

The Accented EFL Teacher: Classroom Implications

El acento del profesor de inglés como lengua extranjera:
implicaciones pedagógicas

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This article reports the findings of a research study on how significant having a foreign accent is for non-native English as a foreign language teachers and learners at university level. It points out the perceptions that teachers and students have about the most relevant issues in the teaching and learning processes. Data were collected by means of a questionnaire answered by thirty-two participants: eight Colombian teachers, eight foreign teachers, eight Colombian students, and eight foreign students. The findings show that although both teachers and students recognize the importance of having a native or native-like accent, they do not see this as the most relevant qualification to teach a language, nor the sole criterion positively affecting learning.

Key words: Accent, EFL, native, non-native, pronunciation.

En este artículo se reportan los resultados de un estudio acerca de la importancia que tiene, para profesores no nativos y estudiantes de inglés como lengua extranjera, poseer un acento extranjero en un contexto universitario. Se presentan las percepciones de profesores y estudiantes sobre los aspectos más relevantes en los procesos de enseñanza-aprendizaje. La información se recogió mediante un cuestionario aplicado a treinta y dos participantes: ocho profesores colombianos, ocho profesores extranjeros, ocho estudiantes colombianos y ocho estudiantes extranjeros. Los resultados muestran que aunque todos reconocen la importancia de un acento nativo o casi nativo, no lo perciben como el aspecto más relevante para enseñar una lengua ni como el único criterio que incide positivamente en el aprendizaje.

Palabras clave: acento, inglés lengua extranjera, nativo, no-nativo, pronunciación.

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Introduction

Much concern has been raised about the ability of non-native English teachers to serve the interests of English as a foreign language (EFL) or English as a second language (ESL) students; namely, to become proficient in a language that is not their own. Specifically, doubt has been cast as to whether an English teacher whose language is characterized by flaws in pronunciation, intonation, and grammar patterns, among others, is still in a position to effectively meet his students' needs for successful communication. In other words, can a non-native English speaker, an accented English teacher, be a good language model for her/his students? This article seeks to discuss the role of non-native English teachers in their students' language learning process. To do this, the authors have inquired into research findings in the multilingualism, the EFL, and the ESL areas. They have also drawn from native and non-native EFL and ESL classroom teachers' and students' perceptions, as well as from those held by native speakers of English outside the EFL/ESL teaching profession.

Review of Literature

The Bilingualism Issue

Much of the discussion dealing with the non-native English teacher, irrespective of whether he is in an EFL or an ESL context, focuses on whether he is bilingual. Generally speaking, bilingualism, as a sociolinguistic phenomenon, is the co-existence or use of two languages for communicative purposes. Easy to understand, right? A problem arises, however, when an attempt to define the term *bilingual* is made, for there is no such thing as a sole definition of it. To make it worse, a definition of bilingual is usually made or chosen on subjective grounds, in spite of counter-evidence. For example, the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (2000)

defines *bilingual* as being "able to speak two languages equally well because you have used them since you were very young" (p. 109).

Now, let us see what is implied in this definition. First, knowing a language is being reduced to only the oral production domain, when in fact, we all know that there is much more to it, namely, reading, listening, and writing. Second, the notion *equally well* casts some doubt, since except for those who have grown up using two languages, it is virtually impossible to attain a balanced linguistic proficiency. Thus, a claim can be made that in the case of a foreign language speaker, no matter how well he uses the language, he *feels* better performing in his mother tongue. Third, *since you were very young* leaves aside the greatest number of people who have learned a new language either in their late youth or adulthood. The question is, then: Under a definition of bilingualism, like the one provided by the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (2000), is someone who has learned English as a foreign language a bilingual person? Clearly not. If so, can someone who does not fit this definition, and so is not bilingual, be an ESL/EFL teacher? Again, no. Canagarajah (1999) argues that rather than a matter of linguistic abilities, it is a social, political, and even racial matter that is at stake when considering the abilities and role of non-native EFL/ESL teachers. In his view, this is so serious an issue that it has come to undermine people's otherwise positive perceptions of these professionals.

Commonly-Accepted Classifications of Bilingual People

Based on empirical studies, researchers have come to classifying bilingual people in the light of two main criteria: age and linguistic skills or proficiency.

The Age Factor

The *Critical Period Hypothesis*, advanced by Lenneberg (1967), which was initially connected to

first language research, claims that there is a biological period when language can be more easily acquired. Lenneberg (1967) and Bickerton (1981) make strong statements in favor of a critical period before which and after which certain abilities do not develop. In this same line of thought, researchers such as Singleton and Ryan (2004), among others, argue that a critical stage for second language acquisition occurs around puberty. This has led some to assume, incorrectly, that by the age of 12 or 13 you are “over the hill” when it comes to the possibility of successful second language learning (Brown, 1993. p. 52-53).

Klein (2002) suggests a well-thought classification of bilingual people and states that:

In accordance with the age factor, individuals are classified as Early Bilinguals. These are the ones who have acquired their second language while being very young. They are subdivided into (a) simultaneous bilinguals, that is, they acquired their two languages at the same time; and (b) sequential bilinguals, those whose second language was acquired after their first language. A second class is made up of Late Bilinguals or those who have acquired their second language at an age other than their childhood. (p. 1)

He expands this concept with a more detailed classification, warning that there are no clearly-defined levels of bilingual skills but rather a language continuum, according to which the following classification is set up.

- *Passive bilingual*: A person who is a native speaker of one language and is capable of understanding but not of speaking the other language.
- *Dominant bilingual*: A person who is more proficient in one of the two languages, showing native-like proficiency in his second language (L2).
- *Balanced bilingual*: Someone who is more or less equally proficient in both languages, but will not necessarily pass for a native speaker in both languages.

- *Equilingual*: He who, in any situation in both languages, passes for a native speaker i.e. he is indistinguishable from a native speaker. This is the strictest feeling of bilingualism advocated by some language planners and, unfortunately, by some language scientists.

These four categories are usually linked to what language skills the bilingual individual exhibits in his use of the L2:

- *Listening*: This is the minimal competence a bilingual is expected to have in the second language. Thus, a passive bilingual is one who can only cope with this skill in the second language, whereas in his first language he is normally proficient in the four skills.
- *Speaking*: This is the ability you generally expect a dominant, a balanced, as well as an equilingual to have.
- *Reading*: This is the threshold where a dominant bilingual often drops out for his second language, but not inevitably.
- *Writing*: It is well known that writing is a difficult skill for people to master, even in their native language for it calls for refined knowledge of grammar, syntax, vocabulary, and mechanical aspects of the language, among others. Hence, an equilingual and a balanced bilingual are expected to be proficient in L2 writing. (Information retrieved from http://www.bklein.info/buc_categorize.html)

The preceding discussion calls for exerting caution so as to not consider this bilingual classification approach complete. This incompleteness is apparent because just as in the case of any other abstraction, it leaves aside important considerations. For example, it does not take into account the existence of real people who are highly proficient in reading comprehension and in writing but are poor in understanding oral language and in speaking the second language. Likewise, cases have been reported which show that language learners have overridden the neurobiological critical period effects in their pursuit to achieve native-like language proficiency, as Canagarajah (1999) points out when referring to his own case.

The Correct Pronunciation Issue

The concept *correct pronunciation* is an elusive one. As early as 1959, the Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary introduces its Pronunciation Guide pointing out that

The standard of English pronunciation, so far as a standard may be said to exist, is the usage that now prevails among the educated and cultured people to whom the language is vernacular; but since somewhat different pronunciations are used by the cultivated in different regions too large to be ignored, we must frankly admit the fact that, at present, uniformity of pronunciation is not to be found throughout the English-speaking world. (p. ix)

For some seemingly hidden reasons however, a great number of people at the decision-making echelon insist on pushing the idea of a uniform, unique concept of English pronunciation. Fortunately for many, since such a stance is based on subjective, interest-group serving grounds, it can be easily challenged.

Although important, pronunciation of a language is by no means the sole criterion for language proficiency, nor is it really the most important one. Thus, there are cases of people who have less than perfect pronunciation of a second language, but they are still highly proficient in other areas of it. Brown (2007) believes that a modern version of this phenomenon might be called the *Arnold Schwarzenegger Effect*. Who would doubt that California's Governor is proficient in the English language, just as is any other American? In the end, if a correct pronunciation is a discrete, mental elaboration, shouldn't we speak of *comprehensible pronunciation* instead?

The Issue of the Accented ESL/EFL Teacher

The credited Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary defines *accent* as "the prominence given to a syllable or a word which makes it stand out to the attention above adjacent syllables or words" (1959,

p. vii). Within the context of this article however, we refer to *accent* as the quality of a person's speech that, in the view of language authorities, sets this person apart, as not belonging to mainstream, or not fitting the (idealized) norm. It is within this context that we speak of *the accented teacher*, particularly the ESL/EFL teacher.

Partially borrowing from Kachru (1986) and from political economy terminology, Canagarajah (1999) introduces the notions *Center speakers of English* and *Periphery speakers of English* and uses these two terms to refer to a native English-speaking teacher and a non-native English-speaking teacher, respectively. She points out that those in the first group are the ones whose first language is the vernacular English of Britain, the United States, Australia, and New Zealand. In the second group are those on the periphery, that is, outside these four countries, even if they speak English as a native language or a second language, as in Canada, Ghana, Sierra Leona, for example. These are so-called *accented teachers*, the ones whose speech is deemed foreign. This distinction may lead to an interesting question: Is this simply a matter of individual linguistic abilities, or is there more than that? That is, is this a sociolinguistic phenomenon, realized within political and economic conditions? Let us consider some recent developments concerning school districts in Arizona, which has sparked a hot debate between some education officials and practicing teachers, and which may help shed some light on the discussion involving accented English teachers.

In an article published in the influential Wall Street Journal, Jordan (2010) reports a surprising move made by the Arizona Department of Education, namely that "teachers whose spoken English it deems to be heavily accented or ungrammatical must be removed from classes for students still learning English" (p. 1). According to this author,

the motivation of the education authorities is to guarantee that low-proficiency level students are taught by native-like English proficiency teachers. She also says that in order to pave the ground for what Arizona's teachers believe will be punitive actions, the Education Department has scheduled classroom observations statewide to evaluate teachers' oral production –with a focus on pronunciation, correct use of grammar, and writing skills.

But what are people's perceptions of accented English at large, and of accented English teachers, in particular? One of our subjects, an American Native speaker of English, who is referred to here as *Reliever 3*, speaks her mind as follows:

No offense meant, but why would you want to? I guess, as an American I find the variation of accents to be beautiful. I will admit that Americans don't all have the same accent either, so which one do you want? After all do you like a Texas drawl, the clipped speech of a New Yorker, the California slang, Southwestern Spanglish, or a Midwestern slur? I have always lived in the US and never traveled farther than just over the Canadian border; yet, everywhere I go, I am told I have an accent. Funny thing is that most of my life has been spent in the same area and even there I have an accent. I wouldn't worry as much about accent as I would just learn the language. I will also admit that a good friend of my family had lived in the US for 30 years and her Japanese accent was so strong many people had a hard time understanding her. A friend of mine in college was from Romania and her accent after 15 years was still pretty strong also. She spoke in Romanian to her family and explained to me that it wasn't the accent that was important but the fact that she learned English.

Reliever 3 seems to confirm what is now commonplace: accents exist; they are a reality, a reality people should live with. Also interesting is the fact that even Center Speakers of English, like *Reliever 3*, admit to having been *made aware* of how different their speech sounds. Fortunately for society at large, it is usage that makes a language, not prescription.

But in the realm of the ESL/EFL profession, what could be the effects of having an accent, particularly when the teacher is not a Center speaker of English? *Frustrated Italian*, another participant in this study, aired her feelings in a rather moving way:

I'm Italian, and I have been living in London for seven years, where I graduated in Fine Arts from an American University. After that, I moved to Thailand to take my TEFL certificate and my grades turned out to be higher than the rest of the class (ALL NATIVE SPEAKERS). This is due to my wide knowledge of both Italian and English grammar, and also to the fact that I had already learned English as a foreign language. Therefore, I know the process one has to go through to actually learn a new language. I also speak French, Spanish, and studied German in school. I'm not saying that nobody would hire me, but all the jobs I was interested in, said on the application: DO NOT APPLY IF YOU ARE NOT A NATIVE SPEAKER. Fair enough, but all I'm saying is, I'm young, energetic and I love teaching, and if I lied about my nationality they wouldn't even notice it. All I can do is to rely on that one job out of ten, which gives a chance to non-native speakers too.

This person's experience is not much different from that of an Austrian who was thankful to be an informant:

I lived in Australia for 42 years, had a business there, got a university degree, did a TESOL course, studied English, etc. I had no problems teaching Buddhist nuns in Tibet, but when I applied for a job, teaching English in Graz (Austria), recently, I was knocked back because I was born in –wait for it... AUSTRIA! I am so frustrated, I could scream!" (Frustrated 2)

These testimonies give rise to an important question: Why is it that after being licensed by an accredited institution a graduate is told that he cannot be hired because his qualifications do not meet current standards?

Luckily for this Italian, this Austrian, and many others in their situation, timely research is contrib-

uting to disclaim the superiority of a certain kind of English or certain accent over the others. One of these enlightening endeavors is Leikin, Ibrahim, Eviatar, and Sapir's (2009). They conducted a study in Israel with sixty participants from different language backgrounds who were exposed to Hebrew phrases recorded in different foreign language accents. The researchers found that it was easier for the Hebrew speakers to recognize the material, independently of the accent it was spoken in, than it was for the other subjects. Based on their findings, Leikin and his colleagues concluded that second language acquisition is facilitated by having learners interact with a teacher who shares their own accent, who speaks their first language, and who is ready to assist them in learning more about their new language. The research team's findings are corroborated by the present study which found that, sometimes, L2 students favor non-native teachers because, in their opinion, these teachers are in a better position to help them in their error correction process, as they know their students' language needs, a crucial factor in establishing teacher-student rapport.

Research Questions

This study seeks to answer two questions: 1) How significant is it for non-native EFL teachers and learners at university level to have a foreign accent? 2) What perceptions do EFL teachers and students have about the most relevant issues in the teaching and learning processes?

Aims

The aim of the study is to shed light on the role of the accent in foreign language teaching and its influence on foreign language learning so that decisions can be made and implemented to better serve students' needs while helping teachers improve their language skills.

Method

Subjects of the Study

The study was carried out in an academic context with subjects involved in EFL teaching and learning. The sample was made up of 32 participants, classified into two groups: 16 EFL teachers with different teaching experiences and nationalities (eight Colombian university teachers and eight foreign university teachers, in different countries) and 16 EFL students from beginning to advanced level and different nationalities (eight Colombian college students, in Colombia, and eight foreign college students, in different countries). This number of participants allowed us to gather data with which to analyze the perceptions that teachers and students have of teachers whose first language is not English, more specifically of teachers who are believed to be accented, and the preferences that students have regarding teachers' accents when it comes to taking English classes and how these perceptions might influence EFL learning.

For the Colombian context, eight foreign teachers who have lived and worked in other parts of the world were considered in order to look at any differences that may be found in other places. The eight Colombian teachers in the study have all worked at university level and taught different levels of English, so their teaching experience and perceptions may be similar. Nonetheless, they have lived diverse experiences while teaching in Colombia or while living abroad, which may have helped change their perceptions.

The sixteen EFL students in the study have had different classroom experiences. Comparing the experiences of foreign and Colombian students helped us analyze how the language teaching and learning processes and the student perceptions in Colombia may be different from those in other parts of the world.

Data Collection Tools

A semi-structured five-scale questionnaire was designed in order to get a good grasp of the perceptions that EFL students have of non-native or accented EFL teachers and constraints that these teachers experience because of their foreign accent.

Results

The different perceptions that EFL students may have of non-native EFL teachers and the constraints that EFL teachers experience because of their foreign accent motivated this study.

Following is a series of tables and figures that present the different variables and the number of tokens that occurred during the data collection stage. The analysis compares perceptions and preferences among participants, based on students' educational levels and teachers' experiences.

Group 1: The EFL Teachers

Table 1 shows the demographic information for the sixteen teachers who participated in the study.

Table 1. Teachers' Demographic Information

Code	Origin	EFL levels taught	Years of experience	Educational level
T1F	Korea	Beginners to Advanced	10	MA
T2F	Korea	Beginners to Intermediate	20	PhD
T3F	China	Beginners to Intermediate	3	MA
T4F	China	Beginners	4	MA
T5F	Saudi Arabia	Beginners to Advanced	8	MA
T6F	Venezuela	Beginners to Advanced	14	PhD
T7F	Uruguay	Beginners	5	MA
T8F	Honduras	Beginners to Advanced	10	MA
T1C	Colombia	Beginners to Advanced	5	BA
T2C	Colombia	Beginners to Advanced	20	BA
T3C	Colombia	Beginners to Intermediate	12	MA
T4C	Colombia	Beginners to Intermediate	8	BA
T5C	Colombia	Beginners to Advanced	20	BA
T6C	Colombia	Beginners to Advanced	16	BA
T7C	Colombia	Beginners to Intermediate	10	MA
T8C	Colombia	Beginners to Intermediate	5	BA

Note: the coding in the far left column stands for the following variables among participants: T= teacher, 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 = number assigned randomly, F= foreign, C= Colombian.

In group 1, each of the sixteen teachers answered 5 questions (see Appendix A). Although teachers could choose an option and answer the questions as close-ended ones, they could also expand their answers and give reasons to justify their choice.

The answer to each question drew the following results:

Figures 1A and 1B. Question 1: What kind of teachers did you have when you were learning English? Native speakers, non-native speakers or both?

Figure 1A. Kind of Teachers Foreign Teachers Had

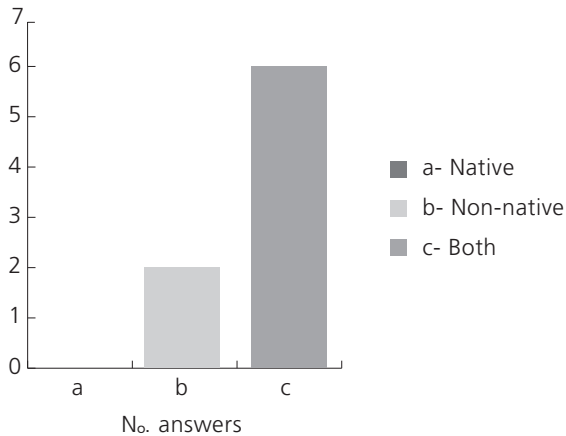
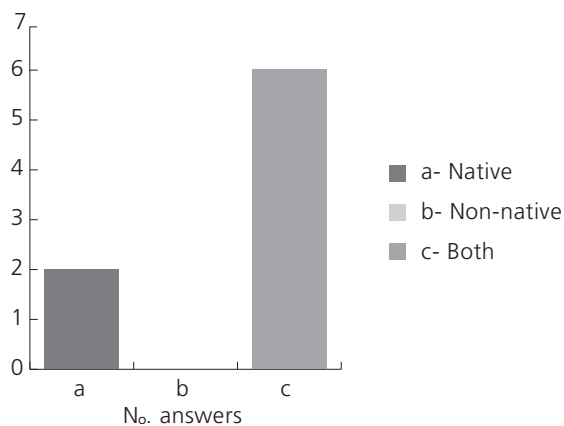


Figure 1B. Kind of Teachers Colombian Teachers Had



As shown in figure 1A, six out of eight foreign teachers had both native and non-native teachers while learning English. The other two (T2F and T6F) had non-native English teachers only. Meanwhile, figure 1B shows that six Colombian teachers were taught by native and non-native teachers. The other two (T5L and T6L) had native English teachers only. One essential aspect to analyze in these data is whether having native, non-native or both kinds of teachers changed their perceptions of what kind of teachers were better for them when learning a language.

Figures 2A and 2B clearly present teachers' preferences as learners. When analyzing foreign teachers' preferences, it is noted that at least one of them (T8F) preferred native teachers, although he mentioned that both native and non-native teachers did a great job. Besides, T2F and T6F, who only had non-native teachers, coincided in saying that they preferred both native and non-native teachers for similar reasons, such as being able to contrast between teachers who know what their students' needs are because they also know the students' native language and teachers whose pronunciation is a very good model to follow. Meanwhile, T5L and T6L, who only had native speakers as teachers, admitted to having no preference as long as their teachers knew the language very well.

Figures 2A and 2B. Question 2: Did you have any preferences for native or non-native speakers? Please explain.

Figure 2A. Foreign Teachers' Preferences

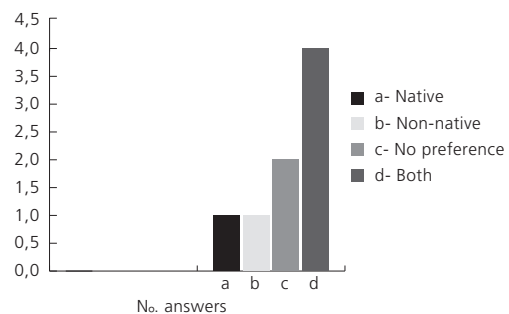
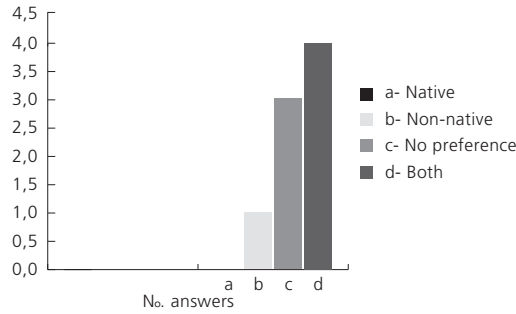


Figure 2B. Colombian Teachers' Preferences



On the other hand, 50% of the foreign teachers preferred both native and non-native teachers for reasons such as finding a bigger challenge in native speakers and having better rapport with non-native speakers.

Fifty percent of the Colombian teachers also mentioned that both native and non-native teachers

are good and so none of them preferred native speakers only. There was the case of T1L who believed that non-native speakers were better because they could help Spanish speakers understand English better.

Teachers from the two groups expressed similar opinions about the characteristics a teacher should have. Tables 2A and 2B show what these English teachers think is the most important when they enter a classroom and deal with students. Having a good command of the language is, in fact, important. Nevertheless, it is not the only essential characteristic a teacher should exhibit. There are some other relevant issues that matter for them such as patience, creativity, tolerance of diversity, and awareness of students' needs, among others.

Tables 2A and 2B. Question 3: As an English teacher, what are the most important characteristics a teacher should have?

Table 2A. EFL Teacher's Characteristics I

Participant	Foreign Teachers
T1F	Patience, easygoingness.
T2F	Language knowledge.
T3F	Teaching based on students' learning needs.
T4F	Knowledge of students' L1 and needs for learning the language.
T5F	Ability to motivate students.
T6F	Patience and love for what you do.
T7F	Flexibility, patience and tolerance of diversity.
T8F	Fluency in the target language and good teaching skills.

Table 2B. EFL Teacher’s Characteristics I

Participant	Local Teachers
T1L	Love for teaching and patience.
T2L	Creativity, fluency and dedication.
T3L	Patience and dedication.
T4L	Patience and knowledge.
T5L	Good knowledge of the language and patience.
T6L	Good human being.
T7L	Creativity, flexibility and a good teaching philosophy.
T8L	Patience, love for teaching and knowledge of the target language.

Figures 3A and 3B. Question 4: Is having a foreign accent relevant for you as an English teacher? Why?

Figure 3A. Accent Relevance for Foreign Teachers

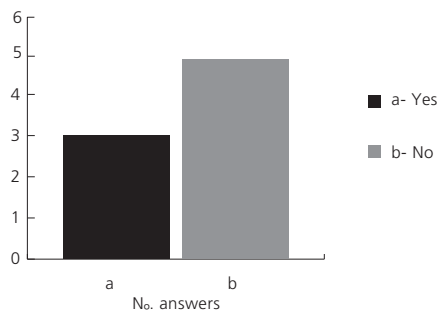
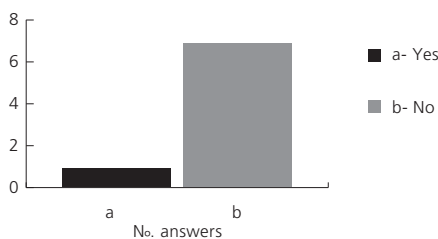


Figure 3B. Accent Relevance for Colombian Teachers



Figures 3A and 3B indicate that twelve out of sixteen teachers stated that having a foreign accent is not relevant for them. When it came to justifying their answers, teachers mentioned reasons such as “The ultimate goal when learning a language is communication, not accent”, “Teaching English is not only a matter of pronunciation”, and “A teacher’s accent does not affect students’ learning process.” However, a few teachers are still concerned about having a foreign accent themselves because, from their point of view, it affects students’ language learning process or because students can question the teacher’s ability to speak the language if he does not have at least a native-like accent.

Tables 3A and 3B include a summary of the experiences the participating teachers recalled in connection to their foreign accent.

Some of the negative accent-related experiences such as those of T1F, T2F, T3F, T7F and T4L do not seem to be due to their foreign accent but to pronunciation concerns. In all cases, these teachers

Tables 3A and 3B. Question 5: Recall any good or bad experiences you may have had because of your foreign accent. Include experiences as a teacher or any other experiences outside the classroom –in your country or in an English-speaking country.

Table 3A. EFL Accent-Related Experiences

Participant	Foreign teachers
T1F	The reaction “What!” What did you say? makes me feel bad.
T2F	At the beginning, many Americans said “Pardon”? or What did you say?
T3F	In China my English is better than my colleagues, but in the United States sometimes native speakers can’t understand my English.
T4F	The understanding of my English depends on where I am and who I am talking to. When the addressee needs to understand me, they understand my accent very well (when I am a potential customer). On the opposite, when I need to argue on some issues in which the addressee needs to say sorry or pay me, they pretend they don’t understand my accent.
T5F	In my country there is no problem with my foreign accent because nobody expects you to speak English exactly like a native. It is ok as long as your pronunciation is clear. But in America, it sometimes frustrates me when native speakers don’t understand me. I would doubt if my foreign accent caused the problem.
T6F	In the United States people seem to like those who have an accent, so that has been a good experience for me. American people usually compliment my “accent”. The bad experience would be not being understood because of my “incorrect” pronunciation.
T7F	Back home I used to teach 5 th grade and I was assigned two American students as teaching assistants. One day while teaching with them we both said a word at the same time and of course our pronunciation was different. I felt very bad when one of my students said: “How are we supposed to learn with you if you don’t know how to say the words in real English?”. That was shocking for me, and all because the non-native accent. A good experience is that I am completing my degree as an ESL teacher and have communicated with people from more than 90 countries while being at graduate school.
T8F	As a teacher in the United States I remember an Arab student that got somehow disappointed to find out I was not American (she thought I was African American and not Hispanic). Other students liked the fact that I was not American, so they could ask me questions, such as: Do you know why Americans do this or that? Or How do they express this or that?

Note: This information was written by each participant and not edited by the authors.

Table 3B. EFL Accented-Related Experiences

Participant	Colombian teachers
T1L	I’ve had different experiences recording audio scripts at the University for a test students have to take at the end of their program. Once I had to administer this test, and while students were taking the listening section, they didn’t notice it was my voice. They didn’t say anything. After the test, they said that woman’s voice was very clear.
T2L	Many students have asked me if I have traveled to the United States and I answer “never”. They feel surprise because of my English level.
T3L	I have only had good experiences.
T4L	Once I was talking to a girl named Jackie and I would call her “Yackie” changing the /j/ to /y/. One day she couldn’t put up with it and made me correct my mistake – I was calling her “Yucky!”
T5L	When I started college in the United States I moved into the dorms and had to share space with girls from all over the world. It was hard to understand them.
T6L	When I was in high school in the United States girls used to really like the way I used to speak English as a Latin boy, so I never worried about my accent, plus I never had problem communicating.
T7L	I haven’t had any outstanding experience to mention because of my foreign accent.
T8L	When I was in the United States people asked me where I was from. Some said my English was very good and my accent never hindered communication.

Note: This information was written by each participant and not edited by the authors.

are quite aware of their having a non-native accent. What is positive is the way some teachers such as T6F, T1L and T6L take it and the good experiences they can recall today.

Group 2 – The EFL Students

The table below shows the demographic information for the sixteen students who participated in the study.

Table 4. Students’ Demographic Information

Code	Origin	English level
S1F	Korea	Beginner
S2F	Korea	Advanced
S3F	China	Intermediate
S4F	China	Intermediate
S5F	Saudi Arabia	Intermediate
S6F	Venezuela	Beginner
S7F	Uruguay	Advanced
S8F	Honduras	Intermediate
S1C	Colombia	Advanced
S2C	Colombia	Beginner
S3C	Colombia	Beginner
S4C	Colombia	Intermediate
S5C	Colombia	Intermediate
S6C	Colombia	Intermediate
S7C	Colombia	Beginner
S8C	Colombia	Beginner

Note

The coding in the far left column stand for the following variables among participants: S= Student, 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 = number assigned randomly, F= Foreign, C= Colombian, B= Beginner, I= Intermediate, A= Advanced.

In group 2, each of the sixteen students answered 5 questions (see Appendix B) – Although students could choose an option and answer the questions as close-ended ones, they could also expand their answers and give reasons to justify their choice.

Figures 4A and 4B. Question 1: Have you ever had contact with Native English speakers?

Figure 4A. Foreign Students’ Contact With Native speakers

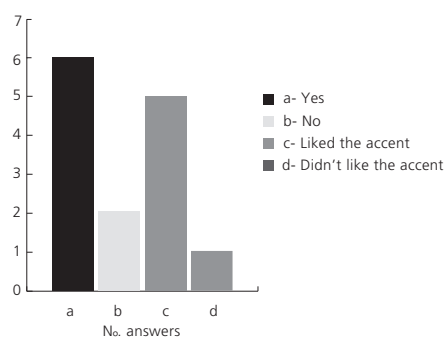
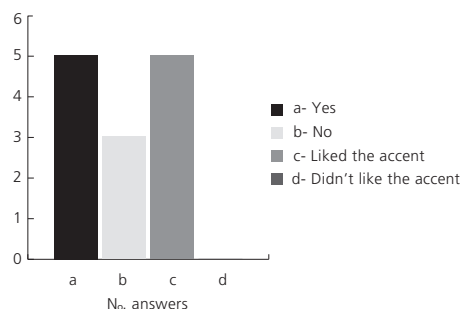


Figure 4B. Colombian Students Contact With Native Speakers



Figures 4A and 4B show that eleven out of sixteen students have had contact with native English speakers and most of them have liked their accents, except for one foreign student who mentioned that he did not like the accent of a native speaker he had contact with because he could not understand much of what this person said. Furthermore, figures 5A and 5B, below, show that

having had contact with native speakers did not make students dislike their non-native teachers' accents. Just the opposite, some of them stated that having a teacher with a non-native accent was good because they could understand more clearly when their teacher spoke.

Figures 5A and 5B. Question 2: Do you like the accent of your current non-native English teacher?

Figure 5A. My Teacher's Accent: Foreign Students' Preferences

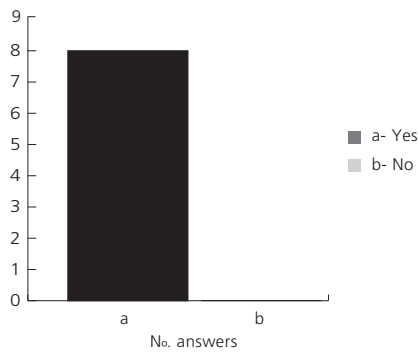
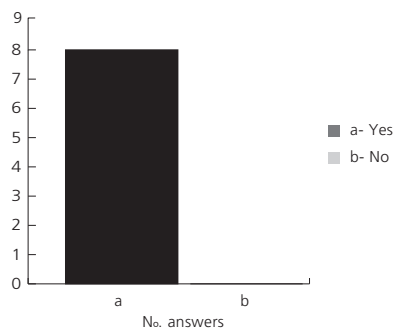


Figure 5B. My Teacher's Accent: Colombian Students' Preferences



The panorama changed significantly when in questions 3 and 4 students were asked to choose the kind of teacher they preferred – native or non-native. Figures 6A, 6B, 7A and 7B, below, show that a native teacher was preferred in most cases, even by beginners: 75% and 85% of the foreign students

preferred a native speaker in their beginning and advanced levels, respectively. In the case of Colombian students, 85% and 100% of them preferred a native speaker in their beginning and advanced levels, respectively.

Students gave different reasons to prefer either native or non-native teachers. Some mentioned that they were more likely to have better rapport with a non-native teacher because he would know the students' needs and native language, which would ease their error correction process. Conversely, regarding language proficiency, students expressed that a native speaker knew the language better and so posed a bigger challenge for them.

Figures 6A and 6B. Question 3: If you could choose your English teacher for the beginning levels, would you prefer him to be a native or a non-native? Why?

Figure 6A. Choosing My Teacher I: Foreign Students

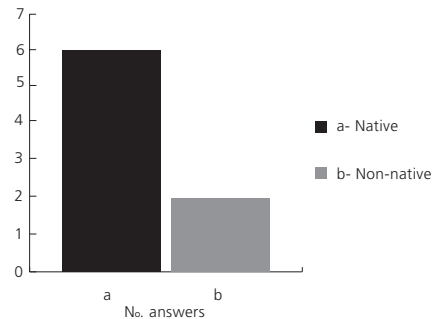
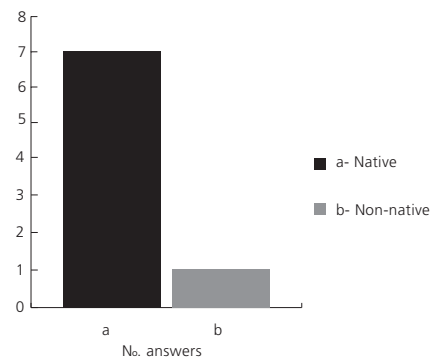


Figure 6B. Choosing My Teacher I: Colombian Students



Figures 7A and 7B. Question 4: If you could choose your English teacher for the advanced levels, would you prefer him to be a native or a non-native? Why?

Figure 7A. Choosing My Teacher II: Foreign Students

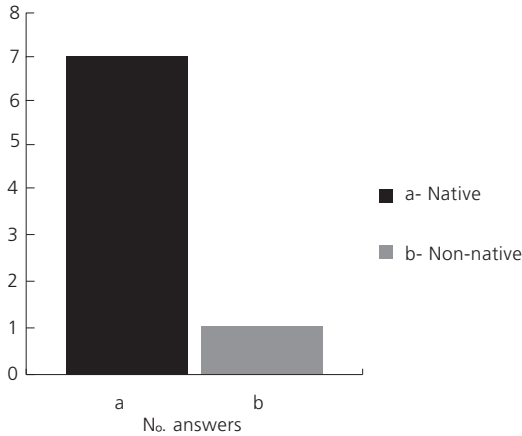
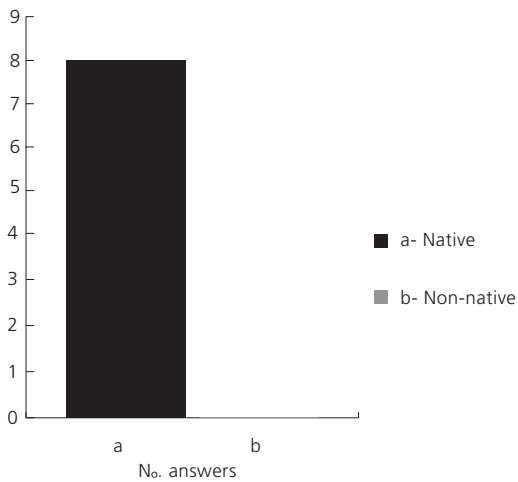


Figure 7B. Choosing My Teacher II: Colombian Students



Students also ranked the characteristics they considered essential in an English teacher. Their responses are gathered in Figures 8A and 8B.

All students agreed that good pronunciation is a must for an English teacher. Yet two foreign students thought that speaking with a native-like

accent was important, while three of them felt that the teacher needed to know the language, regardless of the accent. Only three students considered pronunciation to be relevant. On the other hand, for most Colombian students, having teachers who spoke with a native-like accent was much more relevant, as 75% of them believed that speaking with a native-like accent was an important characteristic an English teacher should possess.

Figures 8A and 8B. Question 5: Circle the characteristics you consider important in your English teacher:

Figure 8A. EFL Teacher’s Characteristics II: Foreign Students

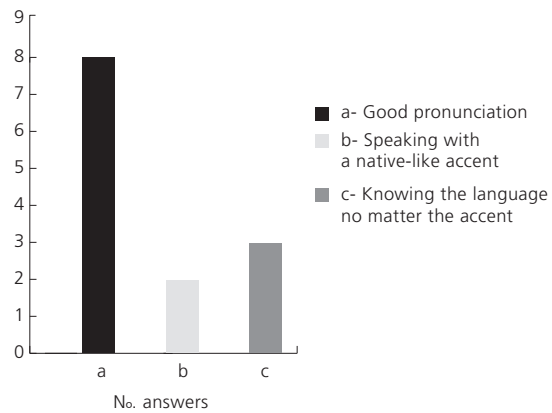
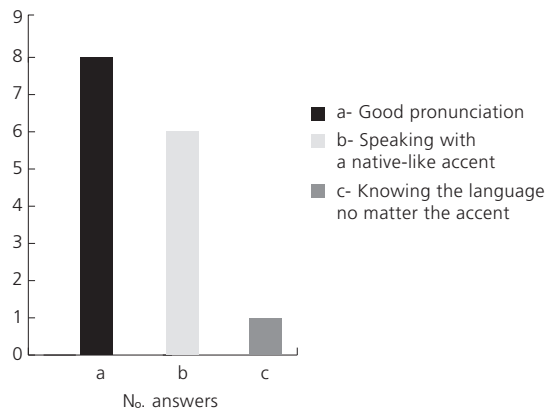


Figure 8B. EFL Teacher’s Characteristics II: Colombian Students



Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to answer these two questions: 1) How significant is it for non-native EFL teachers and learners at university level to have a foreign accent? 2) What perceptions do EFL teachers and students have about the most relevant issues in the teaching and learning processes?

From the Teachers' Answers

On the teachers' side, the data analysis reveals that they recognize the importance of having a native or native-like accent. Yet, they do not see this as the most relevant qualification to teach a language, nor do they think this is the sole criterion which positively affects language learning. Most teachers believe that in addition to having a good command of the target language, it is important for the teacher to be patient, creative, tolerant of diversity, and aware of students' needs.

From the Students' Answers

On the students' side, and just as in the case of the teachers, they feel that pronunciation is a key factor in language teaching. Likewise, most Colombian students and just a few foreign students believe that having teachers who have a native or a native-like accent greatly enhances their language learning process.

The authors contend that although meaningful, the accent should not be given the most importance in measuring teachers' language proficiency. They believe that actions should be taken to acknowledge the key role played by Periphery EFL teachers who have come to outnumber Center speakers of English in the teaching profession. Thus, they feel that even if generalizations cannot be made from this study, its findings can be instrumental in having educational authorities at different levels of decision-making offer non-native EFL teachers the support they need

for further language qualification, so that they can better meet their students' needs.

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Appendix A: Teachers' Questionnaire

Dear English teacher,

We kindly ask you to answer some questions regarding accent. We are exploring how significant having a foreign accent is for Non-native English Teachers. We designed the following questionnaire to share the experiences of other teachers like you. The information you provide will help us get a better grasp of teachers' experiences in different countries.

Nationality: _____

Years of Teaching Experience: _____

Levels you have taught: _____

1. What kind of teachers did you have when you were learning English?

Native speakers _____ Non-native speakers _____ Both _____

2. Did you have any preferences for Native or Non-native speakers? Please explain.

3. In your opinion, what are the most important characteristics a teacher should have?

4. Is having a foreign accent relevant for you as an English teacher? Why?

5. Tell about any good or bad experiences you have had because of your foreign accent. Include experiences as a teacher or any other experiences outside the classroom -in your country or in an English speaking country.

Thanks for your cooperation.

Appendix B: Students' Questionnaire

Dear Student,

As English teachers, we are concerned about your learning process; therefore, we would like to find out about your experiences and preferences when learning a language.

English level: _____

Nationality: _____

1. Have you ever had any contact with native speakers of the language? Yes____ No____
2. Did you like their accent? Yes____ No____
Why? _____
3. Do you like the accent of your current non-native English teacher? Yes____ No____
Why? _____
4. If you could choose your English teacher for the beginning levels, would you prefer him to be a Native or a Non-native?
Why? _____
5. If you could choose your English teacher for the advanced levels, would you prefer him to be a Native or a Non-native?
Why? _____
6. Circle the characteristics that you consider important in your English teacher:
 - a) Good pronunciation
 - b) Speaking with a native-like accent
 - c) Knowing the language, regardless of the accent.