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Attitudes toward Regional British Accents in EFL Teaching: Student and Teacher Perspectives

Abstract

In this attitudinal-based study, British EFL teachers report on their regional accents, both in terms of their own attitudes ~~(and recalled attitudes of non-native teachers and British hiring staff)~~, and the reported attitudes of their EFL students. Drawing on interviews with 20, mostly, Northern EFL teachers, there are three broad findings. First, the participating teachers reported that EFL students sometimes found their accents difficult to understand, but appreciated, and often celebrated, their ‘difference’ nonetheless. Second, student attitudes contrast with that of one particular senior staff member, who instructed a teacher to adopt more ‘standard’ Southern pronunciation. Finally, the teachers themselves expressed pride in their accents, and ~~explained that~~ outside of a perceived need to modify their accents to be better understood, otherwise exercised agency and resisted suggestions that their accents needed to change. Overall, the students’ reported positive engagement, and teachers’ pride in their regional accents are key implications- ~~of our findings. of our findings.~~

Key words: Language attitudes; accent; modification; (non-Southern) regional accents

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1. Introduction

Within the teaching of English as a Foreign or Second Language, or English Language Teaching (we will use the abbreviation of EFL throughout), there has arguably been a general preference for teachers who are ‘native speakers’ (Mahboob, 2004; Holliday, 2005; Lasagabaster & Sierra, 2005; McKenzie, 2013; Díaz, 2015) from one of the inner-circle countries such as the USA or the UK (Kachru, 1982). Nonetheless, research also shows that students are more concerned with the teaching ability and personality of the teacher and not his/her first language status (Atamturk, Atamturk & Dimililer, 2018). Additional research points to the benefits of non-native speakers as EFL teachers—e.g. [the](#) teacher being an inspiration for students, acting as a ‘learner model’ (Medgyes, 2001: 436), ‘role model’ (Lee, 2000: 19) and a ‘confidence booster’ (Pacek, 2005: 257).

Accent is of particular relevance in terms of EFL students’ attitudes toward their teachers (Major, Fitzmaurice, Bunta, & Balasubramanian, 2002; Jenkins, 2007; Evans, 2010; Walker, 2010; Kaur, 2014; [Baratta](#), 2019). For example, Kung and Wang (2019: 395) report on two broad considerations for English as a Lingua Franca and EFL students’ English use in current and future communicative purposes: ‘pursuing a native-like accent or prioritizing intelligibility’. A commonly perceived benefit of native speakers is indeed their accent, which is often regarded by students as being ‘authentic’ or ‘real’ (Poblete, 2015). Additional research points to a similar view, reflecting opinions that native speakers are best placed to teach pronunciation (Holliday, 2005; Díaz, 2015; Sa’d, 2018; Wong, 2018; Tran & Nguyen, 2020).

However, while the need for global intelligibility rather than a particular accent is perhaps the ultimate goal for EFL students according to some (e.g., Levis, 2005; Jenkins, 2006), Candan

and Inal (2020: 120) report that EFL students' attitudes toward accent is an area that 'still requires deeper investigation'. In the present article, we investigate students' attitudes toward accent from the perspective of native speaker accents which might not be immediately familiar to students. In this case, the focus is on native speaker EFL teachers from Britain who speak with regional accents, largely, but not entirely, deriving from the North of England.

Received Pronunciation (RP) and General American (GA) have received much attention as model native speaker accents (Mompean & Hernández-Campoy, 2001; Timmis, 2002; Kaur, 2014; Carrie, 2016; Fang, 2016; Wong, 2018; Kung & Wang, 2019), functioning as stand-ins essentially for 'the British/English accent' and 'the American accent'. However, by focusing on accents which are more regional within Britain, and clearly not RP, there is the potential to discover how EFL students perceive accents which are unfamiliar to them. In this study, student perceptions are presented alongside teachers' attitudes toward regional accents to act as a relevant and important counterpoint.

Attitudes toward language, including accents, can involve extremes of both positivity and negativity (Barbour, 2014; Watson, Watson & Tay, 2018; Ito & Cacioppo, 2019). There is the potential to discover a wide range of attitudes by exploring this subject from multiple perspectives involving regional British accents in EFL teaching. This is important if we consider the negativity that still exists toward regional British accents (Coupland & Bishop, 2007; [Montgomery, 2012](#); [Cardoso et al, 2019](#); [Baratta, 2021](#)). This also includes negative perceptions of such accents within the British teaching profession, which some teachers

believe is reflective of linguistic prejudice (Baratta, 2017; 2018a, b). Moreover, this study can reveal something regarding EFL students' expectations for their British teachers' accents, compared with the accent expectations of the teachers themselves. What might a preferred native-speaker accent be within EFL pedagogy, especially considering the potential for negative domestic attitudes toward regional UK accents (Levon, Sharma, Watt & Perry, 2020)? To address this, it is necessary to gather the attitudes of both teachers and students.

To those ends, we interviewed 20 EFL teachers who were asked to discuss both previous and current teaching experiences in a variety of international settings and in the UK in order to discover attitudes toward their accents in professional contexts of teaching. The research questions guiding the study are as follows:

1. What are the EFL students' reported attitudes toward their British teachers' accents?
2. What are the British EFL teachers' attitudes toward their accents as part of pedagogy?

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2.1 Accent attitudes in Britain

Attitudes toward individuals can be based, at least in part, on their use of language. Thus, if a given accent is judged negatively based on the various connotations that the accent holds in the interlocutor's mind, then such negativity can be passed on to the speaker. In this manner, accent can act as a proxy for larger social identities connected to national/regional origin as well as race/class, which can involve stereotypes (Giles, 1971; Serrarens, 2017; Baratta, 2018b; Ito & Cacioppo, 2019; van Gelder, 2019). In the context of accent attitudes within Britain, there is the potential for negative judgement to be made of regional accents in terms of prestige and attractiveness, notably accents tied to cities such as

Birmingham, Liverpool and Glasgow (Coupland & Bishop, 2007), and more specifically, regional accents deemed to be ‘broad’¹ (Author Baratta, 2018b; Strycharczuk et al, 2020).

Trudgill (2002: 173) further explains that ‘it is usually possible to tell which broad region of the country middle-class speakers come from. And working-class speakers can usually be pinpointed even more accurately as to their geographical origins’. This is reflective of middle-class speakers’ regional affiliations being harder to identify (MacFarlane & Stuart-Smith, 2012; Haddican et al., 2013; Baranowski & Turton, 2015; Cardoso et al, 2019; Strycharczuk et al, 2020), with implications of decreased negative stereotypes associated with less readily identifiable accents and class levels (Baratta, 2021). Avoiding stigmatized and readily identifiable accent features can thus assist in the deployment of an accent that is perceived more favourably. Therefore, speakers of broad regional accents may be motivated to switch to less identifiable accent varieties as a means to avoid negative evaluations based on region and/or class stereotyping. While class is not a specific focus within this paper, its reference here points to the history of negative perceptions of accents perceived as working-class within professional and academic settings in the UK (e.g., Lawler, 1999; Addison & Mountford, 2015).

For British individuals it is arguably the case that regional British accents would be largely understood; however, regional accents might still be perceived negatively by some listeners based on a presumed lack of prestige. For EFL students, however, if broad regional accents are to be judged, it might be on the basis of a lack of intelligibility due to a lack of exposure to such accents. Subsequently, the resulting stereotypes might be absent for EFL students,

¹ ‘Broad’ accents are those which are more immediately identifiable to a specific city or local region, via the use of salient features (Labov, 1972), what Cruttenden (2014) refers to as distinctive vowels and what Baratta (2018b) refers to as phonological giveaways. The societal implications of such accents are that they are more open to negative perceptions.

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due to lack of familiarity with the regional and class-based stereotypes of which long-term British residents are perhaps all too aware. This raises several points for EFL teaching and learning.

First, there is recent evidence that regional British accents are perceived as ‘unprofessional’ in teaching contexts ([Baratta, 2017](#); [Baratta, 2018b](#)). [Baratta \(2018a: 174\)](#) reveals that an EFL teacher from Rochdale (a town in the North of England) was told at a teaching position interview that her accent was ‘too Northern’ and would ‘create the wrong impression’. Having her accent flagged as uncommon in EFL pedagogical contexts, in contrast with RP, marks her as a linguistic ‘other’. This does not suggest a simple binary of RP vs non-RP accents, however. Rather, the issue concerns British accents which EFL students are simply unfamiliar with and which students might not understand as a result of that unfamiliarity. This can have implications for the accents teachers use within EFL contexts, having to consider students’ comprehension needs but perhaps alongside the need for students to be exposed to a variety of accents as part of their development of English skills, [which](#) we address in this article.

Second, we are not suggesting any link between British accents which are judged negatively and a subsequent lack of comprehension on the EFL students’ part. Nonetheless, negative judgments and intelligibility might be interrelated, in the sense that if certain accents are avoided for classroom teaching due to negative perceptions, EFL students will subsequently be less exposed to them. Ultimately, however, we suggest that, given the negative perceptions of regional accents in Britain, this might have implications for hiring staff’s views regarding the ‘ideal’ accent for EFL teaching. We need to consider the teachers themselves and their attitudes toward their accents, as well as the EFL students’ attitudes toward British accents,

both familiar and unfamiliar. Thus, by taking into consideration the views of teachers and students, we can provide a more holistic picture.

2.2 EFL students' attitudes toward their teachers' accents

Within EFL teaching, we might consider certain native speaker accents to be 'traditional' based on their usage by teachers, classroom listening materials and student preference. Largely, these accents have been Received Pronunciation (RP) and General American (GA), which have also tended to reflect EFL students' aspirations for their own pronunciation (Chiba, Matsuura & Yamamoto, 1995; Dalton-Puffer, Kaltenboeck & Smit, 1997; Timmis, 2002; Wong, 2018). Howlader (2010: 233) goes further, declaring that 'RP and GA are the two dominant varieties of English in the world'. Staying with the British context for this paper, notions of RP as a standard accent reflect its prominence within the speech of the upper-class, given its status as a class-based, rather than regionally-based, accent (Giles, 1971; Coupland, 2000; Snell & Andrews, 2017), as well as subsequent connotations of education level and wealth. Nonetheless, more modern attitudes may also regard RP as indicative of snobbery and arrogance (Hughes, Trudgill & Watt, 2012). Lindsey (2019) further argues that RP is actually outdated and should not be used as a standard for EFL teaching.

Additional research nonetheless shows that EFL students can indeed have stereotyped notions of native English accents, albeit more often tied to national stereotypes rather than regional ones. For example, Kaur (2014: 6) found that EFL students from a variety of L1 backgrounds rated accents tied to the USA and UK in rather broad terms, describing the US accent as 'standard', 'normal' and 'cool', but also judged to be 'show off' and 'harsh'; attitudes toward the British accent included 'snobbish' and 'a little bit classy'. Such judgements, both positive

and negative, may stem from ‘specific stereotypes and views of the country where the speaker is from’ (van Gelder, 2019: 11), which can involve political factors (Munro & Derwing, 1995b; Serrarens, 2017), thus tying in with attitudes on a larger – here, national – scale, which are then passed on to the accent and, of course, the speaker.

On a practical level, the extent to which EFL students understand their (L1) teacher’s accent is highly relevant and connects with listening comprehension. Without understanding a teacher’s accent, a student will find it understandably difficult to process the information delivered by the teacher. Studies have focused on this in terms of the potential to lead to reduced assessment scores (Derwing & Munro, 1997; Kang, Moran, & Thomson, 2019). Likewise, increased familiarity with a teacher’s accent can lead to increased listening assessment scores (Harding, 2012). However, a lack of familiarity toward a given accent has been shown to lead to a subsequent judgment of the teacher, such as being perceived as lacking in ability to teach a given subject (Major et al, 2002; Barbour, 2014; van Gelder, 2019). This can indicate that accent attitudes, as a means to judge the speaker, can be based on factors that go beyond stereotypes at the national or regional level, and be tied instead to the immediate context of the classroom.

A final point to make, inherent within a discussion of accent, concerns the pronunciation which students are being taught to emulate, either directly or indirectly. It was referenced earlier that many EFL students regard native speaker accents more favourably than non-native speakers, with RP and GA (historically at least) often synonymous with British and American accents, respectively. However, Fang (2016: 77) advocates against ‘a restricted focus on a fixed standard of pronunciation’. One reason for this is that students are often communicating in international settings and contexts, which will not necessarily involve

speaking with L1 English speakers. Indeed, pronunciation teaching is regarded as less a means to adopt a specific accent, but a means to produce effective communication, which involves more than pronunciation in the first instance (Jenkins, 2000; Walker, 2010; House, 2012).

Moreover, current research within EFL pedagogy stresses the need for students to understand, and appreciate, the sheer diversity of Englishes (Alptekin, 2002; Kirkpatrick, 2007; Galloway, 2017; Matsuda, 2017; [Baratta](#), 2019), varieties which differ from inner-circle English in terms of lexis, grammar and indeed, accent. Thus, teachers have a responsibility to expose students to such diversity, which means going beyond RP and GA, but also going beyond the inner-circle of English. Fang (2016) further stresses the need for students to be exposed to a variety of native speaker accents, but not to blindly imitate them. Both Zheng (2014) and Fang (2016) emphasise the need for students to regard themselves as legitimate speakers of English as a Lingua Franca, which is again linked to going beyond the adoption of native speaker accent norms.

Taking the discussion thus far into consideration, there are several points to consider:

- Attitudes toward British accents might be expected to involve both positive and negative evaluations on a regional level for British individuals, whereas for L2 English speakers (especially those who do not reside in Britain), attitudes might be more concentrated on national stereotypes (e.g. ‘classy’, as outlined earlier).
- If EFL students are indeed more exposed to RP, at least within their initial English teaching and learning, then regional British accents may be unfamiliar and as a result, hard to understand.

- There is the potential for initial student reactions to unfamiliar British accents to involve negative judgement of the teacher, especially if compared in students' minds with more well-known British accents.
- This lack of familiarity, however, can be addressed by exposure to such unfamiliar accents as a means to help students improve their listening abilities by becoming acquainted with a wider variety of accents.
- This advocacy of a broader range of accent exposure reflects a more egalitarian approach to language, notably addressed within World Englishes pedagogy; while such pedagogy is often focused on exposure to Englishes beyond the inner-circle, in principle it encapsulates more than just 'standard' inner-circle English accents.
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However, students' perspectives on teacher accent are relevant as well, and thus the present study considers both teacher and student attitudes toward regional British accents as used within EFL teaching, allowing for a more inclusive picture to be presented on this subject.

3. Methods

The study took a phenomenological approach which seeks to draw on the information-rich, shared experiences of participants with a specific phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Phenomenology is concerned with the 'conscious', lived experiences of individuals who have both subjective experiences of the phenomenon and objective experiences of something in common with other people (ibid.).

3.1 Sampling and recruitment

Purposeful sampling was used for this study, based on one of the researcher's involvement with teaching in an undergraduate degree programme which prepares students for a teaching career in EFL. This sample allowed us direct access to a group whose personal and professional backgrounds were wholly relevant to this study. The criteria for the teachers were that they were either (a) current students who had gained teaching experience through a previous ten-month study period abroad (n=3), or (b) had graduated and been in employment for at least six months as EFL teachers overseas (n=17). All participants also needed to broadly describe themselves as having some kind of regional accent from the UK or Ireland. This, we felt, would ensure a variety of accents, though given that the university is in the Northwest of England, we expected greater representation of local accents, which indeed was the case, with all but four participants describing their accents as being primarily tied to the North of England. Although there was no independent measure of the participants' accents, their linguistic training within their degree programme was considered sufficient to make them reliable self-reporters on issues of accent and pronunciation, having covered such topics extensively within their teacher training. This knowledge was also successfully applied when providing nuanced descriptions of their experiences of accent modification.

The sampling approach resulted in a wide variety of teaching experiences in terms of locations with most employed in private language schools. Teaching experience ranged from one year to eleven years (median = 2.5 years). Participants were recruited via email from one of the researchers, who explained the focus of the study and then obtained necessary consent

for the interviews. Table 1 provides background information on the participants for this study.²

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Table 1. Participants’ background information

Participants	Gender	Locations of EFL teaching	Self-described accent	Length of service as an EFL teacher (years)
P1	F	China, Russia, Spain, Manchester UK	Quite Northern	5.5
P2	F	Poland, South of England	Yorkshire-Lancashire mix	6
P3	M	China, Poland	Generic Northern accent	11
P4	M	Poland, Preston, UK	Broad Lancashire	1.5
P5	F	Spain Manchester, UK	Mancunian	5
P6	M	Italy, Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia	Northwest accent (Preston)	2
P7	F	Japan	Preston	1.5
P8	F	Spain, Germany, China, UK	Lancashire	9
P9	M	Spain, Australia, Japan	Midlands (with some Scottish influence)	5
P10	F	Spain, Portugal, Cambodia	Southport (mix of Lancaster and Liverpool)	3
P11	M	France	Northern (Leeds)	1
P12	F	South Korea	Midlands	2
P13	M	Spain, China	Liverpool-Lancashire mix	4
P14	F	Hong Kong, London UK	Newcastle	1

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² Regarding the two authors, one has a research background investigating attitudes to accent, and accent preference in educational settings. The second author is an EFL teacher educator and researcher, specialising in second language acquisition.

P15	F	Spain	Lancashire	1
P16	F	Spain, Thailand, UAE	Maccam (deriving from the Northeast)	7
P17	F	Spain, UK	Preston	1
P18	F	Spain, Bulgaria, Austria	Liverpool	5
P19	F	China	A very weak Welsh accent and a bit of Northern	1.5
P20	F	Japan	Welsh	1

Malterud, Siersma & Guassora's (2015) concept of 'information power' informed considerations about adequate sample size. Appraising information power is considered an iterative process which was suitable to apply to the present study since the interviews were collected over a twelve-month period. The strength of information power could therefore be assessed on a continuous basis as the data grew. In line with Malterud et al.'s recommendations, the study's narrow focus, the highly specific characteristics of the participants, the phenomenological approach, the strong interview dialogue as a result of the existing relationship between researcher and participants, and the in-depth analysis of this purposeful sample, led the authors to conclude that the collection of twenty interviews held sufficient information power to develop new understandings about the phenomenon under investigation.

3.2 Data collection

Semi-structured interviews were used to capture the breadth and depth of the participants' lived experiences, given their particular relevance when faced with a need to ask 'probing, open-ended questions' (Adams, 2015: 494). One of the researchers, a former tutor of the participants, spent a total of approximately 25 hours interviewing the teachers (average interview time = 52 minutes; interview time range = 38 minutes-83 minutes). The interviews

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probed two main areas to obtain the textual (the ‘what’) and the structural (the ‘how’) description of teachers’ experience (Moustakas, 1994). The interview questions firstly elicited personal information and details of teaching service. A second subset of questions then elicited recollections of when their accent was either the focus of discussion or passing comments were made by EFL students, with the participants asked to share specific examples and their personal reactions to these situations. The final subset of questions probed to what extent they felt their accent impacted their personal and professional lives, particularly in terms of others’ views of accent and accent modification. For clarity and data organisation, the interviewer elicited whether each event described through the interview process was a positive, neutral or negative experience, if this had not been stated already. The intention was the responses would lead to an understanding of the participants’ common experiences, the procedure for which is described in section 3.3.

3.3 Data analysis

The approach taken was entirely data-driven using Moustakas’ (1994) systematic procedure for phenomenological analysis. Initially, the data were reduced to significant statements which provided an understanding of how the participants experienced the phenomenon. During this process, verbatim quotes were isolated from the dataset (Step 1). From here, the quotes were grouped into clusters of meaning and developed into distinct themes (Step 2). Steps 1-2 were enacted by both researchers independently and each reviewed the transcriptions multiple times. The researchers also met several times to revise and reach a final agreement on the significant statements and overall themes. Table 2 illustrates the themes constructed from this iterative process. Textual descriptions (e.g. What was experienced?) and structural descriptions (e.g. Did this take place inside or outside the

classroom?) were then created (Step 3) before reporting the ‘essence’ of the phenomenon (Step 4) in the next section.

Table 2. Themes generated from the phenomenological analysis

Theme
1. Unfamiliar accent leading to greater learner engagement
2. Accent dilution for students’ benefit
3. Accent modification becomes the norm
4. Exposure to accents is important for language learning
5. Increased self-awareness of accent with other NSs
6. Unfavourable reactions or resistance if directed to modify accent

4. Interpretations and discussion

The data in this section have been condensed and organised to address the study’s research questions. The themes identified within Table 2 are accompanied by verbatim quotes from the interviews to provide evidence regarding the frequency and intensity of the participants’ experiences of regional accents in EFL teaching. The section begins with documenting the British teachers’ reports of the EFL students’ perceptions of their accents (RQ1), followed by teachers’ attitudes toward British accents as part of pedagogy from the perspectives of British EFL teachers (RQ2).

4.1 What are the EFL students’ reported attitudes toward their British teachers’ accents (RQ1)?

Table 3 presents the students’ comments concerning teacher accents which British staff were able to recall in the interviews.

Table 3. EFL students’ attitudes toward teachers’ accents (as reported by teacher participants)

Themes	Positive, neutral, or negative experience	Participants (P)
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1. An unfamiliar accent leading to greater learner engagement	positive	P3, P4, P5, P6, P7, P9, P10, P11, P12, P14, P15, P16, P17, P18, P20
<u>Example comments</u> 'Students would ask me to say things like <i>lunch</i> and start laughing. I thought it was quite funny' (P4) 'It's not what they are expecting, and they are interested to find out more' (P6) 'Some clients choose me because I'm British and they want a better understanding of British English' (P7) 'Students loved my Northern English accent. They often imitated it and made a joke which was nice and a good sort of talking point' (P11) 'They're curious why I speak like this and other teachers don't. It introduces that there are other accents and it's a good topic in the classroom' (P14) 'We had some big discussions in class and they really enjoyed listening to different accents' (P10) 'For students it was really refreshing and something new for them. They definitely picked up on that and were always asking questions' (P11) 'Students are amazed when you explain how many different accents there are just within the Northwest [of England]' (P6) 'The kids are really curious and interested to know where I'm from because I don't sound like the other teachers. It's a good topic in the classroom, actually, and they want to know more' (P14)		
2. 'Britishness' that the accent brings to the learning experience		
	positive	P3, P11, P12, P13
'They took enthusiasm from having a real English gentleman there' (P11). 'They wanted to learn about Harry Potter and Sherlock and asked me to practise reading transcripts with them. It was very cute' (P12) 'The British accent is kind of romanticised through Sherlock and Harry Potter so students want that accent. That's how they see British English and they want that. It's the commercial side of it' (P13)		
2. 'Britishness' that the accent brings to the learning experience	positive	P3, P11, P12, P13
<u>Example comments</u> <u>'They took enthusiasm from having a real English gentleman there' (P11).</u> <u>'They wanted to learn about Harry Potter and Sherlock and asked me to practise reading transcripts with them. It was very cute' (P12)</u>		

<u>'The British accent is kind of romanticised through Sherlock and Harry Potter so students want that accent. That's how they see British English and they want that. It's the commercial side of it' (P13)</u>		
3. No explicit positive or negative comments made	neutral	P2, P19
4. Students questioning which is the correct pronunciation	neutral	P2, P3, P5, P8
<u>Example comments</u> 'If students are quite particular, they can become puzzled and wonder which (version) is right' (P2) 'Students say 'you say it like this and he says it like that. Which is correct?' I say, we both are.' (P3)		
5. Difficulty understanding Northern phonemes	negative	P1, P2, P5, P6, P13
<u>Example comments</u> 'Sometimes learners don't understand what I say in class' (P2) 'I've had students tell other staff members that they didn't understand what I was saying a lot of the time' (P13)		

The high frequency of positive comments recalled by the British teachers in the interviews suggests the teachers' accents had a positive classroom effect. We concede, however, that it may also be the case that positive comments and responses by the students are more readily available for recall, due to reflecting better on the teachers and not involving a loss of face on their part. Teachers were able to build on the unfamiliarity and curiosity surrounding their accent in an effective way to engage, expose and use it as a valuable teaching point. The reported students' sentiments provide further evidence of a lack of exposure to UK accents and perhaps linguistic diversity more broadly (Timmis, 2002; Howlader, 2010; Wong, 2018). Interestingly, this lack of exposure became a source of confusion specifically for pronunciation in some cases (20% of participants noted this), perhaps supporting existing evidence that non-native speakers strive towards a specific native ideal without practical consideration of their future likely language use in ELF contexts (~~Author~~Baratta, 2019).

Finally, to a lesser extent, 25% of participating teachers recalled instances where their accent appeared to be a communication barrier in the classroom. Importantly, all five of these teachers described feeling responsible for implementing various strategies to address this situation, as discussed in the next section.

In terms of an unfamiliar accent leading to student engagement, teachers further explained that their accents were indeed a novel way of engaging the class. As trainees, teachers are exposed to a range of techniques to stimulate learner motivation in the classroom, but the data clearly suggest their accents also proved an effective tool for captivating learner interest. Half of the interviewees (10 teachers) shared P11's experiences that 'it was really refreshing and something new for them (i.e. the students). They definitely picked up on that and were always asking questions'. The teachers' accents were often a talking point in class (P5) or had such a positive impact they became the focal point for future lessons (P18).

The broader cultural connotations associated with the teachers' accents were also reported as being a motivating factor for their EFL students. Film, media and sport were the primary connections teachers recall students (and non-native teaching staff) making, which can be viewed both positively and negatively. What surfaces is a sense that it is Britain as a commercial and cultural package, rather than the regional accents per se, which were often the main appeal for many EFL staff and students, as described by P13: 'The British accent is kind of romanticised through Sherlock and Harry Potter, so students want that accent. That's how they see British English and they want that. It's the commercial side of it'. What the teachers offered was a piece of Britain and a way into British life and culture which were otherwise out of reach. This value-added feature, however, was not always well received.

Linking to evidence of EFL students' stereotyped notions of British accents (Kaur, 2014) and Poblete's (2015) discussion regarding authenticity of accents, P13 recalls students being 'a little disappointed' when his accent did not seem to live up to the perceived British ideal. Such 'authenticity' can refer to a specific accent deemed to be more 'typical' of a given region. While RP is otherwise spoken by a minority, it is arguably an accent that has been a linguistic symbol of Britain. On another occasion, P6 overheard his Manchester accent being labelled as 'not a real English accent', presumably again due to the unfamiliarity with regional accents and limited exposure beyond those represented in commercial Britain.

Overwhelmingly, however, the teachers in this study reported that their students from various language backgrounds reacted positively to their accents, despite being largely unfamiliar with them. Fourteen teachers explained that because students were not immediately familiar with Northern accents – or more broadly, non-Southern accents – it did lead to initial difficulties in understanding (to be discussed). However, there was an otherwise positive response reported, seen in student engagement, laughter and, in some cases, a desire to learn more about the variety heard within British accents.

P1, for example, mentioned that her Russian students would try to imitate her Northern pronunciation in words such as *but* [bʊt], with P2 recounting a lesson during Christmastime. In this case, she referenced the *bow* on a holly wreath, realised thus: [bə:]. The students did not immediately understand, until P2 adopted an RP accent: [bəʊ]. P4 also explained how Polish students asked him to reveal his Northern origins in words such as *Coca Cola* and *lunch*, which respectively involve the pure vowels [o:] and [ʊ]. In all such instances – and others – students were reported to have found Northern accents engaging, precisely due to their unfamiliarity, as well as being reported as laughing on occasion. None of the teachers

discussed the laughter in negative terms, but instead explained that it was perceived by them wholly as a positive response to accents that were unfamiliar. From this, it is suggested that, as reported by the teachers, unfamiliarity equates to a positive curiosity and this in turn leads to engagement from the students, at least at a specific moment in the classroom.

4.2 What are the teachers' attitudes toward British accents as part of pedagogy (RQ2)?

To address research question two from the perspective of the British EFL teachers, Table 4 outlines their experiences and perspectives on their own accents, in addition to the impact accents have had on their personal and professional lives. These reactions are classified according to whether the teachers viewed these experiences as positive, negative or neutral, based on how these were described in the interview data. In Table 4, the reactions are presented in the order of neutral and negative. Overall, consideration of the learners and their needs was at the heart of much personal decision-making regarding accent modification. There was also a particularly strong feeling that teachers were prepared to exercise agency to resist unjustifiable requests for accent modification.

The overall themes contained within Table 4 – and the order in which their subsequent discussion is presented – are as follows: accent modification for students' benefit; accent modification as a norm; the importance of exposure to accents for students; teachers' self-awareness of their accents when compared with other native speakers; and resistance to suggestions of accent modification if imposed by others. The themes introduced are not mutually exclusive.

Table 4. British teachers' attitudes toward their accents (RQ2a)

Neutral themes	Example comments	Participants
Accent modification specific to the classroom experience for students' benefit		
Modification of delivery- enunciation and speed rather than/ as well as accent	'It's all intertwined with pace, delivery and clarity of what I'm saying' (P3)	P1, P3, P5, P7, P8, P9, P10, P11, P15, P16, P17, P19, P20
Clarity of communication (intelligibility)	'If you can't make yourself understood in the classroom then something has to change' (P3)	P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P9, P10, P13, P14, P15, P16, P17, P20
RP as self-selected choice for purposeful modification	'They didn't get it the first or second time so I thought I'd just say it in a RP way. They got it automatically!' (P1) 'I try and make it something along the lines of what they might have heard before like RP' (P2)	P1, P2, P4, P5, P6, P13
Modification appropriate to learners' age and language proficiency	'If I've got a lower level group, I try and make it sound neutral, whatever that is' (P3)	P3, P5, P6, P10, P11, P14, P15, P16, P17, P20
Accent modification becomes the norm (inside and outside the classroom)		
Unintentional switch often occurs in the classroom/staff room. Staff become less conscious of their own modification over time.	'I was nervous and apprehensive about my accent as a student teacher, but we have a teacher talk voice which we put on which affects the accent' (P11) 'I don't think that I would be having the jobs that I have if I spoke broader Scouse, to be honest. That's my personal opinion'. (P18)	P1, P3, P10, P11, P13, P14, P18, P20
General accent modification occurs over time through living overseas.	'I still modify my accent when I speak to family and friends. I don't realise it' (P1) 'It's complex. You're listening to people from all over the world and I think your brain just modifies how you speak' (P3)	P1, P3, P9, P14

Commented [A3]: These seems to fit equally well with the category below, which makes me feel (as a reader) a bit confused about the distinction between the two.

Commented [A4]: I am also unclear as to how this is categorically distinct from the first two. Perhaps a caveat when introducing this table in the text is just that these are not mutually exclusive categories would solve this issue.

RP modification is justifiable e.g. unintelligible phonemes, but not wholesale adoption of RP for its own sake.	‘If it was affecting the ability to learn then ok but if I was asked to fit in with other southern accents, I would take offense.’ (P4)	P2, P4, P6, P8, P13
RP modification not sustainable in the long term	‘It’s a strain on me because it’s so unnatural’ (P1)	P1, P2, P9, P13
Exposure to accents is important for language learning		
Student should be exposed to a range of accents	‘There’s no point learning RP because nobody uses it. They need to hear different accents even if they are hard to understand’ (P2) ‘Exposure to accents is a good thing so students know that everyone in the UK does speak differently, just as they do in other countries.’ (P6) ‘There are accents within every country and you have to adapt to that’ (P15)	P2, P3, P5, P6, P8, P10, P11, P13, P15, P16
Students seem to have limited exposure to accents.	‘They asked me about my accent because they’ve only been used to BBC English’ (P8)	P6, P8, P10, P11, P16, P18, P20
Negative themes	Example comments	Participants
Increased self-awareness of accent with other NSs		
Northern versus Southern accents (in England)	‘In summer schools down south a lot of the teachers are local and all used to their own accents which they think is the norm’ (P2) ‘The general perception of my accent from British people is that we are not very well educated’ (P9) ‘Having interviews with heads [at UK primary schools in the south], when they look at where I’m from, they do comment on it. So you don’t sound like you’re from Liverpool so I’ve had to explain the whole situation about me going to Spain. I think that I wouldn’t have got a job here if I had a broad Scouse accent.’ (P18)	P2, P4, P5, P9, P18

	'Without a doubt career success is based in part on modifying your accent' (P18)	
Negative judgements of Northern accents by fellow native speakers	'I'm more conscious of my accent in front of British people because you get more judged on it' (P2) 'People in the south have this notion that they speak the right way and people up north don't speak correctly. I feel you'll be taken more seriously or deemed to be more educated with a southern accent. Overseas I'm not worried about it. Class isn't a thing' (P4) 'I got a lot of stick for it from Southerners, and in the end, I had to just pull them to one side and say, you know, am I doing a decent job, what's the problem with where I'm from?' (P18)	P2, P4, P8, P18
Unfavourable reactions or resistance if directed to modify accent		
Strong reactions to (hypothetically) being asked to modify	'unfair' (P2) 'very uncomfortable' (P7) 'discriminated against' (P8) Rude or inappropriate (P9), 'take offense' (P11, P19) 'feel a bit annoyed' (P13), 'a step too far' (P15) 'irritated' (P16) 'insulting' (P20)	P2, P7, P8, P9, P11, P13, P15, P16, P19, P20
Part of my personality and identity	'If I changed my accent it would change my personality altogether...It's part of who you are' (P3) [I wouldn't change my accent because] 'I'm from the North and I'm proud' (P10) 'I think I'm definitely a proud Northerner and I really want to implement that into my lessons, I want my students to understand me and where I'm from and my Northern cultural accent' (P14) 'I have a lot of pride from where I'm from and changing my accent means I'm kind of making that culture disappear a little bit.' (P20)	P3, P8, P9, P10, P14, P16, P20

It's the link to my regional background and roots	'I'm a product of my family and of my location. You've got to be proud of that' (P4) 'We are a product of our own environment and I don't want to forget that' (P9)	P4, P9
Difficult to establish relationship or rapport with students	'A big part of someone is how they speak so if you're changing that then it's hard to be yourself and build a relationship with that person' (P7) 'It would impact on the learners receiving this very unnatural pronunciation' (P19)	P2, P7, P19

4.2.1 Accent modification benefits the students

As part of the teacher development process, trainees learn to meet the demands of their students and teaching contexts in terms of adapting and grading learning materials, class activities, support and delivery of the lesson. The interviews suggested that the teachers believed adjusting their accents to be just another way of facilitating language learning, much like they were trained to do; as P3 describes, '[Adjusting my accent] is all intertwined with pace, delivery and clarity of what I'm saying'. P13's sentiments that 'it's my role as an educator [to modify] so students... understand' is echoed by the majority of participants (70%). Perhaps unsurprisingly, teachers with young learners or lower proficiency groups reported the need and practice of accent modification most frequently.

In terms of the 'how' regarding accent modification, this mainly took two forms. Twelve teachers reported adjusting to some kind of 'diluted', 'toned down' or 'neutral' version of their accent. This was the most frequently reported target. Six teachers, on the other hand, reported adopting some form of RP accent. Often this was an instinctive choice based on students' prior exposure, as P2 and P1 recall; 'I try and make it something along the lines of what they might have heard before like RP' (P2). They didn't get it the first or second time so I thought

I'd just say it in a RP way. They got it automatically! (P1). Such comments corroborate the pervasiveness of RP in EFL textbook material (Mompean & Hernández-Camoy, 2001) and student exposure to this accent (Ashby, n.d.; Carrie, 2016). Two teachers believed it was best practice to 'switch between the dictionary form and my own accent' (P6) so learners were advantaged by both. All these teachers were keen to point out, nevertheless, that they drew boundaries regarding the purpose and extent of adopting RP as the communicative form. P4 speculated, 'if it (i.e. my regular accent) was affecting the ability to learn then ok but if I was asked to fit in with other southern accents, I would take offense.' P8 felt that 'changing difficult phonemes' was acceptable but would likely resist any wholesale adoption of RP. Four teachers reported side effects of adopting RP. Comments included RP being described as a 'strain' (P1) and 'exhausting' (P13) to imitate, suggesting sustained use was untenable. It is not immediately clear from these responses whether or not the adoption of RP is about using this accent per se, or some variety of it; or, are these teachers merely adopting less recognisable varieties of their otherwise regional accents ([Baratta, 2018b](#))? If the latter, this is suggestive of accents which, as referenced earlier, are less discernible to a specific region. Strycharczuk et al (2020), for example, discuss a General Northern English accent, explained in terms of being pan-regional and comprising a larger area within the North of England, as opposed to being immediately identifiable to a specific Northern city region.

That teachers reported imitating some form of an RP accent, while [somewhat](#) vague in its phonological realisation, is perhaps not surprising. Indeed, Wells (1982b: 297) reports on a variety that he refers to as 'near RP', characterised by a lack of specific regional qualities, thus avoiding the more distinctive features that would otherwise characterise more regional-sounding accents. In terms of the perceptions interlocutors might have of the

speakers of this accent, Wells reports that these would involve being 'educated', 'well-spoken', 'middle-class' (ibid). While this does not provide immediate phonological detail, it nonetheless suggests the type of accents that the teachers are otherwise attempting to emulate in their adoption of a more 'RP-like accent' (Coupland & Bishop, 2007).

Five teachers indeed explained that students, initially at least, had difficulties understanding their Northern phonemes, but unlike previous research (e.g. Kang, Moran, & Thomson, 2019), there did not appear to be any concern for students' assessments from the teachers' reports. Rather, the lack of understanding was reported to be more immediate to a given moment(s) in the classroom. Furthermore, a lack of understanding was sometimes reported in conjunction with an unfamiliar accent being regarded positively, as a linguistic curiosity (e.g. P3).

4.2.2. Accent modification becomes the norm

As described above, teachers were generally comfortable adjusting their accent to some degree for the benefit of the learners. Interestingly, the result of this meant the majority of teachers felt they developed what P3 describes as a 'classroom accent' over time, presumably an accent which attempts to remove the more local phonological features, as discussed earlier. P1's feelings were shared by other teachers; 'I'm just so used to doing it now. It doesn't bother me at all'. Thus, teachers generally agreed that accent modification became an automatic and acceptable part of their practice over time. Taking a more extreme view, P18 believed that, without modification, her accent would have in fact been career-limiting rather than career-enhancing, at the interview stage at least; 'I don't think that I would be having the jobs that I have if I spoke broader Scouse (Liverpool), to be honest. That's my personal

opinion'. This reflects research which indeed acknowledges the ways in which stigmatised accents can be regarded as a negative factor in certain careers, such as teaching (Archangeli et al, 2010; [Baratta, 2018b](#)), finance (Moore et al, 2016) and library work (Lippi-Green, 1997), and professional work overall (Lawler, 1999; Addison & Mountford, 2015).

In some cases, self-imposed accent modification within the classroom also extended to outside the classroom for similar reasons. Five teachers found adopting a less regional accent benefitted communication between colleagues and friends too, giving them greater social capital. P9 provides the most detailed account of this experience; 'I found with my accent becoming more neutral I'm able to talk to a lot more people, be understood by a lot more people from many different countries...it makes me look more worldly...and helps make better relationships'. This account aligns with notions from speech accommodation theory (e.g. Giles, Coupland & Coupland, 1991) and suggests the practice of convergence towards some kind of EFL norm in terms of accent being used as a relationship-building strategy. P9's success in terms of socialisation into friendship groups, as a result of modifying his regional accent, encouraged him to continue this practice long term, as he had reported to us.

4.2.3. Exposure to accents is an important part of language learning

Returning to the classroom setting, despite accent modification being common practice, most (17 teachers) believed that exposure to accents was important for 'natural' and 'realistic' (P5) English language learning; a sentiment echoed in existing research (e.g. Fang, 2016). RP was seen as limiting learners' experience and understanding of English. Agreeing with Lindsey (2019), RP was considered an unrealistic model to introduce into class as 'no one [in the UK] really uses it' (P2). Moreover, 50% of the teachers agreed that 'exposure to accents is a good thing so students know that everyone in the UK does speak differently, just as they do in

other countries' (P6). Seven teachers, however, explicitly highlighted the reality that EFL staff and students were rarely exposed to any accents other than 'BBC English' (P8). This feeling was also indirectly expressed in many other interviews. One teacher recalled a more problematic issue on an IELTS listening test which included a Northern accent; 'None of them understood what she said. I can see I need to expose them more' (P10). As this became an obvious trend, teachers' efforts to address this in the classroom were generally positively received.

4.2.4. Increased self-awareness of accents and Native Speaker judgements in Britain

The following discussion now turns to examples regarding accent perceptions based on what the teachers have previously experienced in Britain. From an employment perspective, six teachers recall North vs. South debates about accents in various UK educational settings from 'banter amongst colleagues' (P9) and 'getting a lot of stick' (P18) to questions such as 'Do students always understand you because you've got a strong accent?' (P2). All these teachers' accounts refer to negative comments of their regional accents from fellow colleagues and employers, providing further evidence of regional stereotyping as reported elsewhere ([Baratta, 2017; 2018a, b](#)). As P18 concludes, 'Without a doubt, career success is based in part on modifying your [regional] accent', linking to Beal and Cooper (2015), with teachers discussing such negativity surrounding regionality as also appearing in their day-to-day experiences, as well as following them to overseas staffrooms too. P2 admits to being 'more conscious of my accent in front of British people because you get more judged'. Such feelings stem from, P4 believes, 'the general perception that we are not very well educated' and 'teachers down south are local and all used to their own accents which they think are the norm' (P2). There was a sense from this group of teachers that these societal perceptions and

attitudes amongst fellow countrymen was nothing unusual and in fact the norm in many cases. P16 described such accent debates as 'something we bond over'. With EFL staff and students, the interviews gave a sense that teachers were able to escape this negativity and feeling of having to fight their regional corner. P4 stated, 'Overseas, I'm not worried about [being judged]'.

4.2.5. Possible resistance if directed to modify accent

The importance of personal choice with accent modification underlies much of the discussion so far. The concept of 'personal choice' might be regarded as problematic, however, when applied to speakers with stigmatised accent varieties in work-based contexts; in such cases, even if no one specifically comments on their accent, teachers might nonetheless feel a need to adjust it in some way. Nonetheless, from the teachers' accounts, it is seen that some felt a need to use less regional-sounding accents merely for the purposes of being understood and not out of perceptions that their accents were in some way 'inappropriate' for teaching. In this sense, teachers perhaps understood there to be a choice available to them.

Perceptions of personal choice were removed, however, in the case of teachers being explicitly directed to modify their accent, with P8 a notable example, who was told by a British manager to adopt more 'standard' Southern pronunciation for teaching. As P8 recalled, this comment followed a lesson observation by the school manager; 'I was told that I wasn't pronouncing things correctly and that I should adopt more of a Southern accent with regards to vowels so I felt like, quite discriminated against'. The interview revealed P8 didn't feel comfortable responding to the feedback at the time, given the nature of the context (formal evaluation) but remarked that 'I wasn't prepared to change my accent'. In terms of

the (in most cases hypothetical) directive to modify their accents, 50% of the teachers claimed feelings of possible discomfort ranging from 'feeling a little bit annoyed' (P13) to 'insulted' (P20). These reactions largely stemmed from strong ties to their regional roots which they did not want to forget; 'I'm a product of my family and of my location. You've got to be proud of that' (P4). Links back to the classroom were evident here too with two teachers voicing their concerns that 'students wouldn't get the best out of me because I would be too worried about how I speak' (P2) because 'if you change how you speak then it's hard to be yourself and build a relationship with that person' (P7).

Above all, resistance to accent modification was closely connected to personality, identity and teacher agency. Teachers equated accent changes to diminishing personality (P2) and airbrushing their cultural roots (P20). In P14's case, the idea of being Northern and all that represents was intentionally implemented into lessons so learners could understand him and his cultural roots. A very strong feeling of pride, characterised in the statement, 'I'm from the North and I'm proud' (P10), seems to symbolise this struggle to legitimise regional accents, particularly from England's northern regions. Gratifyingly, the lack of cultural biases experienced (Alford & Strother, 1990) meant this seemed to be a fight the teachers did not have to undertake with EFL staff and students when teaching overseas, with the exception of P8. It is clear that the teachers indeed take pride in their accents, with accents a symbol of regional – and perhaps class – origins. In this sense, their collective regional accents have their own sense of capital and, though speculative, it is possible that such linguistic pride is enhanced by the perceived interest that the students have in the teachers' accents.

A comprehensive discussion of accent and professional identity is outside the scope of this article, but the data do suggest some interesting links. In terms of British employers (overseas or UK-based), accent does seem to matter according to these participant teachers. Many participant accounts reveal experiences of negativity, or at least concern, towards their regional accents which is comparable to other research suggesting regional accents may be considered professionally unsuitable (Lippi-Green, 1997; Kerswill, 2009; Liberman, 2010; [Baratta, 2018b](#)). For overseas employers, this view appears to be driven by commercial concerns over the (perceived) impact regional accents may have on their fee-paying clients.

Some teachers in this study also held the view that accent plays a key role in their personal sense of professionalism. Although this was not explored in detail, adopting a modified version of their accent was regarded as a frictionless way to interact professionally and personally with EFL students, EFL colleagues or users of other varieties of English.³ British staff often viewed a less-regionally specific accent as a way to enhance their professionalism in terms of acceptance by native speakers and non-native speakers, and gain some degree of linguistic capital (Brady, 2015; ~~Author~~[Baratta, 2017](#); [Donnelly, Baratta and Gamsu, Author et al., 2019](#)). P14's account sums this up; 'I think I'm getting a new identity now, more professional. I feel more professional now than I used to. I think that's the best way I think [accent modification] has impacted me. I feel more like a serious teacher now'. Staff were mostly at ease with some degree of accent change leading to the conclusion that accent

³ Readers are directed to further work on professionalism and professional identity for teachers here: Lorimer, C., & Schulte, J. (2011); Sachs, J. (2001); Varghese, M., Morgan, B., Johnston, B., & Johnson, K. A. (2005).

modification was seen as a necessary to-do for teaching purposes. Accent modification only became problematic when personal choice was removed, as discussed earlier.

5. Conclusion

Overall, the teacher testimonials considered here report accents as something to be celebrated, in most cases, rather than derided. This points to the fact that perceptions of accents – and the speakers – are in the ear of the beholder, as it were. When teaching students who have no familiarity with regional accents, the fact that such accents are initially difficult to understand is not, in itself, a particularly negative issue, as reported by the participants. Rather, the results show that the negative stereotyping is absent precisely because of a lack of knowledge regarding not just the accent, but the regional origins and associated stereotypes, to a certain extent.

Moreover, the lack of familiarity leads students to approach their teachers' accents with curiosity and interest. We again suggest that this in turn can lead to student engagement in the context of learning English.

In the cases where teachers did admit to modifying their accents, they largely have a pragmatic response to this practice which focuses on the needs of the learners. It is important to note that such modification, if chosen by the teachers themselves, is regarded with overall acceptance. But for P8, who was specifically told by a staff member to change to more Southern pronunciation, the picture is more complex. In this case, it is suggested that her Northern accent is otherwise being suggested to be a liability for teaching. In addition, she is being told, in part, how to teach. But overall, it is clear that amidst such negative comments made about teachers' accents, or comments certainly perceived as negative, the

students were otherwise accepting of the (mostly) Northern accents within a variety of countries where teachers were employed. This also is a positive outcome, as it addresses the linguistic reality of accent variety in the UK.

Clearly, however, the experiences of just twenty teachers from an individual university cannot be applied more widely; a more extensive study would be ideal, that involves a larger sample and indeed, more variety of accents. It is important to also acknowledge that what the participants recalled in the interviews were likely approximations of actual events. Nonetheless, the study here does reflect on the views of many EFL students from a variety of countries, which does reveal something regarding attitudes toward regional accents, which, as revealed in this study, are largely positive.

The negative perceptions that exist in UK society regarding regional accents, however, is not lost on the teachers, but outside of the UK and/or in the content of teaching EFL, perceptions are very different. Any negativity toward teachers' accents does not derive from their students. Rather, it is the staff who themselves are native speakers, specifically British individuals, who are more likely to suggest changes to teachers' accents. This might further point to a suggested 'standard' or 'teaching' accent. Nonetheless, the teachers otherwise were able to use their 'native' accents to the benefit of their students, which shows experience teaching overseas arguably helps to avoid any 'linguistic baggage' being carried over. This would refer to concerns that teachers' accents will be judged in negative terms by students who are perhaps otherwise unfamiliar with the national stereotypes in Britain that are based on accents. An unfamiliar accent is perceived as

intriguing and generally welcomed, so that teachers can see this as an opportunity to escape the negativity of regionality.

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