

Decolonising the teaching of second language speech

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I have been teaching second language (L2) speech (also known as second language pronunciation or second language phonology) for several years, first to third year undergraduates and currently to MA students. Three things precipitated an urgent need to “decolonise” this module, moving away from white Eurocentric perspectives: 1) an understanding in UK higher education of the need to decolonise in general (e.g. Dessent et al., 2022); 2) a paradigm shift within linguistics, problematising the concept of the “native speaker” (Cheng et al. 2021) and 3) the fact that the majority of my MA students are racially minoritised and have English as a second language, unlike my previous UG students.

When teaching, I ask the students to listen to L2 speech and categorise what they hear according to a checklist I have developed for this purpose: (1) consonant substitution (2) consonant deletion; (3) epenthesis; (4) difference in stop realisation; (5) difference in liquid realisation; (6) difference in vowel quantity or quality; (7) difference in lexical stress (8) other (e.g. slip of the tongue/ influence of spelling). I teach the students narrow transcription, avoiding shortcuts such as [r] for [ɹ] (since the difference between a trill and an alveolar approximant matters), and using IPA diacritics such as [t^h] (aspirated), [ɪ̃] (nasalised) and [t̚] (no audible release).

To select a category on the checklist they must compare the L2 speech to a standardised form such as Standard Southern British English or General American. I stress that we are doing this in order to understand the phonetics and L2 speech theory, and I am not implying that the standardised form is “correct”. To reiterate this, we do a second activity where I encourage students to identify words in textbooks that problematise L2 speech and replace them with more neutral terms, such as: “For teachers, describing cases of misplaced stress in English is usually straightforward. Lexical stress errors occur when a speaker does not stress the correct syllable in the target word”, replacing it with “For teachers, describing cases of different stress placement in English is usually straightforward. Lexical stress differences occur when a speaker stresses a different syllable in the target word”. I also teach raciolinguistic theory, explaining how people “hear” an accent in racially minoritised speakers but not white speakers even when the speech is the same (Ramjattan, 2022).

However, while the transcription and categorisation activity is a good way to teach narrow transcription and L2 speech theory, I feel continued discomfort when attempting to explain that the comparison to a standardised form does not imply that one is more correct than the other, especially in front of racially minoritised L2 English speaking students. And, despite the word swapping activity, the students continue to use terms such as “correct/incorrect”, “accurate/inaccurate” in their assignments. I am bringing this topic to the conference to encourage discussion on whether there is a way of decolonising the teaching of L2 speech further, or if comparing to a standardised accent is no longer an appropriate way to teach.

Cheng, L. S. P. et al. (2021). The problematic concept of native speaker in psycholinguistics: Replacing vague and harmful terminology with inclusive and accurate measures. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 12, 1-22.

Dessent, C. E. H. et al. (2022). Decolonizing the undergraduate chemistry curriculum: An account of how to start. *Journal of Chemical Education*, 99(1), 5–9.

Ramjattan, V. A. (2022). Racializing the problem of and solution to foreign accent in business. *Applied Linguistics Review*, 13(4), 527-544.