

# **Impact Of Accented Speech On The Credibility Of International Exchange Courses; Challenges For Exchanging Knowledge And Experience In The Erasmus + Program**

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**Abstract-** Rotterdam University of Applied Science (RUAS) and Sultan Agung Islamic University (UNISSULA) have established a professional exchange program, stimulating staff mobility and student mobility. While these exchanges have enriched our educational program, students report difficulty with processing information from the non-native English speaking lecturers. Speakers with a (heavy) accent are sometimes perceived as part of an out-group. Even without prejudice about out-group members, this has a negative impact on the credibility of the received information. The influence of accent on credibility poses a challenge on our exchange program, both for students and lecturers. In this article, several suggestions to a different approach are mentioned. First of all, the credibility challenge needs to be recognized. Furthermore, a program and framework for intercultural competence could provide students with tools to improve communication and cooperation. Lastly, students may demonstrate a more positive attitude and affect when listening to friends, compared to lecturers. The opportunities for student mobility should be maximized. This article explores the impact of accented speech and the challenges this presents to the exchange program of RUAS and UNISSULA, and gives suggestions to improve the benefits from student mobility and staff mobility.

**Keywords:** education, international exchange, accented speech

## **1. Introduction**

While lecturers of Rotterdam University of Applied Sciences (RUAS, located in Rotterdam, The Netherlands) and Sultan Agung Islamic University (UNISSULA, located in Semarang, Indonesia) have been exchanging knowledge and experience over the past two years, questions about reaching the maximum student potential in our international courses have not yet been answered. Different didactical characteristics and pedagogical approaches are part of our dialogue, taking into account the intercultural context of problem based learning and self-directed learning in our universities. Still, in course evaluations students declare to experience difficulty with processing information and with distinguishing main issues from subsidiary evidence. This article will explore the impact of accented speech by non-native speakers of English in the international courses of RUAS and UNISSULA.

## **2. Facts and figures**

In 2015, the city of Rotterdam counted about 624,000 inhabitants and around 170 different nationalities, as shown in Table 1. Rotterdam, Population (Buurtmonitor, 2015). Most students of the School of Built Environment are native speakers of Dutch, although several other languages are common.

For students from RUAS, Dutch is the main language of communication in lectures, tests and assignments. Undergraduate students of Water Management, Civil Engineering and Urban Planning are offered one or two courses in Technical English or Business English with an estimated average of 2-4 ECTS (Hogeschoolgids IGO, 2016).

## **3. Evaluation of Processing Fluency of a Multidisciplinary Project**

In the final semester of college year 2016-2017 students of Civil Engineering, Urban Planning and Water Management have been working on a multidisciplinary project to create a 'Flood Height Communication Platform'. With this platform the students wish to contrive a sustainable directory to exchange GIS-content, tutorials and instructions on several digital information systems that are beneficial to communities facing the challenges of flooding in Semarang and Pekalongan.

In the same semester, lecturers of RUAS and UNISSULA interchanged universities and faculties for two weeks. RUAS invited lecturers from Semarang to instruct students from the School of Built Environment in the period of March 20th until the 26th. UNISSULA welcomed lecturers from Rotterdam to the faculties of Industry, Economy and Engineering between April 17th and the 21st.

Throughout the visit of lecturers of UNISSULA in Rotterdam, students attended a stadium general about the construction of the Polder Banger and participated in an interactive class about local innovations on sustainable waste treatment and micro business. They interviewed the key-note speakers to obtain information on both local communication practices and to collect specific geographical data (Figure 1).

Afterwards, students mentioned several concerns considering the class in general and the interpretation of the received information. They reported difficulty with processing information, distinguishing main issues from subsidiary evidence, and they questioned the relevance of received data. The difficulty of understanding each speaker was part of this evaluation. Students evaluated their working knowledge of English as 'good' and their knowledge of Academic English as 'intermediate'. Difficulty of understanding each speaker is reported to be the result of accented speech of non-native speakers (School of Built Environment, 2017).

## **4. Credibility of non-native speech**

According to Lev-Ari & Keysar (2010) most non-native speakers seem less credible to the audience, since their accent is being used as a signal that the speaker is part of an out-group. Stereotypes of outsiders may subsequently impact credibility of the speaker (Dixon, Mahoney, & Cocks, 2002). Additionally, lecturers with a mild of heavy accent may be more difficult to understand. This contributes to a negative impact on the 'processing fluency' (Lev-Ari & Keysar, 2010). In a study on the credibility of non-native speech, Lev-Ari & Keyser (2010) state that information that is easier to process, will

sound more familiar and even more truthful. In a second experiment they conducted, they showed that native speakers rated heavily accented statements as less truthful than statements made by native speakers or speakers with a mild accent (*Figure 2*). They concluded: *“We showed that people perceived statements as less truthful when spoken by non-native speakers. When people listen to accented speech, the difficulty they encounter reduces ‘processing fluency’. But instead of perceiving the statements as more difficult to understand, they perceive them as less truthful. Consequently, non-native speakers who have an accent are seen as less credible. This is true even when prejudice against foreigners could not play a role”* (Lev-Ari & Keysar, 2010).

Since processing fluency in general impacts credibility of statements, designers for exchange programs may also benefit from the result of the study of Reber, Winkielman & Schwarz (1998). From their study ‘Effects of perceptual Fluency on affective judgements’ several conclusions could be adapted to everyday use in a classroom. For instance, pictures with a high contrast are liked better and increases processing fluency. Likewise, presenting an object or picture for a longer period of time induces perceptual fluency increase (Reber, Winkielman, & Schwarz, 1998). They even researched the effect of the color of the font on the reliability of statements. Small adjustments in presentations could improve processing fluency, and therefore the attitude of the students towards the credibility of the provided information.

Although minor adjustments to a presentation may have a positive influence on the attitude of a student towards a lecturer and the provided data, for a non-native speaker the matter of accented speech is of more significant importance. Numerous studies have examined the response of students towards accented English. In ‘Attitudinal and affective response toward accented English’, Bresnahan et al. (2002) sum up a few conclusions from relevant research on this matter. As Rounds (1987) described: *“Students often complain to their parents and to university administrators about having to take courses with foreign teachers whom they find difficult to understand”* (pp.643-644). Likewise, Ruben & Smith (1990) published a study in which 40% of their undergraduate sample reported to avoid classes taught by foreign teaching assistants (Bresnahan, Ohashi, Nebashi, Liu, & Shearman, 2002). Results from Bresnahan et al. (2002) confirmed that more intelligible foreign accent was also considered more positively both for attitude and affect compared to less intelligible foreign accent. Furthermore, a more positive attitude and affect was reported when participants were listening to friends compared to teaching assistants. They conclude: *“The data obtained in this study were consistent with the claim that intelligibility, role identity and strength of ethnic identity are key issues in receptivity to accent”*.

According to the studies mentioned above, accented speech potentially has a negative impact on attitudinal and affective response of students. Accent is used as a signal that the speaker is part of an out-group and statements made by a speaker with a heavy accent are perceived as less truthful. Minor adjustments to enhance processing fluency may have a positive effect on the perceived credibility of presented data. This presents a significant challenge to the lecturers of the Erasmus + exchange program.

## 5. Maximizing Opportunities

Students, lecturers and trainers from RUAS and UNISSULA have been exchanging knowledge and skills on several occasions in the past two years. With input from different cultural backgrounds, several academic disciplines, and multifarious educational methods, these exchanges have enriched our classrooms with new insights and innovations. With real assignments from authentic organizations and entrepreneurs, students develop ideas and appliances that are relevant and applicable and hopefully enhance the resiliency of our cities. However, considering the challenges non-native speakers of English face, by what means could we improve our exchange program and maximize the benefits of student mobility and staff mobility?

A first step could be to recognize the challenges as explored in this article. Students may not only perceive the lecturers from the opposite University as more difficult to understand, but may also view data as less credible (Lev-Ari & Keysar, 2010) According to their study, this is especially hard to overcome when speakers have a heavy accent.

Social theory also confirms that people prefer language that is associated with their in-group (Bresnahan, Ohashi, Nebashi, Liu, & Shearman, 2002). “*Accent conjures up stereotypes about outsiders, which promotes prejudice that could impact the credibility of the speaker*” according to Lev-Ari (2010). This is especially plausible with students with not only different native tongue, but also from various cultural, social and religious background. Raising awareness on the effect of accented speech on credibility is therefore a good start for our education program.

Furthermore, emphasis on cross cultural cooperation could contribute to our exchange program in seemingly unexpected ways. To provide students with accurate information on cultural dimensions, with various tools to improve communication and cooperation, could not only enhance mutual understanding but also add to the quality of their products and performance. The exchange program would benefit from the development of a program and a framework for intercultural competence (Catteuw, 2012), this could also intercede staff mobility.

Lastly, with reference to the study of Bresnahan et al. (2002), students may demonstrate a more positive attitude and affect when listening to friends compared to lecturers. RUAS and UNISSULA should maximize the opportunities for student mobility in order for students not only to learn from each other, but to experience a working environment that creates awareness of intercultural challenges and possibilities. Learning together, establishing a working relationship and friendship will correspondingly increase the credibility of other non-native speakers.

## 6. Conclusion

Rotterdam University of Applied Science and Sultan Agung Islamic University have established a professional exchange program, stimulating staff mobility and student mobility. While these exchanges have enriched our educational program and provided entrepreneurs and organizations with beneficial products and information, students report difficulty with processing information from the non-native English speaking lecturers.

Speakers with a (heavy) accent are sometimes perceived as part of an out-group. Even without prejudice about out-group members, this has a negative impact on the

credibility of the received information. The influence of accent on credibility poses a challenge on our exchange program, both for students and lecturers.

Raising awareness on this effect of accented speech may be the first step to improve educational exchange. To be able to work in our globalizing world where millions of people are non-native speakers of the language they use daily, we should provide students with the tools and techniques to communicate and cooperate in a cross cultural setting. The development of a program and framework for intercultural competence is a necessary step to improve our educational program. Also, giving students the opportunity to work, experience and hang out together, is more than just fun. It may change their response toward accented English, and influence the credibility of received statements and data.

Therefore, it is recommended that RUAS and UNISSULA put more emphasis to increasing student mobility. International courses should be implemented with students from both universities. A program and framework for intercultural competency could be developed simultaneously with other educational programs of the Erasmus + Program.

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