‘What did they say?’ Examining the effects of lecturers’ accents in English on the *actual* and *perceptual* listening comprehension abilities of international students in a culturally diverse Australian university

Abstract

The rapid growth in numbers of international student**s** studying at Australian universities has resulted in a substantial increase in cultural and linguistic diversity within the higher education sector. As a result, the teaching and learning environment has also become culturally and linguistically complex, with many teachers and students now communicating in English as a second language (ESL); hence with accented speech. This small-scope study explored the effects of accented speech on the listening comprehension skills and abilities of ESL students at an international university campus. The students’ written and verbal responses were recorded and, while it may not be possible to generalise from findings based on such a small sample, key issues nevertheless emerged**:** the perceptual level of difficulty in comprehending accented English may not align with actual comprehension ability for a range of reasons; the degree of proximity between the first language of second language English speakers and listeners may not have a strong effect on enhancing comprehension, and international students' expectations about Australian teachers' accents may not align with the realities of a multicultural community and workforce. Recommendations are subsequently provided on the basis of such indicators to assist universities to develop greater awareness amongst their teachers and learners of the cognitive- and the socio-linguistic issues involved in teaching and learning in English as a second language within an Australian university context.

1. Introduction

The rapid growth in numbers of international students studying at Australian universities has resulted in a substantial increase in cultural and linguistic diversity within the higher education sector. As a result, the teaching and learning environment has also become culturally and linguistically complex, with many teachers and students now communicating in English as a second language (ESL); hence, with accented speech. This paper reports on a research study designed to explore the effects of non-native, accented speech on the listening comprehension skills and abilities of a group of ESL students at an international university campus in Australia. An important hypothesis to the research was that the individual student's *actual* listening comprehension, demonstrated through written response, and their *perceptions* about listening comprehension, demonstrated through individual interviews, may be unequivalent. The *actual* and *perceptual* difficulties identified in students' listening comprehension were examined in terms of: a) first language (or L1) correlations between listener and speaker; b) inter-language speech intelligibility benefit (or ISIB); that is, a listener's ability, developed through linguistic knowledge and experience, to better comprehend accent-related variations in language use (Rasmussen, 2007) and c) student perceptions about accented English within an English speaking teaching and learning environment (Mahoney, 1999).

In order to establish and distinguish actual from perceptual comprehension issues, this study utilised both cognitive-linguistic and sociolinguistic approaches in the analysis of findings in order to explore the ranging effects of accent on listening comprehension. Cognitive-linguistic theorists study the relationship of language and mind; that is how the brain processes language (Kemmer, 2007), whereas sociolinguists study the use of language in social interaction (Deumert, 2007). Hence, a sociolinguistic approach seeks explanations about language "… based on the agency of speakers (or groups of speakers) rather than abstract linguistic systems or cognitive mechanisms," (Deumert, 2007 p.1).

This paper consists of four parts: (1) a review of the cognitive-linguistic approach to second language (L2) and accent; (2) a review of the sociolinguistic approach to L2 and accent; (3) a review of the study itself and its findings; and (4) recommendations for principles and strategies to improve the understanding of accented or L2 English in an Australian teaching and learning environment implied by issues raised in the findings.

2. What is accent?

2.1 Alternative approaches to explaining interlanguage differences and accent

A range of considerations can be used to explain the role of accent in communicative success, for example:

1. Proximity/distance between first languages of L2 interlocutors;
2. Interlocutors' familiarity with diverse accents in the L2 (ISIB);
3. Interlocutors' familiarity with each other's specific L1 accent;
4. Interlocutors' communicative experience with an individual and familiarity with his or her specific accent.

This study focused on considerations 1 and 2, as it was anticipated that the linguistic proximity (or distance) between the first languages of speaker and listener; and/or listener familiarity with a diverse range of specific accents could affect listener comprehension – *actual* or *perceptual.* All of the volunteer participants, teachers and students, acquired English at adult, or near-adult, level. The six student participants, coming from Chinese (Mandarin), Korean and Indian (Hindi) first language (L1) backgrounds, have satisfied English language entry standards for studying at an Australian university. The students listened to three short lecture presentations, delivered by speakers of Mandarin, Hindi and Russian L1 backgrounds,

who have all been teaching at Australian universities for numerous years. In this study, two of the speakers originated from a very different L1 background to each of the listeners. Moreover, the purposive selection of a Russian-English speaking teacher (a minority language group at the Campus) was intended to ensure that all the students would be listening to a L1 accent to which they had little, if any, prior exposure. Postgraduate teachers and undergraduate students were purposively selected to ensure that the students had no prior communicative experience with the teachers and therefore no familiarity with their patterns of pronunciation. Hence, considerations 3 and 4 were likely to have only limited, if any, effect on the listener's comprehension.

2.2 An adequate definition of accent

Within a standard cognitive-linguistic framework, accent can be defined as a characteristic pronunciation that 'reflects a national or local mode of utterance' (Oxford University Press, 1995). This 'characteristic style of pronunciation' (Macquarie University**,** 1997) is determined by the 'social or regional background' and 'phonetic habits of the speaker's native [or first] language' (Dictionary.com. 2007). This standard definition emphasises the technical and regional aspects of accent but fails to acknowledge the integral role of the listener in the generation of meanings associated with accent. Derwing, Thompson and Munro (2006), point out that "…intelligibility is determined not only by the speaker, but by the listener as well," (p.183). From a sociolinguistic perspective, it is any perceived oral deviation from the *listener's* aural expectations and their interpretations of these deviations that creates meaning in relation to accent. That is, the 'meaning' and communicative effect of any accent depends on the socio-cultural origins of both the speaker and listener. All participants in this study speak accented English of one form or another but none with the 'local' native English accent, that is the Australian accent.

3. A cognitive-linguistic approach to issues of accent

A dominant theoretical framework for understanding second language learner behaviour in the cognitive linguistic tradition is Second Language Acquisition theory which finds adult learners learn a second language quite differently to younger learners (Koda, 2006). In terms of fluency of speech and sentence constructions, adult learners of L2 do not acquire the near native competency of children learning a second language (Finegan, Blair and Collins, 1997; Werker, Gilbert, Humphrey and Tees, 1981; Brown, 1980). This implies that 'foreign' accents ('foreign' being accented speech that is distinguishable as not being of native origin) and modes of expression may be maintained throughout life when L2 is not acquired at a young age. Hence the teachers and students involved in this study may never lose the 'phonetic habits' that have been transferred from L1 and the 'foreign' accents of teachers may therefore suffer due to an 'authentic' linguistic credibility.

One of the key elements to SLA theory relates to the inter-language effects between L1 and L2. Adult L2 learners not only acquire vocabulary through the categorisation of words and grammatical concepts that have been transferred from L1 to L2 (Finegan et al., 1997), but they also have a more limited ability to discriminate linguistic features that are not used in their native language (Werker et al., 1981)**.** This becomes particularly evident in their productive skills of pronunciation and oral sentence constructions, and in their receptive skills of listening to and understanding L2 speakers, as the characteristics of any first language differentially affect a learner's oral use of a second language in complex ways (Jenkins, 2007), the most obvious being accented speech.

Languages are produced as 'sounds'. Different languages have different 'sounds' partly due to phonetic variations and partly due to the articulatory setting (Lowey & Bultima, 2007)

which is believed to be shaped in the early years of language acquisition; that is before puberty. It is the way sounds habitually resonate through the larynx and mouth that causes the muscular work of the articulatory setting to be shaped in a particular way. Such resonances can be anterior, as in English, or posterior, as in Mandarin (Kerr, 2000; Crystal, 2007;) and, as a result, the articulatory setting of an L1 Mandarin speaker affects the level of fluency and the nature of their L2 accent in English (Kerr, 2000). The difficulties of re-calibrating the articulatory setting to produce sounds foreign to its learned repertoires are evident for example in the problems Russian speakers have pronouncing English 'th', or English speakers pronouncing Mandarin 'zh', or Hindi speakers distinguishing 'v' and 'w'.

Furthermore, languages have a wide range of morphological devices for extending vocabulary, including compounding, reduplication, affixation and abbreviation, and they also borrow words from other languages, which they then submit to their own phonological constraints and regular morphological processes. English is a classic example of both extensive borrowing and a diverse morphology; whilst Mandarin has an isolating morphology; hence non-exhibition of verb tense morphology is typical for an L1 Mandarin speaker communicating in L2 English (Finegan et al., 1997).

Physiological, prosodic and syntactic distinctions all impact on accented speech; and indeed, language proficiency cannot be achieved until the entire information structure has been mastered. This involves phonetic, semantic, syntactic and morphological information about words, plus the ability to encode and decode the information structure as a whole text (Finegan et al., 1997). Such diverse impacts of shared and unshared characteristics between first and second language speakers can impact on communicative success in the second language.

This study sought to explore whether any actual or perceived benefit in listening comprehension existed for listeners and speakers with shared L1 or a shared experience in L2, as previous linguistic knowledge and communicative experience are reported to enhance understanding of accented L2 expression regardless of the specific features of L1 and despite the range of potential linguistic interference between L1 and L2 (Collier, 1989; Bradlow, 2006; Rasmussen, 2007). It was anticipated that the six students may demonstrate and/or report equivalent levels of comprehension across all three L1 accented teachers as a consequence of their communicative experience in using ESL in their prior study as well as in their current Australian university experience.

4. Sociolinguistic aspects of accent

4.1. Perspectives about 'standard' accents in English

Over half the speakers of English around the world today speak English as a second language (AskOxford, 2007; Jenkins 2007) and therefore, with a non-standard accent. As English is now widely learnt and spoken, both as a first and a second language, accented English has become an issue of increased interest and significance. The effects of accent are not only cognitive and technical, as meaning is ascribed to accent by listeners over and above the intentions of the speaker. Studies into perceptions about accent when speaking English as a second language continue to identify positive and negative social judgements (Munro, Derwing and Sato, 2006; Zuidema, 2005; Collins, 1996; Findlay, Hoy and Stockdale, 2004; Creese and Kambere, 2003). These social judgements made on the basis of accent may act as an impediment to learning in an educational context; for example teachers and students may be perceived to be less competent simply on the basis of perceived accent (Lippi-Green, 1997).

Judgements made by listeners about the 'correctness' of a speaker's pronunciation tend to be based on perceived deviation from a 'norm' or 'standard' pronunciation. The concept of a

'standard' pronunciation of English is increasingly problematic. For most of the twentieth century Received Pronunciation (RP), commonly referred to as 'BBC English', was considered the prestige English accent and an appropriate model for L2 learners even though only a very small number of British people, estimated at less than 3% by Crystal (1996) actually speak RP English. General American (GA) has been an alternative model of reference for a standard pronunciation. A significant problem with these models is that neither reflects language in use**;** that is, the regional diversity of native English accents used by the majority of speakers within their home populations. There are considerable distinctions in pronunciation between native speaking populations in Liverpool, Newcastle and London, or Virginia and New York which are not aligned to RP or GA.

For the purposes of this study, the local 'standard' pronunciation is Australian English, yet another native speaker 'norm'. For largely historical reasons the Australian accent does tend to be used consistently across domestic regions by the majority of Australians. It was of interest to this study to discover the degree to which participants made judg**e**ments about accented English that privilege a 'standard' pronunciation or whether they were able to tolerate the notion of diverse accents in English (Crystal, 1996). Hence, participants were specifically asked whether they had an expectation that their teachers in Australian university would have an Australian accent (see Appendix1).

4.2. The *perceptual* influence of L2 English and the effects of accent within the context of the internationalisation of education

In terms of *perceptual* comprehension, the stigma attached to a non-native accent may be an increasingly important factor to be taken into consideration in culturally diverse contexts of teaching and learning. Accented speech may not only create a barrier to facilitated understanding on the part of the listener (Lippi-Green, 1997), but it may generate judgement that has nothing to do with technical aspects of utterance. For example, accent has been a commonly used marker of negative character in popular media for many decades (Munro et al., 2006; Dixon, 2000). Non-native accented speakers have tended to be negatively stereotyped by both native and non-native speakers**;** however the harshest judgements of L2 English speakers tend to come from native, or L1 speakers of English. Even among L1 speakers of English, criticism is directed at fellow L1 speakers, who speak English with a particular accent or regional dialect that is considered to be lower on the socio-economic hierarchy and hence not so-called 'educated' or 'proper' English. An interesting example exists between British and Australian English as the British associate the cockney accent with low social status, and as they hear a similarity between Australian English and cockney, the Australian accent is tainted by association (Mahoney, 1999). Nevertheless for L2 students in **an** Australian university, Australian English is likely to represent a norm of pronunciation which they seek to model.

The judgements made about a speaker's personal qualities and social status as a consequence of a detected accent (Zuidema, 2005; Creese and Kambere, 2003; Carlisle, 2000) tend to make assumptions about a speaker's level of education, socio-economic position, as well as more personal qualities (Munro et al., 2006; Mahoney, 1999). Judgements about accent are also frequently based on perceived aesthetic effects, yet "…there is no scientific evidence to suggest that some accents are intrinsically more pleasant while others jar," (Trudgill, 1983 in Mahoney, 1999, p. 171)

Languages themselves are complex, adaptive systems that change over time and are socially constructed and honed by social discourse. The older and the more isolated the language, the more complex it is and the more difficult to learn (Ellis and Larson-Freeman, 2006). High contact languages on the other hand, such as English, become streamlined and select out the less functional linguistic over developments. So, in a sense, L2 English "changes the very

nature of the language itself" (Ellis et al, 2006); hence judgements about what is a 'standard' English accent depend on the listener (L1 background or not). It was therefore interesting in this study, to observe whether international students' reactions to non-standard English accents in a teaching and learning environment would be relaxed.

4.3 Issues about - and the right to - accent within a learning context

The majority of teachers in the world who teach English or in English are not native English speakers (Maum, 2002); yet non-native accented teachers have been perceived to be less qualified and less effective than their L1 English-speaking colleagues (Lippi-Green, 1997). Hence, questioning a teacher's ability and credibility may also be based on accent and this could be regarded as a form of 'linguistic discrimination'.

Social identity theory defines identity as constituted through three processes: categorisation, identification and comparison (Haslam, 2001**;** Turner, Brown and Tajfel, 1979). In turn, a person's linguistic profile is intimately entwined with cultural heritage and represents an important and indelible element of their sense of self. Accent is therefore a marker that is both a site of resistance as well as a boundary of exclusion. Efforts to judge English pronunciation against a native standard are clearly ideologically problematic, as they require a speaker to conform to a standard English accent, if this were at all possible, given L1 interference factors and the range of 'standards' from which to select (Findlay et al. 2004). If we acknowledge and accept that accented English is currently a feature of the diverse identities engaged in globalised communications, we might still question the degree to which accent may impede understanding through communication, and we must therefore also consider the skills of a global listener.

4.4 The skills of the global listener

Studies in sociolinguistics describe a *perceptual* learning that occurs for listeners with ongoing exposure to different non-native or native accents in English (Bradlow, 2006). Indeed research participants in a recent study (Clarke, 2002) were able to improve an initially slowed processing time when listening to an unfamiliar accent within four utterances by the speaker and had overcome any slowed response effect after hearing 16 utterances.

Other studies identify an 'interlanguage speech intelligibility benefit' (ISIB) so that L2 speakers have a general advantage over native speakers in their ability to understand the L2 speech of others (Rasmussen, 2007). Other theorists (such as Bradlow, 2006) stress the flexibility of speech perception processes and argue that intelligibility of foreign accented speech varies depending on the degree of 'talker-listener attunement' rather than on the extent of its deviation from an abstractly defined, static, talker norm. There is significant evidence that exposure to L2 English in various contexts can enhance listening comprehension of L1 accented English.
In a recent study by Owens (2005), academic staff expressed some anxiety about their international students' accents in English but also an ability and willingness to learn to listen in a different, 'global' way and to use multiple strategies to check for comprehension. The same staff indicated that this involved 'higher' level listening skills and felt that this was an important element of successful intercultural communication. It is assumed that these 'higher level listening skills' may be a form or effect of ISIB. Importantly, staff emphasised that *willingness* to listen 'differently' is a pre-requisite to acquiring such skills development.

A large number of studies into perceptions about accent within an educational context look for perceptions that teachers may hold about learners (Munro et al., 2006) or what learners

hold of other learners (Zuidema, 2005). According to Zuidema (2005), "…International Reading Association (IRA) and National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) publications and position statements emphasise teachers' responsibilities to accept and accommodate diverse students' languages, yet no official statements have been made about teaching students themselves to be accepting of the linguistic diversity" (Zuidema, 2005).

This study explores student perceptions about accent and related listening comprehension ability in order to go some way to address that gap.

5. Research method

5.1 Participant selection

Research participants were recruited from: a) currently enrolled, first term undergraduate students at the University, and b) currently employed, first-generation, non- native English speaking migrant teachers from various discipline areas.

A purposive sampling method was used to select students from Chinese (Mandarin) and Indian (Hindi) background as they represent the largest cultural cohorts of the international students enrolled at CQU and also in Australian universities generally (IDP 2006). First year students were selected as they were deemed to have limited experience in the Australian university teaching context although all participating students had experience of between six months and one year of study at pre-university level in Australia. Invitations to participate with the incentive of a book voucher were issued by email and telephone and six students participated: four Chinese, one Korean and one Indian student. The three teachers who agreed to participate were L1 Russian, Hindi and Chinese (Mandarin) with non native or 'foreign' accents in English.

5.2 Research design

It was considered important in this study to ask students how they felt about accented teaching to attempt to measure their perceptions against their actual performance. Hence a quasi-experimental design was implemented.

In this design the three teachers each gave a five minute oral presentation about a specialist topic from their area of expertise. The teachers from presented on the following topics: Digital Information Literacy, Initial Product Offering and Software Programming Languages. Students were not familiar with either the topics or the individual teachers. After each speaker finished his/her presentation, the students were given five minutes to provide a written summary and explanation of the topic as they had understood it. Each student was then interviewed for approximately ten minutes and qualitative data was sought with open ended questions to ascertain their perceptions of non-native accented teaching.

Interview questions (see Appendix A) sought to identify:

- Whether students could identify specific accents;
- How heavy the students perceived each accent to be;
- Students' assessment of the effect of accent on their ability to understand the topic;
- Students' strategies for coping with comprehension difficulty;
- Students' prior expectations of what kind of accent Australian university teachers would have;
- Students' feelings about being taught by non-native accented speakers.

Data analysis involved a comprehension grading of the student's written text per topic achieved through a moderated marking process conducted by participant teachers/researchers. Then interview notes were analysed to find common responses to a degree of accent/scale of difficulty choice as well as answers to open ended questions about expectations and feelings in relation to non-native accented teachers teaching in an Australian university.

5.3 Discussion of research: emerging patterns and expectations

While it may not be possible to generalise from the findings, due to the small sample of teachers and students involved in this research study, the following patterns of expectation and performance emerged:

- Students' assessment of their ability to comprehend individual speakers on the basis of assumptions about speaker accent were not reliable**;** in particular, students demonstrated an ability to comprehend varied accents in English beyond their perceived ability;
- Variations in phonemic, syntactic and/or orthographic proximity between languages did not appear to facilitate listening comprehension;
- Students expressed a preference to learn from teachers who had an Australian accent rather than a non-native accent even while studies show that L2 students also experience difficulty understanding their Australian accented teachers;
- Students had an expectation that their university teachers would speak with an Australian accent;
- All students believed that their own interest in the topic had a stronger effect on their ability to understand a speaker than speaker accent;
- The phonemic distance between first and second language had no significant effect on *actual* comprehension but did effect listener *perceptions* of the strength of an accent;
- Students did not associate non-native accent with low competence or credibility; in fact, most students commented on the high quality of the three presentations even if they perceived a strong accent (see Appendix 1, question 6);
- When asked about how they might respond to communicative uncertainty related to accent all students identified strategies that require adjustment from the *listener* suggesting: 'pay more attention', 'ask questions', 'read beforehand', 'ask the speaker to repeat', 'ask the speaker to slow down', 'ask colleagues for help', 'put more effort into developing comprehension skills'.

A wide range of comprehension levels were evident from the analysis of the students' written text. As expected, comprehension of an unfamiliar topic, without prior exposure to the accented speech of the speaker, and no study or support materials, was limited when it came to the *actual* and the *perceptual* understanding of the topic. Listener familiarity with and exposure to accented speech (or ISIB) may play a significant role in successful learning in L2, which in turn, may have significant implications for L2 teachers.
However, the students' own assessments of their ability to comprehend individual speakers on the basis of assumptions about speaker accent were unreliable. That is, the students' own *perceptual* ability did not always correspond to their *actual* ability to comprehend the presentation. Some students had an *actual* ability to comprehend the varied accents in English that was beyond their *perceived* ability, whilst for other students, the opposite applied. Hence, the phonemic distance between L1 and L2 had little apparent effect on comprehension but did affect listener *perceptions* of the strength of an accent.

For example, two students, one from China and one from India, scored significantly higher than the other four students, who all scored fairly consistently, within 10% of each other, on a

conglomerate score. For the two high-scoring students, there were very minimal differentials between comprehension of the speaker regardless of the speaker's L1 background and accent. Nevertheless, both students indicated that they *perceived* comprehension to be significantly more difficult when listening to a Russian accent (that is, a totally 'foreign' accent in their experience) and not one to which they had been previously exposed or accustomed to. Hence, both students, as within our expectations, nominated this speaker as possessing a 'heavy accent' rather than a 'moderate' or 'light' accent, however L1 interference had little if any impediment on their *actual* comprehension ability, as evidenced in their written summaries.

One implication of this finding is that factors other than *actual* and *perceptual* comprehension ability of unfamiliar accented speech, such as listener interest in a specific topic, contribute to the listener's true ability to understand unfamiliar accents. This was evidenced in the interviews held with the students after the presentations. When students were asked to comment on any difficulties experienced in comprehending the speakers, all six students identified their own interest, or lack thereof, in the topic as the main factor facilitating comprehension, above accented speech. Although half of the students 'felt' that the Russian accent was the most difficult for them to understand, two students (one Chinese and one Korean) selected the Russian speaker as the easiest for them to understand because they were familiar with or interested in the topic. Hence a *perceptual* difficulty in comprehension of an unfamiliar L2 accent does not necessarily impede an *actual* understanding of an unfamiliar L2 accent, as learner interest appears to play an important role in the comprehension of accented English.

The lack of correlation between students' *perceptions* of comprehension difficulty and demonstrated levels of *actual* comprehension in their written text therefore became an interesting aspect in this study. Indeed, in many cases, students rated their comprehension of a specific speaker as high but scored low on the written text, and in other cases they rated comprehension as low but scored well on the written text. Several students even achieved their highest *actual* comprehension scores when listening to speakers they had identified as having a 'heavy accent' and being 'difficult' to understand. Only one Chinese student scored highest when listening to a Chinese speaker and he explained this to be due to interest and familiarity with accounting as a topic. Students did not associate non-native accent with low competence or credibility, and in fact, most students commented on the high quality of the three presentations regardless of the presenter's L1 accent or cultural background. However, when students were directly asked in their interviews about their preferences in regard to accented speech, most students answered that they preferred an Australian accent to any form of non-native accent and that they did in fact have an expectation that their university teachers would be speaking with an Australian accent. For example, five of the six students expressed a preference for Australian accented teaching staff and said that they expect Australian accented teachers to be teaching at Australian universities. This was mostly justified on the grounds that they were learning difficult topics in course content and that an accent just 'makes it harder'. Hence a *perceptual* hierarchy of spoken English in terms of perceptions about native versus non-native accents became evident. This hierarchy however appeared to be based, not upon assumptions made about the credibility of the speaker as other studies have suggested (Lippi-Green, 1997), but about the ease of the listener. Whilst this may be interpreted as a form of linguistic discrimination, it appears to be more about student needs, based on self-interests, rather than teacher credibility. Hence, assumptions about negative stereotyping of non-native English speaking teachers on the basis of teachers' credibility may be misplaced.

This tendency for students to make assumptions about teaching and learning in a native versus non-native accented teaching and learning environment remains problematic for teachers who are L2 speakers, teaching at Australian universities. Not only does this imply that perceptions about teachers, particularly in terms of accented speech remain biased, but it also suggests that international education still tends to exclude the promotion of language

diversity as a necessary component of internationalisation. Ironically perhaps in this context, Sawir (2006) notes the surprise that international students experience when they come into contact with Australian accented English and the difficulty many students report with understanding their Australian teachers and classmates as well as the lack of confidence they feel in their own speaking ability.

Only one student felt that learning from teachers with different accents was a benefit. This student was Indian (Hindi) and had been exposed to greater regional variations of spoken English before coming to study in Australia. Hence ISIB, due to prior socio-linguistic experience, may have played a role in both his *actual* and *perceptual* comprehension ability as well as in his obvious willingness to embrace linguistic diversity as a component of internationalised education. This student said:

> "It is good to get knowledge of different accents, not avoid it … especially because Australia is a multicultural country and English is a global language. So wherever we go, if we are not at home if I know English in accents, I can speak and understand, like Chinese English speakers, or else I have to stay home and not travel,"

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

This research indicates that the *perceived* effects of accents on comprehension are more dramatic than the *actual* effects. This finding alone may assist teachers and students to better understand the role of 'accent' in their teaching and learning activities, as well as be better prepared for an element that is quite prominent in the experience of international education.

International students appear to possess assumptions about English and about studying in English speaking countries such as Australia, New Zealand and Canada which are not reflective of the increasingly multicultural character of the teaching and learning environment of such societies. On the other hand, international students also display an evident willingness as well as capacity to manage accented communications in a teaching and learning environment even though they express a preference for native accents. Against convention, students actively displayed a high tolerance towards unfamiliar accented speech and students' preference for native English teachers was based more on their own lack of confidence in L2 English and their self-interest, rather than on discriminatory judgements about accented English speaking teachers. The fact that perceived difficulty was greater than actual difficulty in comprehension of accented English may reflect a general anxiety that L2 speakers and listeners share about their own comprehension capacity. Derwing et al. (2002) observed that among other benefits, L2 speakers developed significantly improved confidence levels in their ability to understand non-native accented English as a result of cross cultural training and 'other' language training, hence such strategies may prove beneficial for universities to implement to support teaching and learning in L2.

As *perceptions* about comprehension difficulty in this study did not align with demonstrated comprehension *ability*, this may reflect a lack of confidence on the part of L2 listeners in teaching and learning environments. This lack of confidence in an ability to understand varied accents may be a relevant factor that drives student preference for a single standard native accent, in this case the Australian accent, and may warrant further study. In response to such tendencies, Australian institutions involved in international education could:

- Ensure teacher awareness of the *perceptual* limitations of teaching in L2;
- Prepare and educate teachers to respond positively to these short term limitations;

- Ensure that students are better informed pre-sojourn and in-sojourn about the nature and make-up of the multicultural community in Australia;
- Promote the benefits of bilingualism and multilingualism in education sectors to reduce anxiety towards foreign languages and accented speech;
- Explain and promote the benefits of ISIB attainability in the context of 'global use of English';
- Explain and facilitate the capacity for *perceptual* learning and unlearning for teachers and students.

Such issues represent important topics for further research in larger studies. Both the teachers and the international graduates at Australian universities may then become more comfortable in their role as 'global' listeners and speakers of English as an international language.

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APPENDIX A

Interview questions for student participants:

1. **Did you understand all the presenters well?**
2. **Which presenter did you understand best? Why?**
3. **Which presenter did you find most difficult to understand? Why?**
4. **What can students do to assist understanding in this situation?**
5. **Can you identify the specific accent of each presenter?**
6. **How strong would you say these first language accents are for:**

Speaker A	Very Heavy	Heavy	Moderate	Light	Very Light
Speaker B	Very Heavy	Heavy	Moderate	Light	Very Light
Speaker C	Very Heavy	Heavy	Moderate	Light	Very Light

7. **How much difficulty did you experience understanding the topic due to accent:**

Speaker A	Very Difficult	Difficult	Some	Little Difficulty	No Difficulty
Speaker B	Very Difficult	Difficult	Some	Little Difficulty	No Difficulty
Speaker C	Very Difficult	Difficult	Some	Little Difficulty	No Difficulty

8. **What kind of accent did you expect Australian teachers to have when you started studying here?**

9. **How do you feel about learning from university teachers who speak English with an accent?**