Educational Degree, Gender and Accent as Determinants of EFL Teacher Credibility

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Abstract

Teacher credibility is assumed to be the most important variable which affects teacher-student interaction. It may be one possible reason for why students prefer to have more classes with some particular teachers than others. Highly credible teachers can motivate the students and maximize their overall academic performance. In light of the foregoing, this study aimed to investigate the roles of educational degree, gender and accent in the credibility of Iranian EFL teachers from their students' perspectives. Data for this study were collected from 400 high school students and 20 EFL teachers in Sistan and Baluchestan province who were chosen by convenience sampling. The results of independent-samples Mann-Whitney U Test indicated significant differences between credibility evaluations for BA and MA teachers and for male and female teachers. The findings revealed that female teachers and teachers with MA degree perceived to be more credible compared to male teachers and teachers with BA degree. Furthermore, the results of simple linear regression showed that students perceived teachers with more native-like accent as remarkably more credible. Besides the theoretical implications, this study addresses some pedagogical implications.

Keywords: Accent, Educational Degree, EFL Teacher, Gender, Teacher Credibility

1. Introduction

Teacher credibility plays a major role in the dynamics of today's classrooms (Semlak & Pearson, 2008). According to McCroskey, Holdridge and Toomb (1974), teacher credibility is a composite of character, sociability, composure, extroversion and competence. This concept is based on students' impressions of teachers' verbal and nonverbal communication behaviors (Hendrix, 1997; Myers & Bryant, 2004). 'Character' refers to the degree to which a teacher is trusted by students; 'sociability' refers to the degree to which a teacher is considered to be warm and friendly; 'composure' refers to the degree of emotional control exhibited by a teacher; 'extroversion' refers to the degree to which a teacher is perceived to be outgoing; and 'competence' refers to the degree to which a teacher is perceived to be knowledgeable about a given subject matter (McCroskey, 1992). Students' perception of their teacher credibility has a profound influence on classroom communication and is regarded as one of the vital factors aiming to foster students' abilities to learn from their teachers. Teachers with higher credibility perceptions are able to motivate and increase their students' overall academic performance (Cooper & Simonds, 1999; Teven & McCroskey, 1997). It is also reported that the students who view their teachers as credible can recall course information (Wheeless, 1975). It has been a long time that high teacher credibility has been linked to favourable teaching evaluations, positive course ratings, and the desire to take another course from the same instructor (Kearney, 1994), as well as ratings of student satisfaction (Teven & Herring, 2005).

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Hence, teacher credibility can be regarded as one of the possible answers for "why students like to have more classes with some particular teachers than others" or "why students suggest their friends take courses with a certain teacher."

For business communications at work, source credibility has been found to be important based on the first impression (LaTour, Henthome & Williams, 1989). A principal factor affecting source credibility in international communications is accent (Tsalikis, Ortiz-Buonafina, & LaTour 1992). The effect of accent has been dealt with extensively in social psychology and linguistics literature (Bradac & Wisegarver, 1984; Giles, 1973, 1980; Giles & Sassoon, 1983; Giles, Baker & Fielding, 1975; Labov, 1972, 1973). Foon (1986) found that speech style (including accent) "appears to have a powerful influence on the judgments of perceivers over a wide range of qualities attributed to the person perceived" (p. 521). In a study, Tsalikis et al., (1992) found that the salesmen who spoke accented English were perceived by Americans as less intelligent, less knowledgeable, and less effective than the salesmen with standard American accents. Research findings indicate that the role of accent in business credibility has important implications for business people competing in the international arena. However, its role in teacher credibility has not yet been thoroughly investigated.

Apparently, the notion of teacher credibility has very important implications, but there is a lack of empirical studies involving the role of educational degree and gender on EFL teacher credibility perception. Hence, the present researchers tried to investigate the concept particularly in the Iranian context. Specifically, this study sought to answer the following research questions:

Research Question One: Are students' perceptions of their teacher credibility different for BA and MA teachers?

Research Question Two: Are students' perceptions of their teacher credibility different for male and female teachers?

Research Question Three: Are EFL teachers' credibility predictable based on their students' perceptions of native-like status of accent?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Teacher Credibility

The concept of ethos or source credibility was brought up by Aristotle for the first time (Umeogu, 2012). According to Aristotle, ethos, logos and pathos are three main ways of persuasion; and among these, ethos plays an important role in influencing the thoughts and beliefs of the audience (Umeogu, 2012). Based on Aristotle's definition, ethos can be defined as the element of speech that presents the speaker as trustworthy and believable (McCroskey, 1998; Wisse, 1989). Braet (1992) believes that true credibility is gained when the audience attributes three qualities of good sense, virtue and goodwill to the speaker. Earlier research on teacher credibility has tended to focus on the relationship between teacher's sex, and ethnicity and students' perceptions of teacher credibility (Glascock & Ruggiero, 2006; Hargett, 1999; Nadler & Nadler, 2001; Patton, 1999). It has also indicated that there is a positive correlation between source credibility and learning, particularly in an instructional setting like the classroom (Beatty & Zahn, 1990; Frymier, 1994; McCroskey & Teven, 1999). In other words, students' perceptions of their teachers may help one predict the students' performance in an academic environment (Teven & McCroskey, 1997; Thomas, Richmond, & McCroskey, 1994). During different times, this concept has gone through various changes by different scholars and the last modification was made by McCroskey and Teven (1999), who introduced a three-dimensional scale for source credibility. This one was a composite of competence, trustworthiness, and caring. Competence is defined as perceived knowledge or expertise that a speaker possesses in a particular subject (Teven and McCroskey 1997); trustworthiness is accounted for the extent to which a source is perceived by his/her audience as an honest one (McCroskey 1998); and perceived caring stands for the audience's perception of the speaker in terms of how much s/he recognizes their values, well-being, and interests (McCroskey and Teven 1999).

In a recent study, Pishghadam, Seyednozadi and Zabetipour (2017) studied the relationship between teacher credibility and two newly-developed concepts of 'emotionalization' and 'life syllabus' in relation to achievement scores of EFL learners. Findings of this study indicated that exvolvement, as a component of emotioncy, can lead to higher achievement scores, while involvement, as another component of emotioncy hierarchy, brings about the opposite results. Furthermore, the findings indicated that higher rates of teacher credibility can lead to higher achievement scores. Still, in another study conducted by Santilli, Miller and Katt (2011), 66 students at a Brazilian university and 100 students at a large university in the United States completed measures of nonverbal immediacy and source credibility regarding the instructor in the class immediately prior to the one in which the research took place. The findings revealed that for U.S. students, perceived instructor nonverbal immediacy behavior was positively associated with all dimensions of source credibility. Among Brazilian students, instructor nonverbal immediacy was positively related to competence and caring only. Fischer Clune (2009) examined the effects of the instructor's sex, gender role, and communication style on instructor credibility from students' perspectives. The results indicated that good male instructors were more often considered credible and assertive, while good female instructors were more often considered caring and responsive. In the same vein, Banfield, Richmond and McCroskey (2006) investigated the effect of teacher misbehavior on teacher credibility. The findings showed that credibility was significantly impacted by each individual type of misbehavior, with competence impacted the most by 'incompetence' and caring and trustworthiness impacted the most by 'offensiveness'.

2.2. Educational Degree

Researchers have pointed out that there is a positive relationship between teacher's qualifications and experience and student's achievement. (Asikhia, 2010; Darling-Hammond, Berry & Thoreson, 2001; Goldhaber & Brewer, 2000; Laczko-Kerr & Berliner, 2002; Olaleye, 2011). In their endeavors, Unanma, Abugu, Dike and Umeobika (2013) examined the relationship between teacher's academic qualifications and academic achievement of senior secondary school students in chemistry. Findings of this study revealed that there was a strong positive relationship between teachers' qualification and students' academic achievement in chemistry.

In a similar vein, Fakeye (2012) explored the extent to which teachers' qualification and subject mastery could predict students' achievement in the English language among senior secondary students in Ibarapa Division of Oyo state, Nigeria. The findings of this study showed that teachers' teaching qualification has a significant relative contribution to students' academic achievement in the English language. The study also found out that teachers' mastery of subject matter contributes significantly to students' academic achievement.

Goldhaber and Brewer (1998) confirm the importance of subject-specific information about teacher preparation in their analysis of NELS:88 data to address questions about when to reward teacher degrees. Their findings suggest that general measures of teacher degree level are not related to high school student achievement in math, science, English, or history. However, in math and science, subject-specific degrees earned were found to have a positive impact on student test scores in those subjects. This was the case for both bachelor's as well as master's degrees. Further, teachers holding both a bachelor's and a master's degree in the subject area taught were the most effective.

2.3. Gender

Gender may also affect teacher credibility. Past research has examined some factors such as attractiveness, gender stereotyping and power strategies in relation to credibility (Jordan, McGreal, & Wheeless, 1990; Nadler & Nadler, 1990; Rubin, 1981). The findings are inconsistent, and there is no evidence to show that one gender is better at teaching than the other or one gender is more credible in teaching than the other (Nadler & Nadler, 1990; Rubin 1981; Wheeless & Potorti, 1989).

Taqi, Al-Darwish, Akbar and Al-Gharabali (2015) looked into the impact of teacher's gender in language teaching classrooms amongst EFL learners at the college level in Kuwait. They found that male teachers were generally viewed as better teachers than their female counterparts. However,

in terms of organizational skills, female teachers surpassed male teachers. Besides these, personal traits such as friendliness and kindness appeared to attract the students towards male teachers over their female counterparts. The study revealed that the majority of the students found male teachers friendlier and kinder than female teachers. Male teachers were also associated with a higher level of sense of humour, whereas female teachers were associated with less patience. In another study, Patton (1999) investigated the effects of ethnicity and gender of instructor on their credibility in the university classroom. A significant relationship was found between the instructor's ethnicity and credibility, but there was no significant relationship between the instructor's gender and credibility.

2.4. Accent

Everyone possesses an accent. Richards and Schmidt (2010) define accent as a particular way of speaking which tells the listener something about the speaker's background. They argue that accent may reveal the speaker's social class, region and whether or not the speaker is a native speaker of the language. 'Accentedness', or presence of a foreign accent, is defined as "the degree to which the pronunciation of an utterance sounds different from an expected production pattern" (Munro, Derwing, & Morton, 2006, p. 115) and it is perceived to distinguish speakers from different native-like communities (Derwing & Munro, 2005, 2015).

In a study conducted by McGillis (2017), investigated the role of regional dialect in college students' determinations of teacher credibility. In a broader sense, the research aimed to improve our understanding of social barriers that exist between teachers and students with different regional origins. Results showed a significant difference between conditions for responses related to dynamism. Participants who heard the standard American English recording evaluated the speaker as significantly more energetic than those who heard the American Southern English recording. According to language attitudes research, this difference could be due to participants' perceptions of the speaker's speech quality, dialect euphony, and rate of speech. Similarities between groups in responses related to trustworthiness, competence, and caring indicate that lecture content and speech characteristics other than dialect played a more significant role in credibility attributions than dialectical differences. Nonetheless, findings related to dynamism provide evidence that perceptions of teacher credibility are in fact affected by the speaker's use of regional dialect.

In another study, Hanzlikova and Skarnitzl (2017), replicated the study with non-native listeners to see whether this effect is also relevant in international communication contexts. The same set of statements from the original study was recorded by 6 native and 6 nonnative speakers of English. 121 non-native listeners rated the truthfulness of the statements on a 7-point scale. The results of the study tentatively confirmed a negative bias against non-native speakers as perceived by non-native listeners, showing that subconscious attitudes to language varieties are also relevant in communication among non-native speakers.

Stocker (2016) examined whether the presence of a foreign accent negatively affects credibility judgments. In the results, no difference between native and foreign accents was found, and no difference between different foreign accents was found either. Similarly, Sanchez and Khan (2016) examined whether the presence of a foreign accent negatively affects learners' experience in an online learning environment. Results indicate that the presence of an instructor accent, consistent with prior work on perceptual fluency, does not impact learning, but does cause learners to rate the instructor as less effective.

Major, Fitzmaurice, Bunta and Balasubramanian (2002) explored the extent to which native-English speaking and ESL listeners performed better on a test when the speaker shared their native language. The results indicated that both native and nonnative listeners scored significantly lower on listening comprehension tests when they listened to nonnative speakers of English, native speakers of Spanish scored significantly higher when listening to Spanish-accented speech, and native speakers of Chinese scored significantly lower when listening to speakers who shared their native language.

Tsalikis et al. (1992) investigated the role of accent on the credibility and effectiveness of the international business person. The subjects of this study were 109 part-time graduate business

students at a major city in Guatemala. The subjects were asked to listen to recordings and rate the speaker on five scales measuring perceived effectiveness. The findings of this study suggested that a salesperson presenter without a foreign accent had an advantage over a salesperson presenter with a foreign accent. The paper also reported that there was no significant interaction between the respondents' exposure to the accent and his ratings of the accent.

A study was done by Calloway (1980) to ascertain whether language instructors or naive judges were more reliable in judging oral proficiency. Fifteen students from the ESL centre were chosen to record a tape while reading passages in English. The tape and a questionnaire were administered to 70 raters. Each sample was rated by the judges on each of six scales. The first four scales consisted of four pairs of bipolar adjectival descriptors, an overall proficiency scale and a multiple choice questionnaire about the language background of the speaker. The results revealed that there was a very substantial agreement among the raters, regardless of whether they were naive or experienced. Both groups were very reliable on the whole in judging the proficiency level, although the experienced raters were somewhat more reliable. Also, they were much better at identifying correctly the source language backgrounds than the naive group.

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

The participants in this study were 400 students and 20 teachers. 200 students were male and 200 were female with an age-range of 16 to 18 years and all of them spoke Persian as their mother tongue. The students were chosen based on convenience sampling. The students were studying at 10th, 11th and 12th grades of high school. 10 male and 10 female teachers participated in this study. Half of the teachers in each group had an MA degree and the rest had a BA degree. All participants were located in different high schools in Sistan and Baluchestan province, Iran. The criteria used for participants' selection were the ease of access and availability.

3.2. Instrumentation

3.2.1. McCroskey Teacher Credibility Questionnaire

In order to determine the teachers' level of credibility, the Teacher Credibility Questionnaire designed by McCroskey *et al.* (1974) was used. The questionnaire included 14 items measured by a seven-point bipolar scale. In this study, higher scores indicate higher credibility. In order to make sure that, the students do not answer randomly, half of the items were negatively worded. The present researchers translated it into Persian to eradicate any probable linguistic barrier. The translated version of the questionnaire was doubled-checked and linguistically validated by the expert who taught translation courses for many years. Pilot testing of this scale for this particular study revealed that adjectives 'selfish', 'quiet' and 'unreliable' caused the teacher credibility scale to fail to achieve reliability; thus, new adjectives were inserted. The reliability of the Persian translated version in a previous study, reported by Pishghadam et al. (2017), was 0.86. The reliability of the Persian scale of this study was 0.82 using Cronbach's alpha.

3.2.2. Accentedness and Overall Proficiency Questionnaire

Evaluation of teachers' accents was done using Accentedness and Overall Proficiency Questionnaire (AOPQ) designed by Calloway (1980). The first four scales are made of four pairs of bipolar adjectives which are 'not very intelligible' to 'intelligible', 'unpleasant' to 'pleasant', 'unacceptable' to 'acceptable' and 'nonnative' to 'native'. In addition, there was an overall proficiency scale (OPS) but this item was ignored since it is not relevant to dimensions of accent. The reliability of Persian translation for this questionnaire, using Cronbach's Alpha, turned out to be 0.79 which is satisfactory.

3.3. Data Collection Procedure

To collect the data, both questionnaires were distributed to the students. They were explained how to fill out the questionnaires, along with some examples. The explanation was given orally in Persian. The students were asked to rate their teacher on the teacher credibility scale. Then, the students

listened to a passage of 187 words with appropriate level of difficulty twice. For the first time, it was read by a native speaker in a CD, and for the second time they listened to their own teacher reading the same passage. The students listened carefully and evaluated their teacher's accent by completing the Accentedness questionnaire, which took 15-20 minutes approximately. It is worth mentioning that to help the students rate the teacher's accent appropriately, the researcher asked the teacher to expose the students to native-accent through various listening activities such as listening to dialogues or interviews for twenty minutes each session during the semester. In this way, the students were able to distinguish native from nonnative accent to some degree.

4. Results

As stated before, this study aimed to investigate the roles of educational degree, gender and accent in teacher credibility. To answer the research questions, first a Kolmogorov-Smirnova test was run to analyze normality of distribution of the obtained scores on the scales. Table 1 demonstrates the results.

Table 1: Tests of Normality for Teacher Credibility Scores

	Kolmogorov-Smirnov			Shapiro-Wilk		
	Statistic	df	Sig.	Statistic	df	Sig.
Teacher Credibility	.09	400	.000	.95	400	.000

According to Table 1, the assumption of normality of distribution was violated (α=.000). Consequently, the non-parametric statistical test of Mann-Whitney U was selected to test research hypotheses one and two.

To answer the first research question regarding students' perceptions of their teacher credibility for BA and MA teachers, median for BA and MA teachers were computed and analyzed and to make sure whether there was any significant difference between the credibility perception of students for two groups of teachers a Mann-Whitney U test was run by the researchers.

Table 2: Analysis of Median for BA and MA Teacher Credibility

Educational degree	N	Median
BA	200	78.00
MA	200	92.00
Total	400	86.50

Table 3: Independent-Samples Mann-Whitney U Test for BA and MA Teacher Credibility

Total N	400
Mann-Whitney U	38931.00
Wilcoxon W	59031.00
Test Statistic	38931.00
Standard Error	1155.05
Standardized Test Statistic	16.39
Asymptotic Sig.(2-sided test)	.000

The results of the Mann-Whitney U test indicated the existence of a significant difference for MA teachers (Mdn=92, n=200) and BA teachers (Mdn=78, n=200), U=38931, Z=16.39, r=0.81. In other words, there was a statistically significant difference between BA and MA teachers in terms of credibility evaluations. The size of the observed difference between the two groups in terms of credibility was large according to Cohen (1988).

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In order to find the answer to the second question concerning the students' perceptions of their teacher credibility for male and female teachers, medians and a Mann-Whitney U test were applied to investigate the significant differences between the two genders.

Table 4: Analysis of Median for Male and Female Teacher Credibility

Gender	N	Median
Male	200	83.00
Female	200	88.50
Total	400	86.50

Table 5: Independent-Samples Mann-Whitney U Test for Male and Female Teacher Credibility

Total N	400
Mann-Whitney U	27097.000
Wilcoxon W	47197.000
Test Statistic	27097.000
Standard Error	1155.059
Standardized Test Statistic	6.144
Asymptotic Sig.(2-sided test)	.000

As Tables 4 and 5 display, a statistically significant difference between male and female teacher credibility evaluation is apparent. For the credibility of male and female teachers, the Mann-Whitney U test showed the existence of a significant difference for male (Mdn=83, n=200) and female teachers (Mdn=88.5, n=200), U=27097, Z=6.14, r=0.30. The size of the observed difference between the two groups regarding credibility was medium. The results showed that female teachers (Mdn=88.5) were more credible than male teachers (Mdn=83) from the students' perspective.

To answer the third research question which sought a relationship (prediction) between teachers' accents and their credibility from the students' perspectives, a simple linear regression was applied.

Table 6: Simple Linear Regression of Teacher Accent and Credibility

R	R2	F	B	Std. Error	β	T	Sig.
.841	.70	960.6	2.21	.07	.84	31	.000

As the table shows, teacher accent is a positive and significant predictor of teacher credibility (β= .84, p= .000). In other words, native-like accent is highly correlated with teacher credibility; hence, it is a very good predictor of teacher credibility.

5. Discussion

The results of the study revealed that the students perceived MA teachers more credible compared to BA teachers. In other words, the teacher's educational degree seems to have a positive impact on students' achievement and as such on teacher credibility in turn. The results supported Early et al. (2006) study who found that teachers with a bachelor's degree had students with higher achievement than teachers with an associate's degree. Similar result has been reported by Zuzovsky (2008), who found that science teachers with higher degrees had better-performing students. This might be because of the fact that science is a constantly developing domain and science teachers with advanced education in their field of teaching may be at a greater advantage. The superior performance of MA teachers over BA teachers may be due to the fact that they have updated their knowledge about teaching as well as learning and have got more years of working experience, too. BA teachers can benefit a lot by participating in teacher education courses or relevant in-service training. This finding, furthermore, concurs with the study of Ajayi (1986) indicating that the classroom teacher is one of the chief determinants of the educational achievement of students in that their academic qualification,

professional training among other variables are most significant determinants of academic performance of student.

Furthermore, the results of the study revealed that students' perceptions of their teacher credibility are different for male and female teachers. This could possibly be due to the fact that female teachers have a better relationship with their students and they tend to care more about them. The findings are in harmony with earlier research findings. Research suggests women are perceived to be more honest (Alexander & Andersen, 1993), more trustworthy (Bronlow & Zebrowitz, 1990), and more ethical than men (e.g., Dawson, 1995; Ferrell and Skinner, 1988; Lane, 1995; Whipple and Swords, 1992). The results of the present study suggest that male teachers are expected to display more qualities of extroversion and sociability such as to smile often and being friendlier with their students. Thus, a male teacher's job may be more demanding that of a female teacher, as students expect more from male teachers regarding credibility building qualities. The findings, however, contradicts Buck and Tiene's (1989) study in that attractiveness and gender did not significantly affect perceptions of competence. Students, whether male or female, were more affected by overall teacher qualities than by whether the teacher was male or female (Wheeless & Potorti, 1989).

The obtained results of the study showed that teachers' accent can be a good predictor of teacher credibility. This is consistent with the findings of Tsalikis et al., (1992), who maintained that the presence of foreign accent does seem to affect the credibility of business persons. It is also in line with findings of Stocker (2015) who maintained that the presence of foreign accent negatively affects the credibility perception of the speaker. As a consequence, to compensate for a non-native-like accent of some teachers, in the short run, teachers must practice good speech habits like working on voice volume, hesitations, enunciations, etc. Low credible teachers can also learn to cope with predicted negative first impressions owing to accents.

6. Conclusion and Implications

The present study was an attempt to investigate the roles of English teachers' educational degree, gender and accent on their credibility perception from their students' perspectives. The results of this study could add further support to existing literature particularly those areas which have less been investigated. The results of this study added the literature in the field of EFL in that they demonstrated the factors which are perceived to be influential in teachers' credibility by the students. The findings of this study could have some implications for teachers and teacher educators by helping them to gain an awareness of the importance of teachers' characteristics; namely, teacher credibility. Thus, the findings of this study could be of prime importance for teachers and teacher educators willing to increase the positive outcomes of EFL classes. furthermore, this study can be of great help to the foreign language teacher education researchers who intend to develop the field and to understand the ways through which teachers can motivate students' learning. The results of the study could also give awareness to English teachers, showing that their credibility, above all, could guarantee the students' success.

The present study did not intend to examine credibility enhancement strategies and behaviours, so this could be the topic of further research. Additionally, the same study can be conducted at university level to evaluate students' perception of credibility among university professors in the Iranian context. Future studies in this area can be conducted on some other characteristics of teachers such as age, years of teaching experience, career awards and the number of academic publications.

Another limitation of this study that can be overcome in future research is the data collection instruments which consisted of questionnaires. Further studies may lead to precise findings implementing other data collection methods such as self-reports, observations and interviews. Since credibility is hard to earn and easy to lose, English teachers should pay special attention to this aspect because students judge their teachers based on what they teach and how they tach.

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