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The Sociocultural Influence of British and American Accents on English Teaching in China: Identity Formation and Teaching Implications

Deqiao Liu

College of Foreign Languages, Capital Normal University, Beijing, 100089, China
350054109@qq.com

Abstract:

In China, English is the principal foreign language for studying, working, and communicating abroad. In this context, both British and American accents have become symbols of language and culture, influencing learners and teachers' understanding of English. Based on a review of literature and educational practices, this study explores the historical development and social functions of Standard Pronunciation (RP) and General English (GA) in the United States, as well as their impact on the construction of learner identity in Chinese English education. The results show that RP is typically seen as prestige and authority, whereas GA is associated with accessibility and practicality. Learners show their tendency through accent choice. But in some classes, exam-oriented teaching, inconsistent teacher's accent, and bias against different accents hinder education. In response, this study proposes pedagogical approaches that value accent diversity, prioritize intelligibility, and support identity development. By analyzing accents, authentic interaction, and intercultural exchanges, students can develop linguistic adaptability and intercultural competence and at the same time reinforce their cultural identity and sense of belonging.

Keywords: British accent, American accent, cultural identity, English language teaching, China

1. Introduction

The worldwide expansion of English has led to an increasing diversity of accents. As a result of the ongoing globalization, the great importance of English can be reflected in the vast, rapid spread of English in different fields worldwide. Received Pronunciation (RP) and General American (GA) are two widely-acknowledged English accents as standard pedagogical

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models in the context of English-as-a-foreign-language (EFL) education internationally [1]. In China, students learn RP and GA through textbooks, assessments, teachers, and media. As a result, their perceptions and attitudes toward these two accents are often distinct. In particular, RP is frequently associated with tradition and academic authority, while GA is more often regarded as modern and practical. These different perspectives have resulted discussions about which accent should serve as a principle in classroom teaching and teachers' pronunciation. Current studies suggest that an accent is not only a linguistic form but also a cultural marker, and it has made a profound influence on English language teaching. Therefore, this study focus on the development of British and American accents in English language teaching and their influence on learners' identity formation. By analyzing the historical background, social functions, and pedagogical roles of RP and GA, the study highlights the cultural and identity-related challenges that learners encounter when choosing an accent. In addition, it further proposes corresponding teaching strategies and assessment intended to support learners in developing linguistic skills as well as cultural identity.

2. Evolution of British and American Accents and Formation of Learner Identity

2.1 History and Social Functions of British and American Accents

The historic and socio-cultural significance of British and American accents accounts for perceiving and making use of English. Conventionally, in 19th-century Britain, RP was associated with the upper and middle class, and thus signaled learning, power, and class. The evolution was shaped by elite colleges and universities, where phonetic study and social networks enhanced its power [2,3]. Standardization by broadcasting, law, and governance, and promotion by the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), RP gained prestige and became a social identifier. As Levis observes, the nativeness principle is to teach or learn a native model of English pronunciation, aiming for a target of native or near-native pronunciation proficiency [4]. Through rhythm and intonation in drama and elocution and in literature, learners' understanding of standard English was shaped as well. GA is very neutral, standardized, and phonetically explicit. The wide spread of American cultural products has promoted the global influence of GA, forming a relatively consistent pronunciation cognition among learners. High intelligibility is a prominent feature of GA, which plays a vital role in cross regional and international exchanges. The phonetic characteristics of GA, like clear vowel system and small regional differences, make it a powerful medium for effective communication in diverse English contexts. In addition, the popularity of GA has also been strengthened by educational policy and international business practice. Especially in Business English and global communication courses, clarity and standardization have been paid attention to. The historical formation and social functions of RP and GA shape learners' pronunciation, attitude and preference. RP stands for authority and status, while GA prioritizes comprehensibility and cross-cultural communication. These differences define the orientation and choice of learners, which will be further discussed in the part of learner identity and classroom practice.

2.2 Identity and Cultural Construction in Language and Accents

Language plays a central role in cultural identity, as learning a language cultivates language skills and enhances social status. The use of language reflects social identity and cultural belonging. For example, formal learners are often associated with academic or professional roles, while informal learners dominate social and popular culture environments, influencing their social status and identity. From a theoretical perspective, learners' choice of accent, such as RP or GA, is a way of identity construction and expression. RP is typically associated with an academic oriented identity, emphasizing adherence to pronunciation norms, academic authority, and traditional educational values, while GA is associated with international communication and popular culture, prioritizing fluency, comprehensibility, and cross-cultural adaptability. Thus, learners' preference for accents reflects both their understanding of language norms and their self positioning in social roles, educational expectations, and cross-cultural communication. In addition, long-term exposure to cultural products can also affect the choice of accent. For example, learning GA through movies, news, or social media can enhance awareness of global communication, while the RP present-

ed in school curriculum reinforces academic and authoritative norms. And some learners hope to master authentic English accents as they believe their accents may not be clearly understood [5]. Similarly, some learners emphasize the practicality of communication and even question the superiority of native English accents [6]. Therefore, accent selection demonstrates learners' strategic positioning in social and cultural spaces, including judgment of formal and informal contexts, balancing academic and cross-cultural identities, and actively managing their language practices. These relationships can help analyze learner identity and culture, and assist teachers in linking accent choices with cultural identity.

2.3 Complex Conflicts between Learner Identity and Cultural Adaptation

When learning English, it is necessary to find an appropriate balance between historical and identity issues, as well as local identity and international standards. These issues are usually manifested via English accents. RP emphasizes the construction of language standards and identity, and supports academically oriented tasks. GA supports international communication and comprehensibility. In these aspects, learners' choices reflect the interaction between multiple social and cultural identities. These issues involve language, social roles, and cultural belonging. For example, learners may be more inclined to use RP in academic environments to demonstrate professionalism, while using GA in cross-cultural communication to achieve language clarity and fluency. They may adopt strategies to address these issues, like adjusting stress patterns, intonation, or pronunciation based on context. And these situations indicate that students have freedom and flexibility in emotional and identity management, without relying on specific school practices. In addition, long-term exposure to socio-cultural and communication issues may have an impact on cultural conflicts. In schools, RP retains academic and normative verification, while access to GA through the Internet, education or other forms of international exchanges enhances cross-cultural identity. These differences help to study the use of terms and identity in the school and social environment, and provide reference for teaching design.

3. The Use and Challenges of British and American Accents in Chinese Classrooms

3.1 The Distribution of English Accents in Chinese Classrooms

In English classrooms in China, the various accents used by teachers and students reflect changes in educational trends and teaching practices. The traditional RP is the main language model that dominates textbooks, listening materials, and assessment tasks. This trend has influenced people's perception of common language and also affected teacher training courses. Due to the expansion of international media, including movies, TV dramas, online courses, and business connections, GA's attention has rapidly increased. GA is the most common in daily communication and practical use because of its clear and colloquial characteristics. GA is often used as the primary listening and speaking model in college English courses, business English courses, and online learning platforms, providing people with various adaptation opportunities. At present, learners are exposed to various accents, which are influenced by the type of textbooks, curriculum design, and teachers' own pronunciation habits. Some teachers use RP, while others use GA. In addition, additional tools such as English corners, international exchange programs, and Internet resources increase the diversity of accents. In this diverse speech environment, learners gradually change their pronunciation habits through interaction and practicing different accents. And this multi accent environment cultivates language adaptability, comprehensibility, and cross-cultural communication skills, while enhancing learners' sensitivity to accent differences and strategic responses in practical communication.

3.2 The Learner Identity and Language Expression

In the English learning environment in China, learners mainly express their personal identity via accent selection and pronunciation strategies. Some students use RP to conform to standard norms and showcase their professional and academic personal image. These choices are consistent with the school's norms and educational identity. In contrast, GA is more commonly used in daily meetings, international conferences, or business collaborations due to its clear and fluent features, improved comprehensibility, and adaptability. Therefore, using GA helps to communicate with international peers and cultivate cross-cultural

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competence. In addition, in addition to using local speech or language patterns from nearby areas, mixed or concentrated intonation will also be adopted. These adjustments, such as tail sounds, consonant pronunciations, or vocabulary choices, help balance native language features and expression goals. These approaches are grounded in the language and strategy rules that students use in various communication contexts. For example, in cross-cultural group conversations or global work, teachers can easily choose RP or GA, or make basic language adjustments to improve understanding. These techniques demonstrate adaptability and flexibility in educational, social, and cultural environments, and reflect students' dialogue with local and global identities.

3.3 The Complexities of Coexisting RP and GA in Chinese English Classrooms

The coexistence of RP and GA in English teaching in China has brought many challenges. For a long time, standardized exams and textbooks have made RP the primary language, which has shaped the pronunciation habits of teachers and students and limited their understanding of other accents. This situation is further complicated by different teacher backgrounds and curriculum designs, as some teachers have received RP training and teach RP in the classroom, while others tend to teach GA in the classroom. In addition, differences in vocabulary selection and teaching focus among different schools and regions also lead to uneven use of accents. Top universities emphasize multicultural exchange, while standard courses are exam oriented. Therefore, students are exposed to different accent teaching environments. In addition, students will also experience pressure. Due to the possibility of encountering multiple accents and a lack of clear guidance, choosing which accent to rely on may be a challenge. Students may unconsciously mix accents to maintain a balance between academic standards and everyday use, leading to internal conflicts. Through instructional support, these issues can be addressed by clarifying the functions of accents, balancing clear speech and standard sounds, and fostering students' confidence and communication skills in a multilingual environment. In classroom design, diverse listening materials, role-playing, and interactive tasks are used to enable students to adapt and apply different accents in real-life contexts. And teacher guidance and peer feedback can enhance clarity and pronunciation, promote multicultural communication, and enhance language flexibility.

4. Teaching Approaches for Accent Diversity and Cultural Identity

4.1 The Development of a Pedagogical Framework for Accent Diversity

Incorporating accent diversity into the classroom is an important method for enhancing students' cross-cultural communication skills in English education. From a conceptual perspective, RP and GA should be seen as complementary resources rather than hierarchical standards. This can help students understand the functional role of accent selection, rather than just attempting to use a common language. Teachers emphasize the value of RP in appropriate and professional strategies, while recognizing the clarity and practicality of GA in daily and international communication. From a methodological perspective, classroom activities can adopt this concept in various ways. For example, students can compare listening materials and analyze the differences between RP and GA in vowels, consonants, and intonation; Observe accent usage in real-life contexts through movies, news, or podcasts. Teachers can also encourage students to discuss accent choices, enabling them to make choices in different interpersonal communication scenarios, increasing language freedom and cross-cultural awareness. Thus, developing an educational framework for accent teaching can help students understand the social functions of language and support them in autonomously choosing accents in different communication environments, thereby enhancing language adaptability and communication skills.

4.2 The Enhancement of Cultural Identity through Teaching Strategies

Language can convey information, and reflect the identity and cultural belonging of learners. To enhance students' awareness of cultural identity, teachers can first help them understand the socio-cultural significance of RP and GA, emphasizing that accent selection is a strategy rather than a value judgment. Specifically, by analyzing how accents reflect academic authority, social status, and cross-cultural adaptability, students can understand the relationship between language and identity. In practice, teachers can

organize activities such as simulated international conferences, academic presentations, or business negotiations. And these activities provide students with the opportunity to choose accents based on contextual requirements, allowing them to experience different pronunciation characteristics and observe the impact of their choices on communication effectiveness and audience understanding. In addition, teachers can encourage students to engage in discussions and reflections. This process enables students to evaluate the function of different accents in various communication contexts, consider how the audience perceives and understands them, and develop skills to flexibly adjust language use according to specific contexts. Therefore, a well structured teaching plan and targeted strategies can help students improve their ability to adapt to cross-cultural environments and take control of their language learning. At the same time, these methods also enhance their sense of cultural belonging and social identity in real communication.

4.3 The Improvement of Assessment Practices in Classroom Implementation

Traditional classroom assessments often prioritize pronunciation similar to that of native speakers, thereby overemphasizing the "correctness" of RP or GA, which may weaken students' confidence and identity expression. Existing studies argue that the focus of English education should prioritize comprehensibility rather than pursuing pronunciation similar to that of native speakers [7]. To address these issues, the evaluation framework must adopt a functional orientation. This orientation should revolve around three key dimensions. The importance of comprehensibility is self-evident, as it determines the effectiveness of students' communication of information and the potential impact of accent differences on comprehension. In addition, fluency is also an important dimension, including language coherence, rhythm, and natural intonation. Besides, communicative competence is crucial as it assesses learners' ability to adapt flexibly in interactive environments. In practical operation, teachers can use diverse listening materials, simulated communication tasks, and oral reports to conduct comprehensive evaluations, avoiding relying solely on a single mother tongue standard. This functional assessment method helps to enhance students' language proficiency and cross-cultural communication skills, while also promoting their independent expression of identity, achieving a balance between classroom fairness and cultural identity development. The English curriculum standards in China should also reflect this trend. By removing explicit requirements for native speakers' pronunciation and adding more diverse oral activities. Despite policy adjustments, there are still some challenges in classroom teaching practice [8,9].

5. Conclusion

The results indicate that the development of British and American accents has a profound impact on learners' identity formation in English teaching. In addition, RP and GA each have unique social functions and cultural significance, and learners need to maintain a balance between academic authority and cross-cultural communication when choosing which accent to learn. The disconnect between the evolution of global teaching objectives and deeply rooted local preferences is not unique to China. Across the world, teachers must address the tension between traditional notions of linguistic locality and the practical need to cultivate communicative competence in diverse and multilingual environments, which has been discussed in many studies. Understanding how teachers' pronunciation teaching concepts and practices are influenced by factors such as teaching experience and teaching environment can offer valuable insights for global teacher education. By implementing teaching methods that address the diversity of accents, like comparing different accents, simulating real-life communication situations, and engaging in intercultural conversations, students' language adaptability and cross-cultural communication skills can be enhanced. Besides, using an assessment framework focused on functionality that highlights clarity, fluency, and communication skills, instead of just aiming for native-like standards, can boost learners' confidence and ability to express themselves. These teaching and assessment methods not only help develop students' language skills, but also strengthen their sense of identity and cultural belonging in a multicultural setting.

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