

LANGUAGE BIAS AND STUDENT PARTICIPATION ACROSS MULTICULTURAL CLASSROOMS IN THE PHILIPPINES AND THE UNITED STATES

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ABSTRACT: *This study examined how language-based discrimination shapes students' classroom participation, academic confidence, and sense of belonging in multilingual educational settings. Using a mixed ethnographic design, the inquiry was conducted over six months in two state universities in Northern Mindanao, Philippines, and one private high school in Humble, Texas, USA. Forty-two purposively selected students participated: 28 from the Philippine universities and 14 from the Texas high school. Data were generated through participant observation, semi-structured interviews, discourse samples, and limited frequency counts of recurring themes. Cross-case analysis revealed convergent patterns of accent stereotyping, language shaming, exclusion from peer interaction, and reduced access to classroom discourse when students' English was perceived as non-standard or less proficient. These experiences encouraged self-silencing, participation anxiety, and reduced academic confidence. Although bilingual and English-language support mechanisms were present, they did not consistently address accent bias or the unequal institutional value assigned to different linguistic repertoires. The findings position linguism as both an interpersonal and institutional phenomenon and underscore the need for bias-aware teacher development, explicit language-equity policies, and assessment practices that prioritize communicative meaning and intellectual quality over conformity to a single accent or language variety.*

Keywords: linguism, accent bias, multilingual learners, classroom participation, educational equity

INTRODUCTION

Language functions not only as a medium of instruction but also as a social signal through which speakers are judged as credible, competent, educated, or legitimate. In multilingual classrooms, such judgments may attach to accent, grammar, fluency, lexical choice, or the use of regional and immigrant language varieties. When these judgments systematically privilege one form of speech while devaluing others, they constitute linguism or language-based discrimination. Raciolinguistic scholarship has shown that supposedly neutral standards of "appropriate" academic language can reproduce wider social hierarchies by treating dominant ways of speaking as natural measures of intelligence and belonging [1,2].

Accent is particularly salient because it is immediately audible and socially interpretable. Research on nonnative accents shows that speakers may encounter stigma, negative evaluation, and communication-related anxiety even when their message is intelligible [3]. Broader work on language ideology likewise demonstrates how accent discrimination can become normalized in education, employment, media, and public institutions [4]. These dynamics matter in settings where English carries substantial symbolic value and where multilingual students must negotiate among home, community, and institutional expectations.

At the same time, contemporary multilingual education scholarship cautions against interpreting students' diverse linguistic resources primarily through a deficit lens. Translanguaging perspectives emphasize that multilingual speakers draw from integrated repertoires to make meaning and participate in learning [5]. Classroom models developed through the CUNY-NYSIEB initiative further illustrate how educators can design instruction that treats emergent bilingualism as an academic resource rather than a problem to be corrected [6]. This shift is relevant to the present study because language bias may operate not only through overt

ridicule but also through routine expectations about what "good English" should sound like.

The study was guided by two complementary theoretical perspectives. Critical Language Awareness views language practices as socially situated and embedded in unequal relations of power; it therefore directs attention to how institutions normalize certain forms of speaking and position others as deficient [7]. Bourdieu's concept of linguistic capital explains how particular accents, vocabularies, and language varieties acquire greater institutional value, thereby shaping who is more readily heard, recognized, and authorized to participate [8]. Together, these perspectives frame linguism as more than an individual attitude: it can also be reproduced through classroom routines, assessment expectations, and institutional policy.

Against this background, the present inquiry examined language-based discrimination in two state universities in Northern Mindanao and one private high school in Texas. The sites differ in educational level, national context, and institutional structure; therefore, the study does not treat them as statistically comparable populations. Instead, the cross-context design was used analytically to identify recurring mechanisms of linguistic inclusion and exclusion. The study addressed three questions: (1) How did linguism appear in everyday academic interaction? (2) How did language bias influence participation, confidence, and peer interaction? and (3) What institutional responses could support more equitable participation?

MATERIAL AND METHODS

A mixed ethnographic design combined qualitative inquiry with limited descriptive frequency analysis. The study was conducted over six months in three institutions: two state universities in Northern Mindanao, Philippines, and one private high school in Humble, Texas, USA. Purposive sampling yielded 42 participants, comprising 28 university students from the Philippines and 14 high-school students

from Texas. Participants represented Filipino, Cebuano, Tagalog, English, and Spanish-speaking backgrounds and were selected because they identified as multilingual or as users of a non-dominant language variety.

Data collection included classroom and group-activity observations, individual semi-structured interviews lasting approximately 30–45 minutes, and discourse analysis of selected classroom interactions, written work, and digital conversations. Field notes and interview transcripts were coded for recurring categories such as accent stereotyping, language-preference exclusion, participation anxiety, self-silencing, and perceived academic disadvantage. Thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke's six-phase procedure [9]. Philippine and Texas data sets were first analyzed separately to preserve contextual meaning and were then compared through cross-case analysis. Simple frequency counts were used only to support interpretation of repeated patterns and were not treated as inferential evidence.

Ethical safeguards included institutional ethics clearance as reported by the participating universities, informed consent from all participants, parental consent for minors at the Texas site, confidentiality, and the use of pseudonyms. Participation was voluntary, and participants could withdraw without consequence. Because the study involved different institutional levels and national contexts, interpretations focused on patterned experiences rather than generalized prevalence.

RESULTS

LANGUAGE BIAS AND CLASSROOM PARTICIPATION

Students in both settings described withholding answers or avoiding public speaking because they anticipated ridicule, correction, or negative judgment. In the Philippine universities, some students associated Cebuano- or Bisaya-influenced English with being viewed as less academically capable. Several reported knowing an answer but choosing silence to avoid comments about pronunciation. Comparable hesitation appeared among Spanish-speaking and immigrant students in Texas, who feared that grammatical or pronunciation errors would be interpreted as lack of intelligence.

The pattern suggests that the barrier to participation was not always an explicit prohibition. More often, it was the accumulated expectation of embarrassment. Classroom discourse therefore became unevenly accessible: students whose English more closely matched dominant norms entered discussion with less social risk, while others monitored not only the academic content of their response but also how their speech might be judged.

ACCENT STEREOTYPING AND SELF-PERCEPTION

Accent emerged as a highly visible marker through which students evaluated themselves and one another. Some Filipino participants linked American-sounding English with competence and authority, while regional accents were associated with lower status. At the Texas site, nonnative English speakers similarly described silence as a strategy for avoiding unwanted attention. These accounts resonate with research showing that accent stigma can shape interpersonal evaluation [3] and with ethnographic evidence on the psychological consequences of linguistic racism and accent bullying [10].

Repeated exposure to these hierarchies appeared to become internalized. Students did not only report being judged by others; they also began to question their own academic ability. Anxiety, embarrassment, and self-censorship recurred across the sites. The data thus indicate that linguism can influence participation indirectly by altering students' expectations about whether their contributions will be treated as intellectually legitimate.

INSTITUTIONAL PRACTICES AND INCLUSION

Institutional responses were uneven. The Philippine universities had bilingual practices, yet some classroom interactions continued to privilege monolingual or standardized English expectations. Public correction and selective calling patterns were reported as discouraging. The Texas school offered English as a Second Language support and peer assistance, but some students felt that participation in these programs made them more visibly different.

Across the three sites, general diversity initiatives did not consistently include explicit attention to accent discrimination. The gap between official inclusion and everyday practice indicates that language equity requires more than access to support programs. It also requires examining the ideological assumptions embedded in teacher expectations, participation routines, and assessment criteria [1,5,6].

CROSS-CONTEXTUAL SUMMARY

Across the Philippine sites, regional-accent concerns, public correction, and the association of American-sounding English with competence encouraged hesitation and self-silencing. At the Texas site, fear of grammar and pronunciation errors produced comparable reluctance among Spanish-speaking and immigrant students. The institutional mechanisms differed—bilingual practices in the Philippine universities and ESL support in Texas—but neither context consistently addressed accent discrimination as a distinct equity concern. The cross-case pattern therefore lies less in identical institutional conditions than in a shared social process: students anticipated that marked ways of speaking could reduce the credibility granted to their academic contributions.

DISCUSSION

The findings show that linguism was expressed through both direct interaction and less visible institutional expectations. Accent-based judgments, language correction, and assumptions about proficiency shaped who felt entitled to speak. Although the Philippine and Texas sites differed substantially, students in both contexts described a similar mechanism: a dominant image of acceptable English became a standard against which academic credibility was measured. This pattern is consistent with raciolinguistic critiques of "appropriateness," which argue that standardized norms can appear objective while disproportionately burdening speakers whose language practices are already socially marked [1,2]. The results also illustrate Bourdieu's concept of linguistic capital. Students whose speech was treated as legitimate entered classroom discourse with fewer social risks, whereas others had to manage both the academic task and the possibility that accent or language choice would become the focus of evaluation [8]. Accent stigma research helps explain why this additional burden can produce avoidance and self-monitoring [3], while Dovchin's work on linguistic racism highlights how repeated accent bullying and stereotyping can generate psychological harm [10].

Institutional support remains important, but support can reproduce stigma when multilingual learners are framed primarily as deficient speakers who require correction. A translanguaging perspective offers a different orientation by treating students' full repertoires as resources for meaning-making and learning [5,6]. In practical terms, this means distinguishing communication that is genuinely unclear from communication that simply differs from a preferred accent or variety. It also means designing assessment systems in which knowledge, reasoning, audience awareness, and communicative effectiveness carry more weight than native-like pronunciation.

The study also has limitations. The purposive sample was small and distributed across institutions that differed in educational level, national context, and organizational structure. The frequency counts were descriptive and cannot support population-level estimates. Moreover, ethnographic interpretation is sensitive to context and researcher positioning. The value of the cross-context analysis therefore lies in identifying recurring mechanisms and contrasts rather than claiming direct equivalence between Philippine and U.S. institutions. Future studies should use larger multisite samples, include teacher perspectives, and examine whether specific anti-bias interventions change participation patterns over time.

CONCLUSION

Language-based discrimination affected students' willingness to participate, academic confidence, and sense of belonging in the three institutions examined. Accent stereotyping and the privileging of standardized English appeared in both interpersonal behavior and institutional practice. Students who used regional, immigrant, or non-dominant language varieties were more likely to anticipate judgment and to withdraw from classroom interaction.

The study therefore supports a broader understanding of inclusion in multicultural education. Linguistic diversity should not be addressed only through remedial support or symbolic celebration. Institutions need explicit safeguards against language shaming, sustained professional development on accent and language bias, and classroom assessment practices that recognize multiple legitimate ways of communicating. Student voice can be incorporated through anonymous surveys, focus groups, and multilingual forums, while co-curricular spaces such as storytelling circles and multilingual writing groups can normalize linguistic diversity. These measures shift the goal from making students sound alike to ensuring that diverse speakers can participate, be understood, and be evaluated for the substance of what they know.

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