

Speaking with a foreign accent: Developed strategies of East Asian international students in Australian higher education*

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Park, Eunjae, Helen Klieve, Steven Hodge, and Christopher Klopper. 2020. **Speaking with a foreign accent: Developed strategies of East Asian international students in Australian higher education.** *Linguistic Research* 37(Special Edition): 59-88. This study investigates strategies developed by East Asian international students to cope with the communication barriers caused by accented English. While these students encounter a range of communication barriers caused by accented English, research investigating how these students mitigate the challenges to successfully complete their studies has been limited. Using a qualitative survey approach, this study presents findings from responses from 306 East Asian students to the question “What would be the three top tips that you would give to new international students to be better understood by others and why?” The students, originally from English as foreign language countries (EFL) located in both Northeast and Southeast Asian regions, at one Australian university. In this survey research, two main types of strategies were identified: (a) verbal strategies and (b) non-verbal strategies. The first theme concentrates on enhancing the ability to produce intelligible sounds. The second theme emphasises behaviours or self-discipline in attempting to improve overall speaking fluency. Practical implications are considered for these students’ intercultural communication and learning support. (Griffith University · Griffith College)

Keywords Communication barriers, accented English, coping strategies, East Asian students

1. Introduction

Each year, more than five million students are estimated to undertake their tertiary education outside their home countries (OECD 2016). Australia currently

* The authors would like to express their sincere gratitude to the anonymous reviewers for their useful comments.

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ranks third after the United States (US) and the United Kingdom (UK) in attractiveness as a global study destination for international students (OECD 2016). The number of international students in Australian higher education has substantially increased over the past two decades, from 52,897 in 1997 to 350,472 in 2017 (Australian Government 2018). Students from East Asia, both Northeast and Southeast Asian regions, have consistently accounted for the largest international student population in Australia. For many students who are from countries where English is spoken as a foreign language, the successful completion of their degree is as crucial as achieving adequate language proficiency in English.

The rapid growth in international students has been accompanied by an increase in the debate on problems these students face in both formal study and adapting to a different cultural environment. Sawir et al. (2012) asserted that Australia, along with other English-speaking countries, provides cross-border education on a commercial basis to increase revenues. The market-driven approach in higher education has resulted in adopting a low threshold for language entry requirements for second language (L2) students, often recruiting academically less prepared students, possibly leading to greater challenges in campus environments. The International English Language Testing System (IELTS) is widely used to evaluate L2 students' readiness for their future study in Australian institutions; however, while language proficiency is vital for L2 students' academic success and social functioning, it does not guarantee their social and academic success.

When international students elect to study in Anglophone countries, they are frequently labelled as non-native English speakers defined in language contexts in which one language is dominant and where accent is a crucial indicator of difference (Kettle 2013). L2 students' accent and style of speech can be less valued or even disparaged, often resulting in weaker positions in academic settings (Kayaalp 2016). First language students (L1) are positioned as a 'superior' or 'dominant' group, whereas L2 students are regarded as 'inferior' or 'minority' group (Kayaalp 2016). Accents are conceptually distinct from language proficiency, which indicates how competent a person is with a language (Cook 1999). Nevertheless, accents have been blamed for miscommunication, and can be a potential trigger for stereotyping, racism, and other types of discrimination

(Derwing and Munro 2009).

Significant gaps were identified in the literature regarding L2 students' study experience related to accented English. A growing body of studies have confirmed that L2 students have to deal with accent-associated challenges at two levels: (a) their accent and that of their interlocutor, potentially resulting in communication barriers and (b) perceived accent stereotypes and discrimination (Hanassab 2006; Kettle 2013; Munro and Derwing, 1999; Sawir et al. 2012; Park 2016). These challenges can limit meaningful interactions with their faculty members and peers and the development of interpersonal relationships with them. While transition into a foreign university can be even harder for students who have to face discriminatory experiences, many L2 students are able to manage their academic and social life in Australia to complete their studies. Nevertheless, little empirical research has dealt with how these students coped with the challenges caused by accented English.

This paper reports findings from a larger quantitative study focussed on a wide range of accent-associated challenges contributing to the East Asian students' higher education experience and how they mitigated these focussing on the coping strategies developed by the students to mitigate communication barriers associated with their accent. Empirical data are drawn from a survey with 306 East Asian students enrolled at an Australian university. The identification of appropriate coping strategies can be useful to guide and assist future L2 students and facilitate the students' and hosts' enhanced intercultural communication that in turn may increase their satisfaction with the study experience.

2. Communication barriers caused by accented English

Most L2 student, who began learning their L2 after puberty in a second language environment, have a perceptible foreign accent due to the phonological variations of their L1 transferred to L2 (Kettle 2013). While there is not agreement in the literature regarding whether adult L2 speakers can achieve a near-native accent, the immutability of accentedness is apparent, in almost all cases, after a critical period (after puberty), which means near-native mastery of

phonology is difficult to accomplish (Kettle 2013; Oh 2019). Therefore, as commonly seen, proficient L2 speakers preserve the phonological features of their L1 (Munro and Derwing 1995). And while having an accent does not inevitably impinge on communication, some difficulties do appear to occur from time to time (Derwing and Munro 2009).

Challenges caused by accented English have been a recurrent theme in higher education research for more than a decade (Hanassab 2006; Hellstén and Prescott 2004; Houshmand et al. 2014; Khawaja and Stallman 2011; Malau-Aduli 2011; Sawir et al. 2012). There are, however, very few studies in the literature assessing accent-specific issues, and to our knowledge, only two studies to date addressing accentedness alone (e.g., Kettle 2013; Park 2016). According to earlier research, because some English phonemes do not exist in Asian languages and have different intonations and stresses, Chinese and Korean L2 students find it particularly difficult to differentiate between /l/ and /r/; consequently, they frequently mispronounce “light” and “right” (Park 2016). In a similar vein, Japanese L2 students struggle with pronouncing and differentiating segmental (sound) phonemes such as /r/, /l/, /th/ and /s/. For example, the differentiation between “work” and “walk” is challenging (Yanagi and Baker 2016). Therefore, such segmental difficulties L2 students encounter with prosodic features (e.g., intonation and word/sentence stress) can result in heavily accented English. This can cause difficulties for the students in making themselves understood by others.

Speech intelligibility (i.e., understandability of speech) and comprehensibility (i.e., the listener’s ability to understand a speaker’s message) are linked with L2 anxiety and reticence, particularly with L1 speakers (Horwitz 2001; Munro et al; Tsui 1996). Previous research confirmed that some L2 students’ lack of verbal participation and unwillingness to communicate derived from the fear of speaking with an accent that is different from L1 speakers. L2 students with overall IELTS scores of 6.5 and 7 at Australian universities expressed concerns and anxiety related to their accent, leading to low participation in speech-related learning activities (Park 2016). Furthermore, highly proficient L2 students who achieved an overall IELTS score of 7.5 also expressed feelings of inferiority about their accent, and indicated that this concern was; for example, behind limited participation in discussions in seminars (Sawir et al. 2012). Hellstén and Prescott

(2004) pinpointed that self-consciousness can be a factor affecting their participation in academic activities, with L2 students often reluctant to pronounce English words in front of L1 speakers because they may have a fear of negative evaluation from L1 speakers. Thus, accented English is one area of anxiety with students' fear of intelligibility potentially hindering their academic performances.

L2 students who speak and sound differently from the dominant L1 group are not necessarily academically weak. However, L2 students' accent serves as an immediate cue that they do not belong to the dominant L1 group, eliciting stereotypes about certain characteristics related to the students' ethnic group (Park 2016). This phenomenon has affected the evaluation of L2 students in classroom settings. Research has revealed that L2 students can be judged as low in intelligence (competence) and not socially attractive, especially when the accent is strong from the listeners' perspectives (Wang et al. 2017). Eisenchlas and Tsurutani (2011) argued that L2 students can be offered fewer opportunities to fully participate in classroom activities due to academics' different expectations as to L2 students' academic ability. Therefore, whether it is inadvertent, L2 students feel that they are marked down in speech-based assessment and excluded in classroom settings (Park 2016).

Meaningful interactions with L1 students can help L2 students improve their communication skills and make the successful transitions to new academic settings. Nevertheless, communication barriers, perceived stereotypes, and discrimination may contribute to reducing the chances of intercultural communication between L1 and L2 students. According to Kettle (2013), one problem can be with task grouping; for example, some L1 students refused to allow L2 students to join in a study group. Moreover, L2 students may feel that L1 students are not interested in them, and do not appreciate their effort in making contact, or indicate unwillingness to keep the contact (Sawir et al. 2012). One possible explanation is the pre-existing stereotypes that are undesirably associated with L2 students' ability and intelligence (Kettle 2013). Thus, many L2 students seek interactions within co-national or culturally similar groups, with this reluctance to leave the confines of the mono- or similar-ethnic groups becoming a common phenomenon, which can hinder academic and social transitions into the university settings. In particular, Asian students, more than

other cohorts, are vulnerable to issues of stereotypes and discrimination by L1 speakers (Hanassab 2006; Houshmand et al. 2014). Indeed, as Lippi-Green (2012) asserted, accent discrimination is frequently associated with race.

To recapitulate, understanding L2 students' spoken language sometimes requires additional effort from the listener. Not only can the pre-existing stereotypes produce feelings of not comprehending L2 students, but also subjective experiences of difficulties in comprehending L2 students facilitate more adverse responses to the communication as well as to the students. Given the influence of L2 accents on both speakers and listeners and the substantial social communicative consequences in the dominant language context, L2 students' experienced accent stereotypes and discrimination are inextricably tied to communication.

2.1 Coping with communication barriers

Another issue is the campus climate may not be always favourable to L2 students, yet many students manage their social and academic life on campus. While there exists a great number of research studies on coping with the wide range of challenges encountered by L2 international students including accents (e.g., Houshmand et al. 2014; Khawaja and Stallman 2011; Malau-Aduli 2011), to our knowledge, only one quantitative study investigated coping strategies in response to communication barriers caused by accented English (Park et al. 2017). Hence, it is less clear how L2 East Asian students mitigated the challenges. Considering the negative social and academic influence of accent stereotypes and discrimination, scholars have called for empirical examinations of coping responses as an essential and necessary extension of the literature (Park et al. 2017).

Accented English has been typically addressed either as a part of broad language barriers or racial and ethnic discrimination faced by L2 students. A qualitative study conducted by Khawaja and Stallman (2011) identified that L2 students in Australian institutions deployed and proposed mastering English language proficiency before arrival in a host country and learning formal and informal English through social interactions as a coping strategy. A mixed

method study by Malau-Aduli (2011) found that Asian Medical students at an Australian university sought translation help from L1 peers when they faced comprehension barriers due to the lecturer's accent. Houshmand et al. (2014), in a qualitative study, investigated Asian L2 students' coping response to racial microaggressions. They revealed that for those who were "ridiculed for accents" during their presentations, withdrawing from academic spheres as well as seeking counselling were considered as the last option for the students. This stress can lead to somewhat unrealistic pressure with Kayaalp (2016) identifying in one study that Turkish migrant youth in Canada believed that achieving a native-like accent as a desirable strategy for their social and academic integration into their learning environments.

Much of the initial research in this area has relied on qualitative methods capturing the views of small numbers of students. It is significant to note that qualitative methods, albeit its advantages, are not free from limitations, with difficulties in generalising from these findings. In a recent small mixed methods study, Park (2016) adopted a survey approach to provide further insight into the students' coping strategies in response to the challenges caused by their accent. Using descriptive statistics, she revealed that contrasting views on favoured strategies and their effectiveness. The most popular strategies were self-repetition, followed by paraphrasing, whereas the most effective strategies were accurate pronunciation, followed by paraphrasing. While these findings have added to understanding of this issue, there remain limitations, where data collected through close-ended questions may have restricted full expressions and opinions of the surveyed students. Considering the limitations of previous studies, there remains a need for future research to better access the insights of students around experiences of accentedness.

The current study has applied an exploratory survey research approach to scrutinise how L2 East Asian students coped with communication barriers caused by their accent. It is hoped that the findings will contribute to the current literature on intercultural education by providing more in-depth understanding of coping strategies of L2 students, which they have gained through their life experiences. Further, understanding their strategies may provide insights that can assist faculty and staff members to better facilitate transition of new international students into Australian universities.

3. Methods

3.1 Participants and settings

This study targeted full time onshore East Asian international students (both from Northeast and Southeast Asia) enrolled at one Australian university. This university has over 46,000 students enrolled for undergraduate and postgraduate programmes across diverse disciplines. The selected university is one of the most popular study destinations for international students in Queensland.

Two selection criteria were used for participant inclusion: (a) L2 East Asian students from EFL countries (e.g., China, Korea, Vietnam) and (b) those who began learning English after puberty in an L2 environment. Students from countries where English is spoken as an official second language (ESL) such as Malaysia and Singapore were excluded from this study. These ESL countries are culturally and linguistically pluralistic with local varieties of English are generally deemed as an acceptable model. This differs markedly from EFL countries where English does not play a crucial role in their daily conversations with English rarely spoken outside classrooms with learning often restricted to a native variety of English. As Tokumoto and Shibata (2011) found, ESL university students had more positive views and beliefs regarding their accented English than EFL students. Therefore, participants in this study were limited to L2 students from EFL countries. In addition, since age of learning (AOL), not length of residence (LOR) matters in determining the degree of accentedness, considering the argument of Patkowski (1990) and Munro and Derwing (2011), the critical period of L2 speech learning was taken into account for this study, demarcating this at the age of 15.

3.2 Survey instrument

Given the specific objectives of this study with the focus on accent-associated challenges faced by L2 students, a survey was developed based on previous literature, with the initial draft piloted with nine East Asian students, with the final survey modified from their feedback. The survey consisted of 26 questions across four major areas: (a) demographics, (b) background using English, (c)

social and academic communication barriers on campus, and (d) campus climate: perceived stereotypes and linguistic discrimination. A combination of close-ended and open-ended questions were designed. In the first section, students were asked to report their gender, age, nationality, length of residence, and level of education. In the following section, students were requested to indicate their language test results (e.g., IELTS) and rate their accent strength, speaking and listening skills with a 5-point Likert scale (e.g., none to very strong and poor to excellent). In the third section, they were asked to report their communication barriers with a 5-point Likert scale (e.g., no difficulty to extreme difficulty and never to very often). In the last section, perceived stereotypes and discrimination and its impact on their social and academic life on campus were measured through a 5-point Likert scale, asking students for their extent of agreement/disagreement, no difficulty/extreme difficulty, and never/very often. To capture rich explanatory information, under each section, students were requested to provide short written answers regarding how they managed barriers and also the assistance was being offered from the university to mitigate these challenges.

This study reports data from the open-ended question “What would be the three top tips that you would give to new international students to be better understood by others, and why?” This was because no published information existed that outlined the actual criteria in predetermining response areas. Students were encouraged to answer more than three. Asking up to three strategies was to stimulate more responses from them because they may end up providing one or no strategy.

3.3 Procedure

Prior to commencement of data collection, ethical clearance was approved by the university’s Human Ethics Committee (GU: 2018/159). An online survey can be time- and cost-effective, yet it is unlikely to achieve a response rate better than a paper-based survey (Cohen et al. 2018). Hence, this study used both an online survey and a paper-based survey to increase the response rate.

3.4 Sampling

Recruitment was conducted over a seven-week period at the selected university. A combination of purposeful and snowballing sampling techniques was used to target L2 East Asian students from EFL countries as defined in the pre-selected criteria. The researcher contacted potential students and asked them to recommend the survey to their peers. To ensure a sufficient number of responses, research posters and flyers with the survey QR code were used. Students were able to choose either the online or paper-based surveys. For those who wished to complete the online survey, invitations were sent via email, alternatively, the flyers were provided. The survey was advertised on Facebook pages of East Asian student associations located at the university. With the consent of the university's English language institute, the posters and flyers were located at the English help service for undergraduate and postgraduate students. Further, flyers were distributed to East Asian students who attended pronunciation seminars.

3.5 Data analysis

A total of 336 initial responses were obtained. Following a data cleaning process, with the elimination of cases with high missing values (10% or above) eliminated, 306 remaining cases were used in the analysis. With regard to the open response under consideration, 225 of the participants (74%) provided detail on this issue. Thematic analysis was conducted on these responses to the question with the support of the software programme NVivo (v12). NVivo helped in managing and analysing the qualitative survey data by facilitating the organisation, coding, and connectedness of information obtained. In accordance with the six-step procedure described by Braun et al. (2019), qualitative survey data were read several times to become familiar with the data. A total of 20 codes were then developed by stressing relevant quotes regarding key areas of interest. These codes were clustered into themes based on similarities, differences, and frequencies across the dataset. Some themes were discarded because of insufficiency and irrelevance to the research question. Themes were

refined and merged with two overarching themes remaining in the end. A further dimension in the thematic analysis was introduced by classifying themes against the self-reported speaking skills—an area from the broader study where significant differences were found. The data were organised into four groups based on the self-reported speaking skills.

4. Results

4.1 Participants

Descriptive statistics such as frequency and percentages were used to describe demographic characteristics of the students. Responses from 306 students are used in the analysis, with the background of these students summarised in Table 1.

Table 1. Characteristics of students who completed the survey (N = 306)

Variable	Values	Frequency	%
Gender	Female	159	52.0
	Male	147	48.0
	Total	306	
Age in groups	20~24	204	66.7
	25~30	65	21.2
	30~34	29	9.5
	35~39	7	2.3
	40+	1	0.3
	Total	306	
Nationality	China	169	55.2
	Japan	42	13.7
	South Korea	29	9.5
	Vietnam	21	6.9
	Taiwan	18	5.9
	Thailand	14	4.6
	Indonesia	10	3.3
	Macau	3	1.0
	Total	306	

Length of residence in Australia	Less than a year	96	31.4
	1~2 years	68	22.2
	2~3 years	63	20.6
	3~4 years	47	15.4
	5+	32	10.5
Total		306	
Level of education	Bachelor's degree	181	59.2
	Master's degree	86	28.1
	Doctoral degree	16	5.2
	Others (Grad Dip or Grad Cert)	23	7.5
Total		306	

The student group was balanced in terms of gender, with 159 females (52%) and 147 males (48%). This study included students from eight East Asian countries with the largest number of students from China ($n = 169$) followed by Japan ($n = 42$). Length of stay in Australia ranged from less than 1 year to longer than 5 years, with almost half having a stay of more than 1 year but less than 3 years (42.8%, $n = 131$). A total of 31.4% of the participating students were still new to Australia (31.4%, $n = 96$). Students were enrolled in different years of tertiary programmes from undergraduate up to doctorate across disciplines.

The students were asked to rate their speaking skills on a 5-point rating scheme (1 = poor, 2 = average, 3 = good, 4 = very good, and 5 = excellent). Students' self-reported speaking skills ranged from average to very good. Almost 50% of the students saw themselves with average speaking skills ($n = 147$), followed by 24.2% of those with good speaking proficiency ($n = 74$). Additionally, apart from students who enrolled through pathway/foundation programmes, they also reported their standardised language test results (e.g., IELTS). According to IELTS guidelines, students whose scores ranged from 6 to 6.5 are defined as competent users of English. The vast majority of the students were fell into this category (77.1%, $n = 178$), followed by 16.5% of the students reported that they achieved 7 to 7.5 ($n = 38$).

4.2 Deployed strategies for barriers to communicate

Data analysis identified two major themes, verbal strategies and non-verbal strategies. The first theme refers to direct attempts to improve the ability to

produce intelligible pronunciation. The second theme consists of self-discipline focussing on enhancing overall speaking fluency including accentedness. Since students were asked to provide up to three strategies, the number of strategies applied by the students varied. While the findings summarised in this paper demonstrate that students, irrespective of proficiency levels, deployed and proposed similar strategies, more proficient students appeared to apply more complex strategies than less proficient students. Additionally, descriptive statistics revealed that female students employed far more strategies than male students.

4.2.1 Verbal strategies

Of all the strategies students employed and proposed, pronunciation clarity (n = 101) was identified as the most popular strategy among the student group. They employed and proposed two methods for improving their pronunciation clarity. For example, focussing on prosodic features of speech (n = 83), and recording speech (n = 18). Many students specifically prioritised prosodic features, such as stress, intonation, speech rate and loudness to articulate clearer sounds (with students' self-reported speaking skills noted in each quote):

- (1) Learning to pronounce English words correctly can be one of the hardest parts of learning English. Pay Attention to words & Sentence stress and intonation. (Poor, ID: 76)¹
- (2) Speak at a slower pace to be clearer when speaking. Speak louder, as sometimes accents that are soft can end up being a mumble. (Very good, ID: 315)

Recording their speech was also deemed by the students as an effective way to enhance pronunciation clarity. While few students preferred using this strategy, the advantages of recording speech were pointed out. For example, they believed that using their voice output to assess and discover their weaknesses and strengths in pronunciation was beneficial:

1 Students' written responses were not corrected for spelling, punctuation, and grammar.

- (3) Recording yourself is a good way to get the maximum benefit. You can evaluate your own pronunciation and find out areas where you need to improve. (Poor, ID: 210)
- (4) Record your speech. You'll find out what you need to improve. I tended to increase my intonation every time I was supposed to finish my sentence and it sounded like a question. I found that out when I heard how I spoke English. Since then, I occasionally record my speech. (Very good, ID: 302)

Additionally, for communicative success, the importance of pronunciation compared to other linguistic areas, such as grammar and vocabulary, was emphasised. Students noted that speech with unclear pronunciation or mispronunciation could interfere with the meaning delivery; nevertheless, speech with grammatical errors or mistakes could still be understood. Further, the effective use of knowledge in vocabulary should occur with accurate pronunciation. Students supported this notion by commenting:

- (5) Pronunciation. I think students at tertiary level wouldn't have a serious grammar mistake. Trivial mistakes are fine like articles and prepositions, but pronunciation is essential because people understand each other by how we speak. So, improve your pronunciation. (Average, ID: 133)
- (6) Good pronunciation is related to clarity of your spoken English, even though you know a lot of vocabulary. It can be useless without good pronunciation. (Good, ID: 217)

Reading aloud was considered as a useful strategy to improve oral fluency (n = 60). Students specified that not only could they practice their speech, but also listen to their sound production, and feel the flow of their speech while reading aloud:

- (7) When you read articles, read it aloud. You can hear how you sound, and you can improve your speech fluently. (Not specified, ID: 41)
- (8) Read newspapers aloud and listen to yourself. You can check your fluency. (Average, ID: 120)

Additional benefits from reading aloud were also recognised by the students. For example, students believed that reading aloud enabled them to reinforce other foundational linguistic skills, such as knowledge in vocabulary and written English:

- (9) When you read articles read it aloud. You can hear how you sound, and you can improve your vocabulary and overall speech fluency. (Average, ID: 34)
- (10) Do more reading and when you read, read aloud. I think it's effective because I can hear how fluent I am in speaking English and learn their skills of writing as well. (Very good, ID: 11)

Paraphrasing may not seem to be directly associated with speech intelligibility; nevertheless, it was employed to seek clarity. This strategy was used by the students as an alternative way of coping with communication breakdowns caused by their accent in order to achieve communicative success (n = 53). Furthermore, students remarked that repetition of words or utterances was redundant and inefficient and, thus, paraphrasing was preferred and proposed as a strategy:

- (11) Don't give up when people don't understand you. Try different words to make them understand. Don't say the same thing over and over when they don't understand you. (Average, ID: 57)
- (12) Try to change your pronunciation or rephrase your sentence when people don't understand you. Repeating the same thing again and again wouldn't work well. (Poor, ID: 275)

Communication in English, not only with other English users, but also with co-national students, was a strategy applied and suggested (n = 50). There was also an emphasis on the need for reducing the time speaking their L1 in order to improve overall communication skills:

- (13) Use English all the time, even with friends who speak the same language. There's no point spending too much time speaking your first

language when you're in Australia. (Good, ID: 139)

- (14) Avoid speaking mother tongue and communicate with English as often as possible. Use English with your friends from the same country. (Very good, ID: 222)

4.2.2 Non-verbal strategies

The second theme is labelled as non-verbal coping strategies. This category includes deployed strategies to improve their overall communication skills with speech intelligibility, and to overcome psychological blocks that can impact on their L2 performance. Of all the non-verbal coping strategies, overcoming the fear of speaking was identified as the most favoured strategy ($n = 109$). Two ways for overcoming psychological blocks were used and proposed by the students. For example, having self-confidence ($n = 78$) and being less conscious about their English ($n = 31$).

To become an effective L2 communicator, there was an emphasis on greater self-confidence in speaking with an accent. Further, students believed that the degree of confidence can affect not only the listeners' comprehensibility, but also students' L2 performances:

- (15) Be confident. Don't be afraid or ashamed at your accent. (Very Good, ID: 314)
- (16) Be confident is a first step to improve fluency. Your confidence will affect how much you're comfortable with English communication. So, don't be nervous to better speak and believe yourself. (Average, ID: 140)

Students additionally stated that the degree of self-confidence in communication plays an important role in determining how they appear to the listeners. In other words, self-confidence in communication increases positive attitudes towards them from the listeners:

- (17) Your level of confidence is important for others. They will think you are fluent and be able to manage conversations in English. (Average, ID: 134)

Students suggested that the role of psychological blocks and perfectionism in foreign language speaking could adversely influence their communicative process. Thus, being less self-conscious about their status as a non-native English speaker, and making grammatical mistakes were employed as a strategy, hoping that students have better understanding about the fact that miscommunication is a natural process that can occur in any languages:

- (18) Accept we can't speak like a native English speaker. Don't be afraid of making mistakes. Don't be afraid to show your accent. Be proud. (Poor, ID: 236)
- (19) I would advise international students to not feel frightened or frustrated when talking to the natives or not being understood. When we make a switch to speaking another language, we tend to be more mindful about mistakes we make. But miscommunication happens, even in our native language. (Very good, ID: 336)

Students' responses suggest that having comprehensive exposure to the English language was a crucial way of improving their overall fluency in speaking. Placement in English-speaking environments is not a 'magic bullet', so conscious efforts should be made. Hence, students specified and proposed two ways to increase communicational exposure in natural settings (n = 96). For example, establishing social networks (n = 58) and joining social events organised by the university (n = 38).

Establishing social networks with both L1 and L2 speakers was employed and proposed as a coping strategy. Students found that having social interactions by broadening their social networks was helpful for improving their communication skills providing their conversation partners had higher English language proficiency than they did:

- (20) I always hang out with some friends from Europe. Even though they are not native English speaker, the experience to communicate in English helps me a lot. After catching up with them several times, I found I can speak fluent English without translating my sentences in mind. (Good, ID: 224)

(21) Hanging out with native speakers but if you find it hard to make Aussie friends (mainly they are not interested in international students or they think it will be awkward to talk to non-native speakers) look for friends who are from similar cultural background but speaks fluent and advanced English. (Average, ID: 46)

Students found that joining in a range of social events and activities organised by the university community provides an opportunity to enhance exposure to their target language because they would have opportunities to interact with students from diverse backgrounds:

(22) You need to join uni activities and try to talk with international people. The most important thing is to be out of comfort zone like not staying with some cultural people. Join events as much as you can. (Good, ID: 129)

Students specified and suggested three ways to continue exercise and regular practice for steady language improvement (n = 94). For example, using authentic materials such as media/audio resources (n = 49), building vocabulary banks with accurate pronunciation (n = 29), and using formal materials such as online dictionaries (n = 16). Using authentic materials was preferred by the students to other materials. The use of TV programs, movies and YouTube for the purpose of language learning and improvement was proposed, highlighting the usefulness of these materials in supporting their speech sound and capability to accommodate diverse accents:

(23) Watch podcast or YouTube to improve pronunciation. Listen carefully how they speak differently and learn how your mouth and lips move. (Good, ID: 184)

(24) Watch English drama, news and radio on a daily basis. It's a good way to get used to how different people speak English in different ways and learn from them. (Average, ID: 9)

Building vocabulary banks was applied and proposed for overcoming barriers

to communication. Students considered knowledge of vocabulary was one of the key areas to improve, emphasising that learning accurate pronunciation should occur at the same time for the effective use of the knowledge:

- (25) Build your vocabulary. To immediately use what you learned, practice pronunciation and remember its usage. (Very good, ID: 195)
- (26) Keep a note for new words, learn how to use the words when speaking and writing. Also, learn correct pronunciation. (Poor, ID: 273)

While the use of formal materials was less popular than authentic materials, some students still found it to be useful and thus suggested it as a strategy. Online dictionaries generally offer voice support services for pronunciation, encompassing two different L1 varieties, American and British English. When students were unsure of how to pronounce a word, they listened to both American and British pronunciation, and decided to adopt the more straightforward English pronunciation:

- (27) I found online dictionary is useful. There are some mouthful words, then I check both American and British pronunciation and try to memorize what's easier for me. (Average, ID: 21)

4.2.3 Gender comparisons

While previous analysis did not detect any statistical relationship between gender and self-reported speaking skills, different patterns of used coping strategies were observed. The following table summarises the number of strategies applied by females and males.

Table 2. Number of strategies applied by female and male students (n = 225)

Variable	Number of strategies (%)						
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
F (n = 118)	40 (33.9%)	25 (21.2%)	10 (8.5%)	2 (1.7%)	1 (0.8%)	-	40 (33.9%)
M (n = 107)	68 (63.6%)	35 (32.7%)	4 (3.7%)	-	-	-	-

Note. Both verbal and non-verbal strategies are computed.

Female students were more strategic than male students in using coping strategies to aid communication barriers caused by their accent. While more than a half of the male students (63.6%) relied on a single strategy, followed by 32.7% using two strategies, female students deployed up to seven strategies. Interestingly, the percentage of female students who applied seven strategies was the same as those with a single strategy (33.9% respectively). Female and male students also indicated different preferences in using coping strategies, with strategy preferences summarised in Table 3.

Table 3. Frequencies and percentages of coping strategies adopted by gender (n = 225)

Verbal strategies	Frequencies (%)		Non-verbal strategies	Frequencies (%)	
	F (n = 118)	M (n = 107)		F (n = 118)	M (n = 107)
Pronunciation with clarity	67 (56.8)	34 (31.8)	Self-discipline	71 (60.2)	23 (23.3)
Reading aloud	50 (42.4)	10 (9.3)	Comprehensive exposure to the target language	71 (60.2)	25 (23.3)
Communication in English	44 (37.3)	6 (5.6)	Overcoming fear of speaking	67 (56.8)	42 (39.3)
Paraphrasing	43 (36.4)	10 (9.3)			
Total	204	60	Total	209	90

Note. Many male students (63.6%) deployed either verbal or non-verbal strategies thus the total frequency is lower than the sample size. The percentages would not be equal to 100 as a large number of students used more than one strategy (see Table 2).

Given the total frequency of occurrences, female and male students had different preferences in using verbal and non-verbal strategies. A total of 204 instances of verbal and 209 instances of non-verbal strategies were identified in female students' responses, which means that they favoured both types of strategies. By contrast, male students preferred using non-verbal strategies with 90 occurrences to verbal strategies with 60 instances. This clearly indicates that male students focussed on a narrower range of strategies than female students.

With a verbal attempt, both female and male students deployed pronunciation with clarity to overcome communication barriers (56.8% and 31.8% respectively). The percentages of other strategies such as reading aloud, paraphrasing, and communication in English were markedly higher in female

students than male students.

With a non-verbal attempt, female students still applied more strategies than male students though, it was observed that self-confidence was the most favoured strategy among male students (39.3%). Whereas, among female students, comprehensive exposure to the target language and self-discipline (60.2% respectively) were more popular than self-confidence (56.8%). As slight differences in percentages were found, it can be said female students tended to be more strategic to manage communication barriers than male students.

5. Discussion

Qualitative outcomes derived from thematic analysis revealed that L2 East Asian students demonstrated resilience and had a broad range of strategies, both verbal and non-verbal strategies for managing communication barriers caused by their accent. Findings indicated that female students were more flexible in the sense that they developed multiple strategies than male students. Nevertheless, strategies identified in this study are based on self-report rather than observed strategies. These strategies may represent “the best desired option” for mitigating the barriers. Deployed strategies may be different from the best option. As students were asked to give ‘top tips’ for future students, it appears plausible to presume that the outcomes represent a combination of deployed strategies and the desired option.

As confirmed by Munro and Derwing (1999), prosodic errors are the results of the loss of speech intelligibility. Students across all proficiency and gender groups, verbal strategies were pronunciation-specific for enhancing their speech intelligibility. As they acknowledged, phonological issues outweighed syntactical problems resulting in communication breakdowns. Hence, students stressed that great awareness of prosodic features of speech, pinpointing intonation, stress, and rate to modify their speech to facilitate effective and intelligible communication. Contrasting with previous literature (Kayaalp 2016), our findings verify that the emphasis was on being able to use L2 for practical purposes rather than sounding like a native speaker. One possible explanation is that the students’ actual communication experience in the language context may have

helped them better understand that communicative success requires more than native-like phonology. Therefore, future students were encouraged to improve their speech intelligibility in a more attainable way without pursuing a native-like pronunciation or accent.

There is some alignment between the findings of this study and those of Park et al. (2017) pertaining to the effectiveness of self-repetition. While self-repetition was the most popular strategy, its effectiveness was not strong enough to make a recommendation for its use. In a similar vein, L2 students in this context implied that self-repetition was an ineffective strategy and thus paraphrasing was deployed and suggested. Despite descriptive analysis indicated that paraphrasing was mainly used by females (36.4%) than males (9.3%), developing skills in paraphrasing what they say, building vocabulary banks, or finding a different way to express themselves are valuable skills that can be encouraged for future students to ensure that they are understood in international contexts. In a multilingual and multicultural country like Australia, L2 students communicate with both L1 and other L2 speakers. Given the listeners' diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, their comprehensibility for different L2 accents may vary. Since the ability for paraphrasing provides comprehension options to the listeners (Derwing and Rossiter 2002), this strategy can be useful in intercultural communication. Moving away from the native norms, instruction of paraphrasing would enable L2 students to access a wide range of alternatives to facilitate successful communication with diverse English users.

It was observed that students highlighted the importance of overcoming the fear of speaking. It was found that the cause of anxiety in communication was twofold: (a) great concern about the accuracy of their statements and (b) speaking with a foreign accent. Horwitz et al. (1986) argued that personality traits such as shyness, silence, and reticence may be a contributory factor for communication anxiety. However, in this study, it is probable that gender may play a role in social and academic interactions, given the needs for self-confidence stressed by male students. Similar findings have been reported in previous literature. Male students indicated a higher level of uncertainty of their speech intelligibility than female students, especially with L2 listeners, presuming that males may feel more anxious about their accent (Park et al. 2017). With a

quantitative method, it is not amenable to ask for details or gain more insight that may be useful in understanding their experience. How gender plays a role in social and academic interactions focussing on accents appears to be an issue deserving more investigation.

Although how students managed and overcame communication anxiety was not precisely described in the data, results indicated the needs for increased understanding of communication breakdowns. Miscommunication or misunderstanding can frequently occur, yet these occur in the natural environment of any languages when the speaker's meaning is misread or incorrectly interpreted by the listeners. To put it another way, miscommunication is not necessarily a failure to communicate or a deviation; rather, it is a natural and inevitable phenomenon of all communication itself (Coupland et al. 1991). Therefore, the point bear in mind is that it is more crucial for future students to be aware that an ideal way to respond to communication breakdowns is communication repair, enabling them to influence the listener in intended ways.

The vast majority of the students participated in this study were competent users of English. This may be one of the reasons some deployed strategies reported by the students were to improve communication skills rather than accent specific issues. Furthermore, in the survey's comment section, some students stated that "good pronunciation and language skills will help problems with your accent" (Very Good, ID: 6). "I do not believe that accents or pronunciations are the only things caused miscommunication. I believe that we all have to learn new argument styles and new patterns of discourse that differ from that of our own native languages." (Very good, ID: 336). This indicates that from their point of view, fluency in speaking and speech intelligibility are interrelated as one will help the weaknesses of the other. Further, apparently, they were open to the fact that there may be other factors affecting communicative success.

Keeping this in view, since the level of exposure to the target language is paramount for improving fluency in speaking, students regarded establishing social networks as an effective strategy to practice. Unlike previous studies that stressed ties with host students to learn through formal and informal interactions (Khawaja and Stallman 2011), in this context, the emphasis is not solely on extending social networks with local students, indicating the possibilities of

difficulties in building a link and social interactions with L1 students. Students managed communication and networking benefits that could enhance their learning and social interactions by joining social clubs and events organised by the university student associations. What this study additionally found was these social types of strategies were preferred and proposed by females (60.2%) more than males (23.3%). As Oberzaucher (2013) found in other studies, females generally have higher social competence than males. Further, whether it is cross-cultural communication, female communication is relationship-oriented, whereas male communication is goal-oriented. Considering females' ability to start and sustaining relationships with others, this may be the case why female students in this study stressed social networks and proposed it as a strategy.

Again, female students more than male students preferred using authentic materials to formal materials for their language improvement. They used dramas, movies, and TV programmes as an attempt to elicit language with a sense of purpose that is more realistic than merely depending on what they can learn from English textbooks. They found these materials particularly useful not only in improving their ability to accommodate diverse accents, but also in learning how to lead natural conversations in English by analysing how different speakers use English. In foreign language teaching and learning, studies have already confirmed the significant advantages of using these materials in that they promote high motivation in L2 learners, and stimulate interest, leading to improved communicative competence (Akbari and Razavi 2016). Until recently, limited L1 variety, such as either American or British English, is a dominant teaching model in most Asian countries. Students would not have sufficient exposure to various L1 or L2 English varieties. Consequently, receiving benefits through using authentic materials was suggested for future students.

5.1 Limitations of the study

Qualitative studies such as this study are not free from limitations. Despite the open response rate 74%, students may have not reported their strategies explicitly for some reasons. For example, they may have forgotten to state some strategies they applied because strategies they use can be both at a conscious

and unconscious level. In addition, this study used self-reported speaking skills to present the findings. Although self-report has been confirmed that it is associated with L2 students' communication barriers more than gender differences, their self-report can be potentially subject to reporting errors because their views on their L2 can be subjective.

5.2 Implications for practice

English as a global language encompasses many forms of L2 English varieties because it is spoken throughout the world. L2 students are empowered to speak in their own variety of pronunciation and accents. Considering the needs of the students, universities can offer pronunciation instruction focussing on intelligibility along with alternative strategies for future students, which will be beneficial for their intercultural communication. By adopting diverse strategies, students would enhance their opportunities to negotiate their meaning and achieve communicative success. At the same time, being able to handle a wide range of different accents is an essential skill. Students as listeners would have a different capacity to accommodate different sounds, irrespective of their language proficiency. Accent familiarity can substantially undermine listeners' understanding of English; consequently, unfamiliarity predicts low comprehensibility (Matsuura et al. 2014). Having exposure to a wide variety of English produced by diverse English users will enable L2 students to successfully function in L2 communication in which they are likely to be involved in the international context.

We hope to help academics, university staff members, and L1 students regarding communication problems of L2 East Asian students. L1 speakers may feel impatient and frustrated when communicating with L2 students due to their grammatically incorrect expressions and a strong accent. In English as a *lingua franca* situation, L1 speakers may not feel that they need to accommodate, or adapt to others; nevertheless, communication requires cooperation between the speakers and the listeners. For L2 students, there are other factors causing communication barriers; for example, language anxiety and background noise (Park 2016). Further, L1 accents are not necessarily the most intelligible for them

(Jenkins 2000; Xue and Lee 2014). Hence, when communicating with L2 students with varying levels of fluency and speech intelligibility, it is imperative be more responsive, receptive, and flexible “turning” our ears into those diverse students by using English in different ways.

A common misperception among faculty members identified by Jude and Janette (2005) is that international students are a homogenous group with similar learning needs and anticipations. East Asian international students, as do other groups, face problems when studying in a cultural setting different from their own because their learning styles and preferences can be contradicting in Western cultures. Due to students’ unfamiliarity with interactive classroom settings, they may end up wanting to interact with other L2 student with similar background. As findings indicated, there appears to be a desire by the students to be included with L1 students in interactions. Thus, to encourage them to participate in class and share their experience and expertise with local students, faculty members’ assistance for them to acquire new skills and learning styles seems to be necessary (Jude and Janette 2005). Knowing that there are problems with group work, they can support and guide both L1 and L2 students in how to collaborate and provide feedback employing diverse strategies. For example, sharing background knowledge, avoiding the use of slang, and not speaking too fast through the opportunities to work and mix with diverse students.

L2 students’ accent and pronunciation cannot be the only source of communication barriers because limited knowledge in vocabulary, and insufficient listening skills can often be the cause of misunderstanding. Clearly, there is a need for training, support, and substantially more speech-based resources reflecting the needs of the current students. In practice within universities, communication skills are frequently regarded as a problem for the students. However, higher education institutions could develop institutional strategies to ensure communication skills for L2 students, especially within their discipline, given communication skills are closely associated with the quality of university graduates, and their employability. Additionally, noting that L2 students perceived stereotypes and discrimination are often tied to communication, staff training should be considered because positive changes in attitudes towards L2 students may be contingent on enhanced understanding of foreign accents (Munro 2003). These endeavours should enhance the intercultural

learning environments for L2 international students.

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Received: 2020. 04. 29.

Revised: 2020. 07. 22.

Accepted: 2020. 08. 29.