify the prevalence of ESL learners who have a preference for accent retention and to identify some of the reasons why these learners may exhibit this preference. Estimates for those examined in this study ranged from nearly 9% for those categorized as having a decided preference for accent retention to .29% for those exhibiting the strongest preference. This study also found three significant explanatory variables for a preference for accent retention including, language proficiency level, language distance, and the likelihood of future residency in a country where English is spoken natively.

While these findings suggest that many typical ESL classrooms may not include students with the strongest preference for accent retention, this group may be comparable in size to those who yearn for native-like pronunciation and may be able to achieve it. Though it may not be feasible in many contexts to meet all of the needs of either of these groups of learners, if ethical considerations would suggest sensitivity toward those who desire to retain their accent as a means of preserving their identity, perhaps the same ethical considerations should be shown for those who are striving to alter their identity through accent reduction. Additional research would be needed to determine whether special accommodations for either of these groups would be beneficial.

Nevertheless, in an ideal learning environment, it seems that students should have the opportunity to work as conscientiously as they wish toward constructing the identity that is best for them, whether that process includes focusing on intelligibility, accent reduction, or accent retention. Where feasible, language educators could attempt to identify those learners with unique aspiration in an effort to help them achieve their goals. In the meantime, it seems appropriate for researchers to continue to identify the best ways to help students who desire accent reduction and to identify and accommodate those learners with a preference for accent retention.

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Appendix A

Student Survey

1. Please indicate the total number of months you have studied English as a second language: _____

2. Please rank order the following language skills according to their importance to you personally. Mark the most important skill with a "6," the second most important skill with a "5," the third most important skill with a "4" and so on.

   ____Grammar   ____Listening   ____Pronunciation   ____Reading   ____Speaking   ____Writing

3. In ten years, do you plan to live in a country where English is spoken as a native language?" Check the most appropriate answer: ____ No   ____ Maybe   ____ Yes

For each statement below, circle the response that best corresponds to how you feel.

Very Strongly Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Somewhat Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Very Strongly Agree
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8

1. *I want other people to understand my English pronunciation.*

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8

2. *I don't care if other people understand my English pronunciation.*

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8

3. *When I speak English, I prefer to use some of my native accent.*

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8

4. *I want others to know what my native language is by my accent.*

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8

5.*Speaking with my native accent is a way to show my national pride.*

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8

6. *I don't want to have English pronunciation that is just like a native speaker's.*

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8

7. *I like to speak English with my native accent so people know where I am from.*

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8

8. *Speaking with my native accent is a way for me to stay connected to my culture.*

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8

9. *My native accent is an important part of my personal identity.*

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8

10. *Speaking with my native accent makes me feel unique in America.*

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8

11. *Speaking English with my native accent helps me show love for my country.*							
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8

12. *The amount of native accent I use when speaking English depends on who I am talking to.*							
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8

13. *I don't want my teachers to make my English sound just like a native speaker's English.*							

Follow-up interview questions:

1. Do you think you have a strong preference for accent retention?
2. Why or why not?