

Poblete, J., Gunn, N. y González, X. (Noviembre-Diciembre 2017). The Perception of Accent in Nonnative Speakers of English: A Case of Identity. *Revista Akadèmeia*, 16 (2), 101-127.

**The Perception of Accent in Nonnative Speakers of English:
A Case of Identity**

Jose Luis Poblete¹

Nicholas J. Gunn²

Ximena González C³

Fecha Recepción: 4 de Septiembre de 2017.

Fecha de Aceptación: 28 de Noviembre de 2017.

Abstract

Why is there a hierarchical structure for the acquisition and instructing of the English language? Why are some forms of English pronunciation (namely RP) still considered superior, better or just preferred? Is it prestige? Is it a marketing strategy? Is there research analysis to support this insight?

The perception persists that native speakers of English are superior or default better teachers of the language than non-native speakers of English. The reality is a completely different story. Research has clearly demonstrated that competency and fluency in the target language, combined with refined pedagogical skills are the keys to success when instructing in a second language (Braine, 2010).

The focus of this research is to explore non-native English teachers' perceptions of their own accent in their professional development as educators, and what repercussions these self-concepts have in their quest for meaningful employment and personal growth.

¹ M.A. (Linguistics & Literature). Dirección electrónica: jose.poblete@gesolutions.cl

² B.A. B.Ed TEFL, Dirección electrónica: nicholas.gunn@gesolutions.cl

³ Licenciada. en Educación. Profesora de Inglés Universidad Ucinf. Dirección electrónica: xgonzalez@ucinf.cl

Poblete, J., Gunn, N. y González, X. (Noviembre-Diciembre 2017). The Perception of Accent in Nonnative Speakers of English: A Case of Identity. *Revista Akadèmeia*, 16 (2), 101-127.

Sixty-five non-native Pedagogía en Inglés students and recent graduates from both Universidad UCINF and USACH (Universidad de Santiago de Chile) from the RM Region in Chile were surveyed, from which eight were randomly chosen to participate in a focus group discussion.

Key Words: accent, non-native speaker, professional development, self-perception, teacher identity.

Resumen

¿Por qué existe una estructura jerárquica en la adquisición y la enseñanza del idioma inglés?
 ¿Por qué algunas formas de pronunciar todavía se consideran superiores, mejores o simplemente son las preferidas? ¿Es prestigio? ¿Una estrategia de marketing? ¿Existen investigaciones que apoyen esta perspectiva?

Aún existe la percepción que los hablantes nativos de inglés son mejores profesores que los profesores que no son hablantes nativos. La realidad nos muestra una historia completamente diferente. Distintas investigaciones han demostrado que las competencias y la fluidez en la lengua meta combinadas con unas habilidades pedagógicas óptimas son la clave para el éxito de la enseñanza de una segunda lengua (Braine, 2010).

El objetivo de esta investigación es explorar las percepciones de los profesores de inglés no nativos acerca de su propio acento en su desarrollo profesional como educadores y que repercusiones tienen estas concepciones en su búsqueda de una labor significativa y su desarrollo personal.

65 estudiantes y graduados no nativos de la carrera de Pedagogía en Inglés pertenecientes a la Universidad UCINF y a la Universidad de Santiago de Chile, participaron en una encuesta. Luego de eso, se seleccionaron 8 participantes aleatoriamente para un *focus group*.

Palabras clave: acento, hablante no-nativo, desarrollo profesional, identidad docente, percepción.

Poblete, J., Gunn, N. y González, X. (Noviembre-Diciembre 2017). The Perception of Accent in Nonnative Speakers of English: A Case of Identity. *Revista Akadèmeia*, 16 (2), 101-127.

1. Introduction and theoretical framework

1.1 Objectives

General objective:

-To verify the perception and the reality of native speaker of English with non-native speaker of English in the Chilean context.

Specific objectives:

- 1) to evaluate the effectiveness of RP/GA instruction methodology.
- 2) to assess the perception of accent as a potential hindrance to teacher professional development and teacher self-identity.
- 3) to analyze the practicality of a *Standardized English methodology* as opposed to a *World Englishes methodology*.
- 4) to reevaluate the methodology of the phonetics programs at UCINF and USACH to comply with international standards.

1.2 A Case of Identity

To bastardize T.S. Eliot, *Between the perception and the reality. Falls identity*. The plight of the non-native English speaker has been a perilous and unfortunate situation. Too often, non-native speakers are excluded from job opportunities, simply because they are not indigenous speakers of the target language. Two recent cases in Chile occurred in October 2015 at the Chilean Naval Academy in *Viña del Mar*, and again in October 2016 at the *Instituto Chileno Norteamericano de Cultura de Valparaíso*. Both places requesting applications for English instructors, both places specifying non-native speakers of English need not apply. Why does this discriminatory exclusion exist? Why does the perception persist that native speakers, in this case of English, are inherently better teachers of English than non-native speakers? Is it mere preference? Is it prestige? Is it simply a marketing strategy? Do native English speakers come cheap?

Poblete, J., Gunn, N. y González, X. (Noviembre-Diciembre 2017). The Perception of Accent in Nonnative Speakers of English: A Case of Identity. *Revista Akadèmeia*, 16 (2), 101-127.

There is certainly no academic research evidence to support this position. There is no question of the prominence and importance of the English language in the global economic world, but what can be questioned is its exclusivity which harkens back to the class-based society in which the language originated.

Let's get back to basics! According to the Cambridge Online Dictionary, the definition of *accent* is:

the way in which people in a particular area, country, or social group pronounce words.

This meaning has general consensus across the board, with linguistic experts adding, that *accent* is a subset of *dialect*, and can encompass (Lippi-Green, 1997):

1. The speaker's residence-regional/geographical accent.
2. The speaker's socio-economic status, their ethnicity, their caste or social class-social accent.
3. The speaker's influence from a first language-foreign accent.

Yet, *accent* has nothing to do with *comprehension* or *propensity*. There are literally billions of speakers of English who speak the language with an *accent*, as clearly defined by Lippi-Green, but are completely intelligible when communicating orally. In addition, there are many Non-native speakers of English, whose knowledge and ability to teach the language, far exceeds the average Native speaker. As one gazes into the pool of the English language, is there no clear reflection?

Sadly, the waters become murkier, when searching for a clear definition of a *native speaker*. There are varying denotations amongst dictionaries, with the Cambridge Online Dictionary stating:

Poblete, J., Gunn, N. y González, X. (Noviembre-Diciembre 2017). The Perception of Accent in Nonnative Speakers of English: A Case of Identity. *Revista Akadèmeia*, 16 (2), 101-127.

someone who has spoken a particular language since they were a baby, rather than having learned it as a child or adult.

The Oxford Online Dictionary declaring:

a person who has spoken the language in question from earliest childhood.

While, The Longman Dictionary of English (online) asserts:

someone who has learned a particular language as their first language, rather than as a foreign language.

JJ Lee (2005) in his article, *The Native Speaker: An Achievable Model?* (p. 4) added six criteria:

1. The individual acquired the language in early childhood.
2. The individual has intuitive knowledge of the language.
3. The individual is able to produce fluent, spontaneous discourse.
4. The individual is competent in communication.
5. The individual identifies with or is identified by a language community.
6. The individual has a dialect accent (including the official dialect).

Unfortunately, the Native Speakers of a language are often understood to be monolingual speakers and have been living all their lives in a homogenous speech community. They are perceived to have extensive knowledge of their language, the gurus we appeal to for *truth* about their language, the models we emulate and they are the *keepers of all the keys* about their language. In addition, Native Speakers are believed to have *intuitive knowledge* about their language. This is a highly idealized perception of a Native Speaker, and when applying common sense to the situation, rather than ethereal preconceptions, the concept of a *Native Speaker* does not correspond to reality (Beinhoff, 2013).

Poblete, J., Gunn, N. y González, X. (Noviembre-Diciembre 2017). The Perception of Accent in Nonnative Speakers of English: A Case of Identity. *Revista Akadèmeia*, 16 (2), 101-127.

Yet, the debate continues on what is a *Native Speaker of English*, and whether or not, the Native speaker is an abstract concept rather than a reality (Shakouri, 2014). Can English speakers living on the Indian subcontinent, who have used, spoken and taught English since the middle of the 18th century, be considered *Native Speakers of English*? Can a child born and raised in a Spanish speaking environment, but of Anglo-Castilian parentage and who can function perfectly with the four skills in both languages, be considered a *Native Speaker of English*? Furthermore, Non-native Speakers of English are regularly and summarily excluded from education-related employment opportunities and from presenting at academic conferences, especially in Chile.

1.3 *The Concepts of Received Pronunciation & General American*

Teaching pronunciation has always been a complex issue. Some teachers tend to focus on having students produce a specific variety while others tend to focus their attention on developing students' intelligibility more than forcing students to produce a particular accent. But what is the reality in the English Teaching programs in Chile? It is a well-known fact that most Phonetics or Pronunciation teachers devote most of their effort and time to the teaching of a specific variety: the accent known as RP (Received Pronunciation), even though there is no academic or scientific evidence that supports this view.

The choice of that particular accent seems to be based on some sort of tradition or prestige that this variety supposedly holds. Many Chilean professors and students find RP to sound beautiful and a model to be studied and followed. However, as Upton (2015) states: “comparatively few people speak RP (...) estimates vary on RP use in England. Wells (1982, p.118) puts the figure at 10% (...), while Romaine (2000, p.20): put the figure at 5% at most” (p. 251). Therefore, it is difficult to come up with the real number of people who use RP in England (because no research has been carried out regarding that matter and it is hard to define what RP really is / has become). The question remains: why is RP regarded as the most appropriate model to follow and that students have to produce that particular variety? The answer continues to be focused on words such as “prestige” or “tradition” or some sort of false image/stereotype

Poblete, J., Gunn, N. y González, X. (Noviembre-Diciembre 2017). The Perception of Accent in Nonnative Speakers of English: A Case of Identity. *Revista Akadèmeia*, 16 (2), 101-127.

associated with British culture being a land where everybody is polite, educated and wear formal outfits all the time.

Most people have come to accept RP, without any questioning, as the goal to attain and the majority of the materials related to the teaching of English or pronunciation are still based on RP, as Upton (2015) claims: “Received Pronunciation might seem a straightforward concept. It is to be found, usually without critical explanation, question, or qualification, as the exemplum in countless books” (p. 252). We cannot deny that RP has become an “industry standard” as Upton points out (p. 253). The apparent simplicity that RP holds tends to disappear when trying to define what RP really is. Upton points out “at an elementary level of description, we must first recognize that RP only relates to an accent of England: it is English, not British”. We must ask ourselves: what about the other varieties that can be found in the British Isles? Why are they not found in ELT or pronunciation materials? Why is RP still being taught in Chilean university classrooms?

In an e-mail interview, the renowned English phonetician, Peter Roach stated “I have often said that we must distinguish between the model we choose and the goal, which is usually a desired degree of intelligibility or communicative ability. If your goal is to be intelligible, without worrying whether you sound British, you can select pedagogical priorities that will maximize intelligibility” (P. Roach, personal communication, May 29, 2015). Therefore, phonetics teachers and students should focus more on intelligibility rather than “sounding” RP. An example of this change, moving towards intelligibility rather than focusing on a specific variety, can be found in the Cambridge English Examinations. The speaking rubric in the FCE test handbook states that the pronunciation goal is to be “intelligible: a contribution which can generally be understood by a non-EFL/ESOL specialist, even if the speaker has a strong or unfamiliar accent” (p. 87). For language specialists and some English teachers, the acquisition of one particular model seems to be unrealistic since, in this specific case, English is constantly changing. On the other hand, some pronunciation teachers are reluctant to accept the fact RP, which has become some sort of an iconic model, has changed and will continue to do so.

Poblete, J., Gunn, N. y González, X. (Noviembre-Diciembre 2017). The Perception of Accent in Nonnative Speakers of English: A Case of Identity. *Revista Akadèmeia*, 16 (2), 101-127.

Similarly, the second most popular pronunciation model that we can find in Chilean classrooms is known as GA (General American) and, as the case of RP discussed above, does not hold any significant evidence as to why it is to be followed or taught, even though, we cannot deny the fact that culturally and geographically speaking, the United States has had a major impact on the lives of Chilean people both positively and negatively. However, the notion of GA also seems to be problematic, as RP, since it is only a generalization of the accents that can be found in North America and the Caribbean. In particular, the term General American excludes not only varieties inside the US, such as: New England, Texas or the South, but also, the accents found across Canada and countries such as Jamaica and the Bahamas whose official language is English. There is no evidence that supports the existence of the label General American per se or the teaching of it in the classroom as a goal or attainable model. As Boberg (2015) points out “it serves not only as a kind of pan-regional standard to be used in public domains like mass media communication, but as an acquisition target for learners of English as a second language (...) who wish to benefit from its high social prestige” (p. 230). Again, we encounter the phrase “high social prestige”, which does not provide any deep reasons so as to use this particular model as the accent that students have to learn and produce in their pronunciation courses or when they graduate from university. While it is true that both varieties have been described widely, this situation seems to be driven more because of marketing, linguistic imperialism and a distorted vision of idealized tradition that appears to be going in the opposite direction of where English and its learners from around the world are moving towards: a more global English where labels such as RP and GA prove to be fiction rather than reality.

1.4 *Speaker Identity*

There is an important relationship between a person’s accent and his/her own identity. Accents can make you feel and seem that you are either a competent speaker or an incompetent one. This can also be the case for current and future English teachers. Does the way you perceive your own accent affect your performance as a speaker/teacher? As Beinhoff (2013) argues: “we seem to find evidence for this relationship in everyday observations, for example when people

Poblete, J., Gunn, N. y González, X. (Noviembre-Diciembre 2017). The Perception of Accent in Nonnative Speakers of English: A Case of Identity. *Revista Akadèmeia*, 16 (2), 101-127.

employ regional accents to emphasize their regional identity” (p. 1). In Chile, learning to produce a particular accent seems to be one of the main goals of the people who enroll in English teaching programs. Most students would like to sound like a “native speaker” or they have expressed some concern about improving their accents. Accents can have a powerful effect on a person’s self-perception both positively and negatively and they function as “identity markers” as Beinhoff (2013) states: “language and accents (...) are identity markers because they allow an individual to express their identity in various facets. Accents can express regional, national, or cultural identity and they can be related to factors such as age or social class” (p. 4). Accents can also help us identify and categorize people, especially the way in which we construct our perception of people. A speaker’s accent can give us some answers as to why people decide to produce a certain variety of a language, their social identity and a sense of belonging to a particular group of speakers or region. Beinhoff also argues that “accents are crucial in determining a person’s identity: because the accent is one of the main features of an individual which is compared to a prototype and then assigned to specific groups according to which the speaker is perceived” (p. 5).

1.5 *Teacher Identity*

The key word *identity* must be understood. According to the Oxford Learner’s Dictionary, the definition is:

The characteristics, feelings or beliefs that distinguish people from others.

The identity, and self-perception of a person, whatever their profession is, will have a very important influence from self-esteem to professional performance. Efforts to define the concept of teacher have been on-going for years. The definition has changed in many different ways, just as the focus of education and methods to apply when teaching. This includes the teacher’s day to day work as well as internal and external perceptions. A teacher 20 years ago had a great dissimilarity compared to what a teacher has today. In Chile, even guidelines were created, *Marco para la Buena Enseñanza* (2008), by the Ministry of Education in order to define

Poblete, J., Gunn, N. y González, X. (Noviembre-Diciembre 2017). The Perception of Accent in Nonnative Speakers of English: A Case of Identity. *Revista Akadèmeia*, 16 (2), 101-127.

what a teacher's responsibilities are and how to execute that responsibility. That is why the process of constructing identity changes throughout time.

However, there must be a more specific definition for English teachers. Peter Medgyes, author of the article "native or nonnative: who's worth more?" published in the *ELT Journal* in 1992, initially exposed the existing gap between English teachers. Apparently, it involved not only the differences in language proficiency, but also in the teaching practice (Braine, 2010). These differences have divided teachers, and the debate has continued about who is the most qualified professional: native or nonnative speakers. The English Teacher's identity, then, could be clearly affected by this basic classification: NS (native speaker) or NNS (nonnative speaker). These two categories were created for the purpose of classifying teachers according to their characteristics. Chile is a country whose native language is Spanish. Therefore, their identity is unique and influenced by being nonnative speakers of English. Unfortunately, there is a perception that native teachers appear to be superior academically speaking. In that case, NNS might also see their identity negatively affected, or most importantly, their self-esteem.

Accent is an important factor when defining identity. The importance and influence of the speaker's accent in their development as professionals, but also in their self-perception is crucial. The two questions are: What is the relevance that the teacher's accent has on their identity? How can teacher identity be positively influenced regarding accent?

Researcher-author Katharina Glas in her 2013 publication, *Teaching English in Chile: A Study of Teacher Perceptions of their Professional Identity, Student Motivation & Pertinent Learning Contents*, points out two factors that are part of Chilean English teacher identity: personal identity, and collective identity (p. 138). In the former case, the teacher's subjective characteristics such as: interests, subjective theories, knowledge, assumptions and beliefs are

Poblete, J., Gunn, N. y González, X. (Noviembre-Diciembre 2017). The Perception of Accent in Nonnative Speakers of English: A Case of Identity. *Revista Akadèmeia*, 16 (2), 101-127.

included. ‘Subjective theories’ is a concept that usually is not explicated by the teacher. The ideas are vague and sometimes contradictory as they are based on their emotional state.

Knowledge is related to facts; situations or ideas which have been demonstrated. Assumptions are facts temporarily accepted and considered to be true without demonstration. On the other hand, beliefs are more subjective statements which have no conventional knowledge and cannot be proved. Collective identity, a person’s life story including their experiences, is also essential to defining a person’s identity, and therefore, also a teacher’s. In addition, the collective identities also have an effect, and in this aspect three subgroups are found:

1. *Social identity*: which refers to the social background such as variations in the teachers’ social classes. Also, collectivity of teachers has an important role in the work environment which changes according to school types. Teachers working in public schools will differ from teachers working in private schools.

2. *Ethnic/cultural identity*: which deals with national identity, or how Chileans define themselves. This includes the teacher’s contact and relation with the English speaking world.

3. *Group professional identity*: including the Chilean English teachers’ characteristics with their methodologies depending on different educational contexts.

Regarding speakers’ accents, this does not fit directly into any of the categories mentioned above. However, according to the dictionary definition of accent presented in this research, it gives information about the person’s origin. In that way, the Chilean English teacher’s accent would be part of the cultural identity (Glas, 2013). Thus the next step is to answer the question, what is the real perception students have of their own accent? Which accent varieties are they exposed to both inside of and outside of the classroom?

2. Methodology

Before the survey was sent to the participants, it was validated by Freddy Espinoza, Director of Pedagogía en Inglés, UGM (Chile) and Judy B. Gilbert, specialist in pronunciation for teacher training, Cambridge University Press (Great Britain).

Poblete, J., Gunn, N. y González, X. (Noviembre-Diciembre 2017). The Perception of Accent in Nonnative Speakers of English: A Case of Identity. *Revista Akadèmeia*, 16 (2), 101-127.

In an effort to separate the perception from the reality, 65 Chilean English teachers (both pre-service and recent graduates) from Universidad UCINF and USACH (Universidad de Santiago) RM Region-Chile participated in a quantitative survey consisting of 22 closed questions, using a Multiple Choice or Likert Scale format. The questionnaire was divided into 3 sections: Personal Information (01-06), Accents & Varieties of English (07-16) and Perception of Accent & Self-Identity (Appendix 04). From the preliminary statistical results of this exercise, 3 qualitative open questions were devised to clarify apparent dichotomies in the responses to groups of questions presented, particularly the results from:

Group 1

- Question 7 (I would like to have...)
- Question 8 (I would like my accent to resemble/sound like...)

Group 2

- Question 9 (What varieties of English are you exposed to inside the classroom?)
- Question 10 (What varieties of English are you exposed to outside the classroom?)
- Question 11 (Do you think RP-British English is superior...?)

Group 3

- Question 14 (How do you feel...?)
- Question 15 (Would you like to improve...?)
- Question 16 (Which direction would you like...?)
- Question 18 (Do you feel your accent...?)

The apparent dichotomies in *Group 1* arose from the 62.9% of the respondents to Question #7 indicating they would like to have a *near native to native accent*. In addition, 53.2% indicated in Question 8 that they would like to have their accent resemble a *specific country*. There seemed to be contradictions with the responses in *Group 3*, where 61.3% were *confident* or *somewhat*

Poblete, J., Gunn, N. y González, X. (Noviembre-Diciembre 2017). The Perception of Accent in Nonnative Speakers of English: A Case of Identity. *Revista Akadèmeia*, 16 (2), 101-127.

confident with their own accent (Question 14) and 91.9% felt their own accent would not impede finding employment (Question 18), yet 98.4% wished to *improve their accent*. Although, the direction for *improvement* remained unclear (Question 16).

Group 2 revealed an ongoing debate regarding pronunciation practices. 45.2% indicating they were exposed to RP Pronunciation inside the classroom (Question 9), while outside the classroom 69.4% are exposed to General American Pronunciation (Question 10). 64.5% responded that RP Pronunciation is not superior in terms of prestige and/or professionalism (Question 11).

It was concluded that further insight was required in the hopes of resolving some or all of these conflicts. At that point a focus group was formed with qualitative questions posed.

The randomly selected focus group from the quantitative survey participants consisted of:

- 3 males/5 females
- 3 USACH students/5 UCINF students
- 1 recent graduate (2016)/7 pre-service students.

The following open questions asked were:

1. Why would you like to improve your accent?
2. What's your opinion about being taught only RP pronunciation?
3. If you could speak to your pronunciation/phonetics teacher, what would you ask?

The dialogue, which lasted approximately 30-45 minutes, was recorded on two separate devices to ensure clarity, and then transcribed.

Poblete, J., Gunn, N. y González, X. (Noviembre-Diciembre 2017). The Perception of Accent in Nonnative Speakers of English: A Case of Identity. *Revista Akadèmeia*, 16 (2), 101-127.

3. Results and discussion

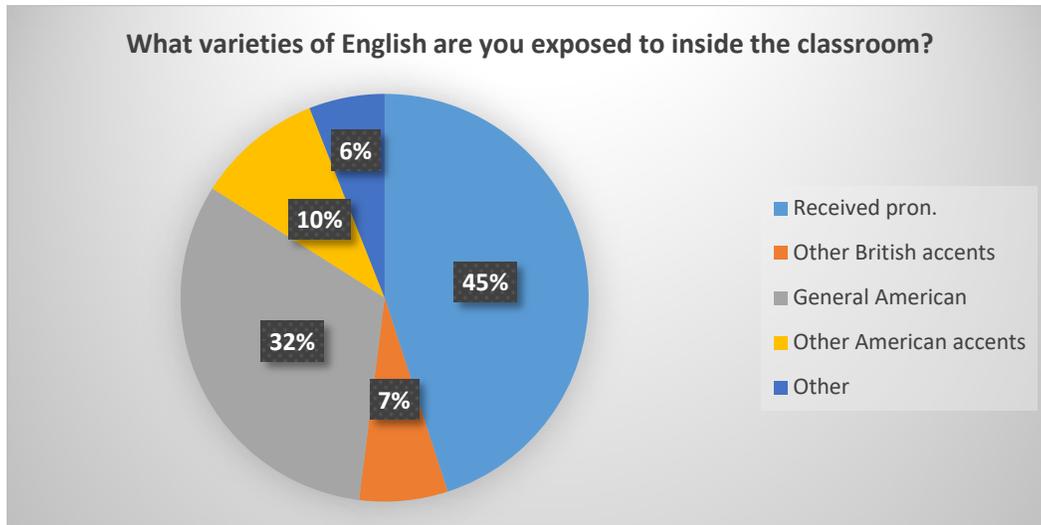
3.1 Accents and varieties of English

In the written survey, we can see that most students are mainly exposed to Received Pronunciation inside the classroom (45,2%), which may mean that most teachers either speak RP or try to encourage the use of that particular pronunciation model in the classroom (see *graph 1*). Teachers also provide examples that contain RP speakers (regardless of their level of English) and students are taught to produce that specific variety in class. Why is the case? As stated in the theoretical framework, RP does not any academic or scientific basis to be the accent that should be taught in class. The notion that RP is the “best” or the “most appropriate” model to be used in class is based completely on a misunderstood concept of “tradition”. In fact, it can be argued that some university teachers are teaching Phonetics or pronunciation the way they were taught, perpetuating the notion that RP is the only valid model that students should learn and produce.

Secondly, students stated that the second variety to which they are exposed inside the classroom is North American English (32.3%). We can see that the difference between the exposure to RP and NA English is quite small. How can that be explained? We will now focus on each university as separate entities. In the written survey, students from USACH stated that they are mainly exposed to RP inside the classroom (80%), 17% are exposed to General American and only 3% to other British accents. On the other hand, students from UCINF university stated that they are mainly exposed to GA (56%), then to other American accents (28%), to other British accents (12%) and only 4% of the students are exposed to RP.

Based on the percentages above, it can be argued that RP is considered to be the correct pronunciation model to learn and to produce at Universidad de Santiago. However, At UCINF university, Phonetics is taught from a different perspective: students are exposed to a wide range of accents, both North American and British.

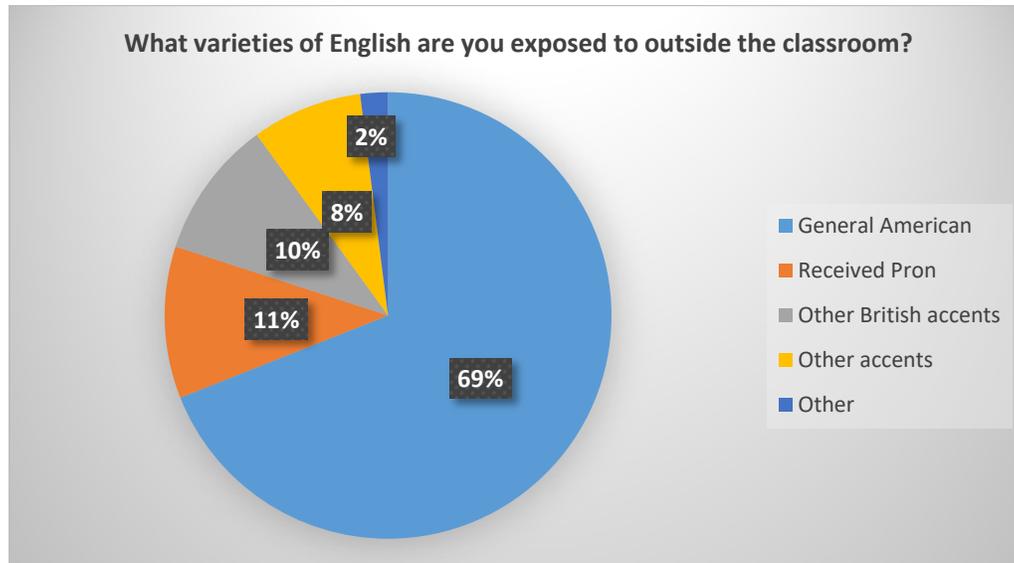
Poblete, J., Gunn, N. y González, X. (Noviembre-Diciembre 2017). The Perception of Accent in Nonnative Speakers of English: A Case of Identity. *Revista Akadèmeia*, 16 (2), 101-127.



Graph 1: Accent varieties that students, from both universities, are exposed to inside the classroom.

However, when students were asked the question: “What varieties of English are you generally exposed to outside the classroom?” (see *graph 2* below). The answer turned out to be completely different: 69.4% of the students who took the survey stated that they were mainly exposed to General American in their daily lives, 11.3% to RP, 9.7% were exposed to other British accents, 8.1% to other accents (Australian, South African, Indian, etc.) and 1.6% were exposed to other accents. At the Universidad de Santiago, 76% of the students claimed that they were exposed to General American outside the classroom, only 12% to RP, 9% of the students were exposed to other British accents and 3% to other accents. Similarly, students at UCINF university stated that 73% were exposed to General American, 9% to RP, 9% to other British accents and 9% were exposed to other accents. How can we explain such a contradiction between what happens inside the classroom and outside the classroom? We can argue students may feel closer to North America both geographically and culturally. TV series, music, video games, books and popular culture play a really important role in the spreading of a certain accent and its role cannot be denied nor overlooked.

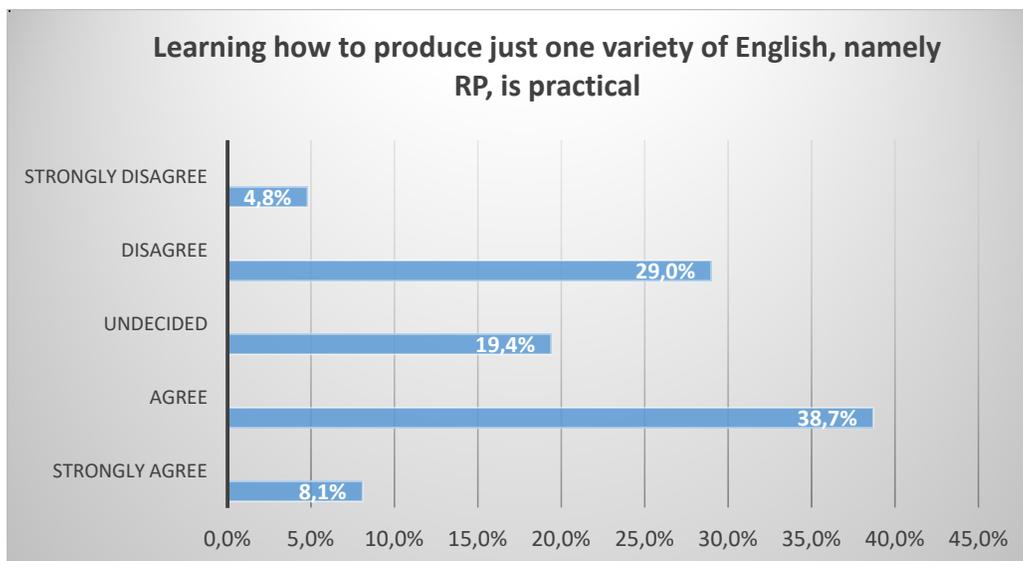
Poblete, J., Gunn, N. y González, X. (Noviembre-Diciembre 2017). The Perception of Accent in Nonnative Speakers of English: A Case of Identity. *Revista Akadèmeia*, 16 (2), 101-127.



Graph 2: Accent varieties that students, from both universities, are exposed to outside the classroom.

3.2 Accent and identity

Question 12 referred to the following statement: “Learning how to produce just one variety of English, namely Received Pronunciation, is practical”, the answers were the following:



Graph 3: Students' perception regarding producing only one variety of English.

Poblete, J., Gunn, N. y González, X. (Noviembre-Diciembre 2017). The Perception of Accent in Nonnative Speakers of English: A Case of Identity. *Revista Akadèmeia*, 16 (2), 101-127.

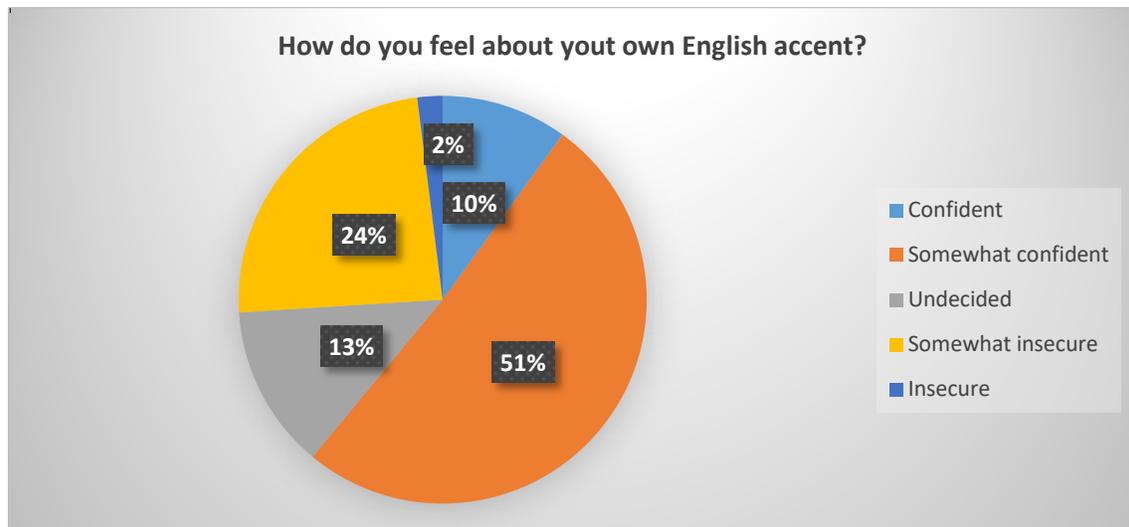
The results are the following: *Agree*: 38.7%; *Disagree*: 29% and *Undecided*: 19.4%. The majority of the students support the idea that producing only RP is useful, however, as it was observed in question 10, approximately 70% of the students are exposed to North American accent outside the classroom. Only 11.3% of them are exposed to RP. In this case, it seems contradictory how important the participants think it is to produce the so-called RP accent, which actually is not as frequently found in their daily life context as North American English. Then the question is, why is it practical to produce it?

If the answers are divided between the two institutions where the participants come from, a great variation is observed. The majority of USACH students - 14 people - disagreed with the statement, and 12 agreed. In the case of UCINF students, there is an obvious difference where 15 people agreed and only 6 disagreed. With this data, a tendency can be clearly seen which describes USACH students as mainly uninterested in producing only RP, while UCINF students give their support to the unique production of RP.

Nevertheless, the focus group helped to shed light on this issue. In the open question: *Is it important to produce other accents in class?* some students mentioned the importance of comprehending other accents, but not producing them. Also confusion between production and comprehension was evident in the students' answers.

Question 14 attempted to gather evidence regarding students' perception of their own accent:

Poblete, J., Gunn, N. y González, X. (Noviembre-Diciembre 2017). The Perception of Accent in Nonnative Speakers of English: A Case of Identity. *Revista Akadèmeia*, 16 (2), 101-127.



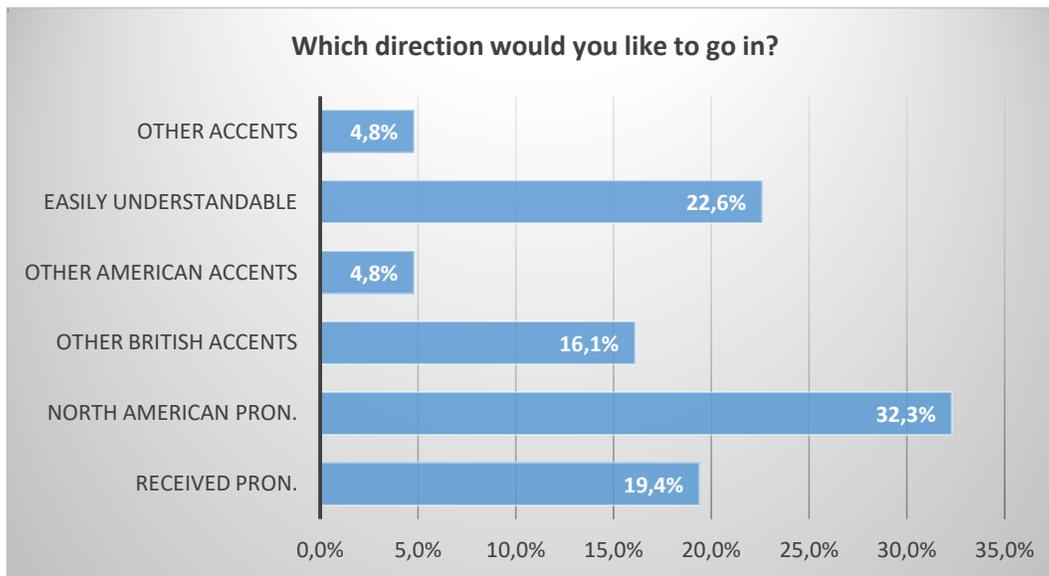
Graph 4: Students' perception regarding their own English accent.

Graph 4 above shows the students' choices regarding 5 different options, however, to make a general comparison, these are grouped into 3 options. It is generally seen that, 61.3% of the students tend to feel *confident* regarding their accent - including the two options *somewhat confident* (51.6%) and *confident* (9.7%) - while approximately a quarter of the students, tend to feel *somewhat insecure* (24.2% plus the option *insecure* 1,6%). These generalized results show that more than half of the students think their accent is not an issue in their language proficiency. On the other hand, around 25% of the students express their insecurity towards their accent. Although we have analyzed their answers we could not find a clear reason for this. Probably, it is linked with their level of self-esteem. Future research could help understand more what self-esteem implies for a language teacher.

In question 15, *Would you like to improve your accent?* only two options were given, and almost all students chose *yes*. 98.4% of the participants expressed interest in improving their accent. The results show great contradiction in this case, due to their responses in the previous question (14) where more than a half of them stated the idea of feeling *somewhat confident* or *confident* regarding their accent (61.3%). A question that was not included was *How would you like to improve your accent?* What do students understand is an action that would help them improve

Poblete, J., Gunn, N. y González, X. (Noviembre-Diciembre 2017). The Perception of Accent in Nonnative Speakers of English: A Case of Identity. *Revista Akadèmeia*, 16 (2), 101-127.

their accent? Is it something that can actually be improved? Question 16 helped to obtain some information in order to elucidate these questions.



Graph 5: Students' preferences concerning accent choice.

If the choices are seen in a general way, that is to say, connecting *Received pronunciation* (19.4%) with *other British accents* (16.1%), the results are that a 35.3% of the students would like to have a 'near-RP' accent. Connecting now the two options *North American pronunciation* (32.3%) with *other American accents* (4.8%), the generalized answer is that a 37.1% of the participants would like to speak with a 'near-GA accent'. After summarizing these options, it can be seen that students follow a similar trend for both RP and GA accents, while only a 22.6% chose the option to sound *easily understandable* and a 4,8% of the students would like to be able to produce *other accents*. Comprehension seems not to be the most important goal for students, but actually to have a native or near-native accent. However, if the answers are seen by institution, that is to say, what USACH students said separately from UCINF students, something else can be concluded. USACH students answered the survey as follows:

- *Near-GA accent*: 7 people
- *Near-RP accent*: 17 people
- *Easily understandable accent*: 9 people

Poblete, J., Gunn, N. y González, X. (Noviembre-Diciembre 2017). The Perception of Accent in Nonnative Speakers of English: A Case of Identity. *Revista Akadèmeia*, 16 (2), 101-127.

This may express their desire for speaking using an RP-related accent mainly. When comparing this view with question 12, a contradiction is clearly seen since USACH students may seem disinterested in producing RP only. In the case of the students at UCINF, they would like to have a/an:

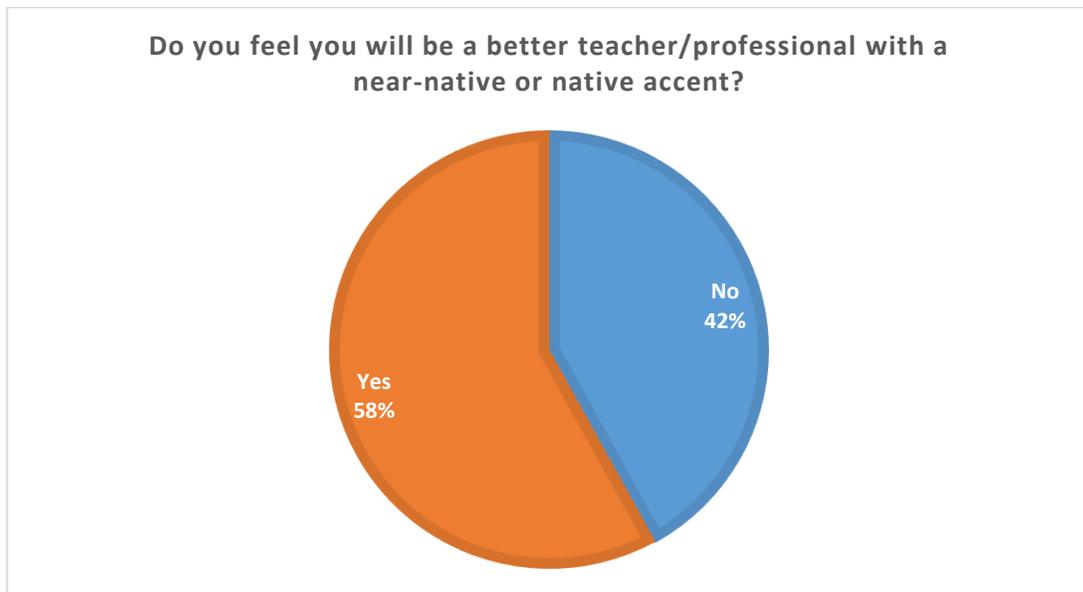
- *Near-GA accent*: 14
- *Near-RP accent*: 4
- *Easily understandable accent*: 4

According to this section of the survey (see *graph 5* above), North American accents are a ‘goal’ for UCINF students, or at least, they would like to follow that model. Although most students selected this choice, in question #12 the majority agreed with the fact that producing only RP is practical. Therefore, incoherence is found once again. One possibility is that the research topic is not actually a matter of discussion for students, and they might have answered this survey without being 100% sure about the concepts used, nor their points of view regarding accents.

3.3 *Self-perception and identity*

Questions 17, 18, 19, 20 and 21 investigated self-perception and identity. Question 19 (see *graph 6* below) stands out as a potential anomaly: 58.1% responded that they would be a *better* professional/teacher with a near native or native accent. This seems on the surface to contradict the replies given to the other four questions. 91.9% of participants said their own accent would not make it difficult to find employment (question 18), 87.1% said their accent had a positive effect on their confidence level or was not relevant to their level of confidence (question 21). 83.9 % felt they were perceived as *competent-somewhat competent* with their current accent level (question 20), while 71% replied that having a non-native teacher or a native teacher was not relevant (question 17).

Poblete, J., Gunn, N. y González, X. (Noviembre-Diciembre 2017). The Perception of Accent in Nonnative Speakers of English: A Case of Identity. *Revista Akadèmeia*, 16 (2), 101-127.



Graph 6: Students' perception related to their accent and their future job as an English teacher.

The focus group discussion shed some light on this oddity. There seemed to be some confusion between *accent* and *intelligibility*. The general consensus was that most wanted to improve their *intelligibility*, but that didn't necessarily mean that their current *accent* was a factor. This initial confusion appeared to have originated from two different sources: First, there was a misunderstanding between *pronunciation* and *listening comprehension*. Most of the focus group indicated that they would like more exposure to a variety of English accents in the classroom setting for practice purposes, but they did not feel it was necessary to be able to produce those variety of accents. Second, and most important, this was the first time they had thought about these issues. It was their *maiden voyage* into the ocean of *reflective practice*. As Thomas SC Farrell has stated repeatedly, *reflective practice* is not only the *mainsail* of a successful career in education, but must be built into the pre-service program in order to enrich the educational experience (Farrell, 2015).

4. Conclusions

Poblete, J., Gunn, N. y González, X. (Noviembre-Diciembre 2017). The Perception of Accent in Nonnative Speakers of English: A Case of Identity. *Revista Akadèmeia*, 16 (2), 101-127.

For most students, accent plays a really important part in shaping who they are and the teachers they will be in the future. As mentioned in the theoretical framework, as soon as you utter a sound, everybody around you will judge you. People will judge you according to the accent you are perceived to have and their perception will be created by the accents they hear. Students judge their teachers, and their classmates as well and label them as competent or incompetent speakers of the language. Teachers also usually judge their own colleagues and students. What about future teachers of English in Chile? Our piece of research intended to provide us with evidence related to what students think about their own accents, also about their own reflection on their learning experience and the suggestions and changes they would like to see in their teaching programs.

Changes in different areas such as the teaching of pronunciation, for instance, their answers show us that most students are exposed to mostly North American English outside the classroom, so why do some teachers continue to expose and to force students to produce only one variety inside the classroom? The answer, as theory tells us, can be understood as following a “tradition”, teaching an “iconic” model, but do teachers and students reflect on this issue inside the classroom? Do students have an opinion on this matter? Can they choose a particular model? The research team really believes that providing or showing a particular model is completely necessary and that will depend on the teacher or on the head of the department, but students need to have a say in this, especially regarding the variety they feel most comfortable with. The model chosen, whatever that is, should be the only attainable goal. In our opinion, intelligibility and consistency should be the ultimate goals (not producing a specific variety) that is why we think that students should be allowed to find their own voice and accent. We, as teachers, should not focus so much on our students’ accents but on their ability to communicate with others.

The written survey sheds light on key issues such as the contact that students have with native speakers of English (most students stated they never communicate with native speakers) and the solution for this issue can be found online: Internet gives us the opportunity to be exposed to an

Poblete, J., Gunn, N. y González, X. (Noviembre-Diciembre 2017). The Perception of Accent in Nonnative Speakers of English: A Case of Identity. *Revista Akadèmeia*, 16 (2), 101-127.

enormous range of accents of English and also speakers of English as a first, second or foreign language. Similarly, students stated that they would like to have “a native speaker accent” (30.6%), “a near-native accent” (32.3%) and “an easily understandable accent” (37.1%), which may indicate that students have not reflected on this issue specifically, perhaps they have never asked themselves the type of accent they would like to have or maybe nobody has actually asked that question before. That is why we think that reflective practice needs to be included in their pre-service education: both teachers and students need to reflect on what takes place inside the university classroom and in the classrooms of future teachers (Farrell, 2015).

After analyzing both the responses to the written survey and in the focus group, one of the most telling pieces of evidence we could find was the fact that students tend to be exposed to mainly RP or British English inside the classroom. However, when students answered the following question regarding the English variety they were exposed to outside the classroom, the evidence they provided gave us a completely different perspective to understand the importance of reflecting about the way we teach English and also the input we provide our students in class and also about the relevance of questioning the contents we teach and the materials we use in class (almost 70% of the students are exposed to North American English outside the classroom). Thus, this issue sheds light on the necessity of having a consistent university program in terms of the model that will be implemented in the classroom, for instance, considering students' interests, the teacher's ability to understand the importance of intelligibility rather than focusing on the production of a specific variety. This would require questioning, revising and modifying the phonetics syllabus and the way pronunciation is taught and assessed.

When we teach vocabulary and spelling, teachers usually expose students to as many varieties as possible, or at least the ones that the teacher knows, for instance: CONtroversy or conTROversy. Teachers should also be able to carry out the same process when teaching pronunciation, then students should be given the opportunity to choose the one they can produce more easily or the

Poblete, J., Gunn, N. y González, X. (Noviembre-Diciembre 2017). The Perception of Accent in Nonnative Speakers of English: A Case of Identity. *Revista Akadèmeia*, 16 (2), 101-127.

option they find more feasible to pronounce. The teacher should not penalize the students who are not able to produce the variety he or she is teaching in class. What should we do if the teacher cannot produce the variety he or she is promoting 100% accurately?

Following this trend, international English tests such as TOEFL, IELTS and Cambridge Examinations have also changed the way they assess oral skills. After analyzing their speaking rubrics, we can state that all of them evaluate intelligibility rather than assessing students' accents. Therefore, we should follow and foster similar evaluation practices in the classroom and also the way pre-service methodology programs teach the assessment and development of oral skills.

According to the survey, when giving students options to refine their current accent, a large part of them expressed an interest for producing either British or American sounds, instead of being easily intelligible. The objective of pretending to sound like a foreigner might be a tendency in students due to their desire for superiority related to other cultures, which is a present in the Chilean socially stratified society. Another possibility is that as teachers of English, we are always judged, and the interviewees who lack experience in teaching, may wish to 'impress' when they speak, making an effort to follow certain patterns, for instance: RP or GA, or in some cases 'fake' an accent or simply overdo it which may lead to sound completely unnatural. This false pretense is mainly based on the way students sound, so their language proficiency perception is mainly focused on accents but not on the quality of their grammar or their vocabulary production.

The reign of the native speaker has thankfully begun to fall into the realm of mythology. It's now the *stuff of legend*, and has no real value either theoretically or practically in 21st century academic research or in the classroom. The labels *Native Speaker* and *Non-native Speaker* of

Poblete, J., Gunn, N. y González, X. (Noviembre-Diciembre 2017). The Perception of Accent in Nonnative Speakers of English: A Case of Identity. *Revista Akadèmeia*, 16 (2), 101-127.

English should be permanently cut from the fabric of language acquisition and discarded. The superiority of the Native speaker of English is firmly entrenched in the camp of *perception*, and it has no basis in *reality*. These are antiquated terms whose time has finally come. The sad fact that these designations persist in the lexicon of language instruction, only functions as an excuse for prejudicial exclusion, for false advertising, and for publicly displaying ignorance.

The perception of accent differs greatly from the reality of accent. Outdated beliefs that only native speakers can instruct the language correctly, that only one or two types of pronunciation are acceptable and that those who cannot attain these lofty levels are unfit to teach still permeates the culture of education in Chile. The reality demands that competency in the four skills of the target language and refined pedagogical skills are the only criterion necessary for success. This shearing of perception and reality will initially have some detrimental effects on teacher identity, as non-native speakers continue to be excluded from job opportunities. Once these outdated beliefs are cleansed from the system, the purified remains will become the new reality of teacher of English, with the terms, *native* and *non-native* washed away.

Some considerations and suggestions for future projects include to gather evidence in terms of students' attitudes towards listening to different English accents, students' perception of real classroom experiences in terms of learning pronunciation. Also, it would be interesting to interview experienced teachers to hear about the way they teach pronunciation, the way they encourage reflection in their classroom and if they reflect on the way they teach and finally, it would be useful to carry out research on how to teach and include different pronunciation models.

Poblete, J., Gunn, N. y González, X. (Noviembre-Diciembre 2017). The Perception of Accent in Nonnative Speakers of English: A Case of Identity. *Revista Akadèmeia*, 16 (2), 101-127.

References

- Accent [Def. 1]. (n.d.). Cambridge Dictionary Online. In Cambridge Dictionary. Retrieved December 15, 2016, from <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/accent>.
- Beinhoff, B. (2013). Perceiving Identity Through Accent: Attitudes Towards Non-Native Speakers & Their Accents in English. *Contemporary Studies in Descriptive Linguistics* 35, 01-300.
- Boberg, C. (2015). 13. North American English. In Levi, J. & M. Reed (eds.), *The Handbook of English Pronunciation* (229-234). Chichester: Wiley Blackwell.
- Braine, G. (2010). *Non-native Speaker English Teachers: Research, Pedagogy & Professional Growth*. New York: Routledge.
- Cambridge English: First (2015) Handbooks for Teachers for Exams from 2015 Cambridge: Cambridge English Language Assessment.
- Farrell, T. (2015). *Promoting Teacher Reflection in Second Language Education: A Framework for TESOL professionals*. New York: Routledge.
- Glas, K. (2013). *Teaching English in Chile: A Study of Teacher Perceptions of their Professional Identity, Student Motivation & Pertinent Learning Contents*. Frankfurt: Peter Lang GmbH.
- Identity [Def. 2]. (n.d.). Oxford Learner's Dictionary Online. Retrieved December 3, 2016, from <http://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/us/definition/english/identity>.
- Lee, JJ (2005). The Native Speaker: An Achievable Model? *Asian EFL Journal* 7(2) 1-12.
- Levi, J. & M. Reed (ed) (2015) *The Handbook of English Pronunciation*. Chichester: Wiley Blackwell.
- Lippi-Green, R. (1997) *English with an Accent: Language, Ideology & Discrimination* New York: Routledge
- Medgyes, P. (1992). Native or non-native: who's worth more?. *ELT Journal*, 46 (4), 340-349.

Poblete, J., Gunn, N. y González, X. (Noviembre-Diciembre 2017). The Perception of Accent in Nonnative Speakers of English: A Case of Identity. *Revista Akadèmeia*, 16 (2), 101-127.

Ministerio de Educación, Gobierno de Chile. (2008). *Marco para la Buena Enseñanza*. Retrieved from Mineduc's website: <http://portales.mineduc.cl/usuarios/cpeip/File/Documentos%202011/MBE2008.pdf>

Native Speaker [Def. 1]. (n.d.). Cambridge Dictionary Online. In Cambridge Dictionary. Retrieved December 7, 2016, from <http://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/native-speaker>.

Native Speaker [Def. 1]. (n.d.). Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English Online. In Longman Dictionaries. Retrieved December 6, 2016, from <https://www.ldoceonline.com/dictionary/native-speaker>.

Native Speaker [Def. 1]. (n.d.). Oxford Dictionary Online. In Oxford Living Dictionaries. Retrieved December 6, 2016, from https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/native_speaker.

Shakouri, E & M. (2014) On the Death of Native Speaker: A Revisiting Stance. *International Journal of Educational Investigations* 1(1), 220-226.

Upton, C. (2015). 14. British English. In Levi, J. & M. Reed (eds.), *The Handbook of English Pronunciation* (251-254). Chichester: Wiley Blackwell.