

Creating a Professional Teacher Identity in Britain via Accent Modification

Authors : Alex Baratta

Abstract : In Britain, accent is arguably still a sensitive issue, and for broad regional accents in particular, the connotations can often be quite negative. Within primary and secondary teaching, what might the implications be for teachers with such accents? To investigate this, the study collected the views of 32 British trainee teachers via semi-structured interviews, and questionnaires, to understand how their accent plays a role in the construction of a professional identity. From the results, it is clear that for teachers from the North and Midlands, in particular, accent modification is something that is required by their mentors; for teachers from the Home Counties, accent is rarely mentioned. While the mentors' rationale for accent modification is to ensure teachers are better understood and/or to sound 'professional', many teachers feel that it is a matter of linguistic prejudice and therefore regard an accent modified for someone else as leading to a fraudulent identity. Moreover, some of the comments can be quite blunt, such as the Midlands teacher who resides in the South being told that it was 'best to go back to where you come from' if she couldn't modify her accent to Southern pronunciation. From the results, there are three broad phonological changes expected: i) Northern/Midlands-accented teachers need to change to Southern pronunciation in words such as bath and bus; thus, a change from [baθ] [bʊs] to [bɑ:θ] [bas], ii) Teachers from the North, notably Yorkshire, told to change from monophthongs to diphthongs; thus, a change from [go:] to [gʊ], iii) Glottal stops are to be avoided; a teacher from South London was told by her mentor to write the word 'water' with a capital t (waTer), in order to avoid her use of a glottal stop. Thus, in a climate of respect for diversity and equality, this study is timely for the following reasons. First, it addresses an area for which equality is not necessarily relevant – that of accent in British teaching. Second, while many British people arguably have an instinct for 'broad' versus more 'general' versions of regional accents, there appear to be no studies which have attempted to explain what this means from a purely phonological perspective. Finally, given that the Teachers' Standards do not mention accent as part of the desired linguistic standards, this study hopes to start a national debate as to whether or not they should, rather than shy away from what can be a potentially complex – and sensitive – topic.

Keywords : accent, accommodation, identity, teaching

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