Understanding and Challenging Accent Bias Through Collaborative Research with Community Members

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Teló, C., Lu, L., Okawa, G., Suzuki, R., See, Y. F., Pham, T. T. D., Odal, A., Mejía, L., Madkaikar, S., Kovacs, A., Kim, B., Fallahnejad, M., Chen, K., Carvajal, M., Balmouddane, Z., Ahmed, T., Trofimovich, P., & O'Brien, M. G. (2026). Understanding and challenging accent bias through collaborative research with community members. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*. https://doi.org/10.1080/01434632.2026.2727736

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Accent bias—unfair assessment of individuals based on their pronunciation—has pervasive repercussions for workplace dynamics and everyday interactions yet remains under-recognized as a form of discrimination. Despite growing research, insights rarely reach non-specialists, limiting broader societal change. We report on a participatory research project that engaged six academic facilitators and 12 community co-researchers across two Canadian cities (Burnaby and Montréal) in understanding and challenging accent bias. Over eight weeks, we participated in discussions and collaborative work exploring experiences of accent bias and developing community-oriented initiatives to promote accent awareness. We analyzed our audio-recorded discussions and written reflections through collaborative thematic analysis, revealing two overarching themes. First, among community co-researchers, a deeper understanding of accent and accent bias emerged, with accents recognized as related to a person's identity rather than effort or ability, and responsibility for communication reframed as shared between speakers and listeners. Second, community co-researchers viewed themselves as agents of change, engaging in mini-projects focused on awareness-raising, community outreach, and resource creation, which fostered personal and professional growth and a commitment to action for all involved. Our findings demonstrate the value of community–researcher partnerships for challenging accent bias.

Keywords: accent bias, accent awareness, linguistic discrimination, community–researcher collaboration, knowledge mobilization, participatory action research

Introduction

"Your voice only counts if it sounds a certain way" (Mah). This message resonates with many who have felt the impact of speaking with a stigmatized accent. Accent bias—unfair assessment of individuals based on their pronunciation—shapes assumptions about where someone is from, the truthfulness of what they say, or how intelligent they are. This can lead to biased decisions about employability, housing, or organizational representation. While research demonstrates that accent is unrelated to competence, trustworthiness, or for the most part intelligibility, there is a general lack of public understanding about accents and the harms of accent bias and discrimination. We (six academics and 12 community co-researchers) therefore partnered for a participatory research project focusing on understanding and minimizing accent bias, with the goal of promoting community–researcher collaboration. We report on how community members understand accent bias and see themselves as agents of change.

Literature Review

Sources and Consequences of Accent Bias

Accent bias stems from two processes. The first involves social categorization and stereotyping, where listeners infer a speaker's group membership and apply negative stereotypes about that group to the speaker (Fiske & Neuberg, 1990; Ryan, 1983). The second involves processing (dis)fluency, where the effort of processing accented speech, which listeners attribute to the speaker, generates negative responses such as annoyance that downgrade speaker evaluations (Dragojevic et al., 2017, 2025). Both pathways are rooted in listener beliefs, fuelled by portrayals of accented speakers as uneducated, villainous, or low-status (Dragojevic & Giles, 2016; St. Pierre & Johnson, 2026), and by misconceptions about accents (Hansen et al., 2020; Teló et al., 2026b).

There are many misconceptions about regional, minoritized, and second or additional language (L2) accents. One is that an accent is a marker of personal and professional qualities such as goodwill and competence (Hansen, 2020), when in fact it says little about the speaker beyond where they have lived or which languages they speak (Lippi-Green, 2012). Another belief is that speakers can eliminate an accent through effort or choice (Hansen, 2020), yet L2 accents are notoriously difficult to change, even after training or immersion (Lee et al., 2015; Thomson et al., 2024). L2 accents are also conflated with understanding, though even strongly accented speakers are often readily understood (Huensch & Nagle, 2021). Lastly, comments like "You speak good French" or "Your accent is cute" may feel like well-intended praise but can function as microaggressions (Sue et al., 2007; Trofimovich et al., 2024), implying surprise at a speaker's proficiency and foregrounding how they speak over what they say.

Accent bias is a pervasive yet overlooked form of inequality (Ramjattan, 2024). Accented speakers are frequently judged as less trustworthy, intelligent, and competent than speakers of standard varieties (Russo et al., 2017). In professional contexts, such bias can shape hiring, promotion, and retention decisions (Roberts, 2021; Spence et al., 2024), disproportionately affecting individuals from minoritized communities (Iheduru-Anderson, 2020; Ramjattan, 2026; Teló et al., 2026a). Accented speakers are often screened out before they can demonstrate their qualifications (Derous et al., 2017) or hired into non-customer-facing or lower-status occupations (Iheduru-Anderson, 2020; Teló et al., 2022). They are also frequently directed toward accent reduction training, which is ineffective and harmful, implying that speakers must erase their identity to be considered legitimate professionals (Lee et al., 2015; Ramjattan, 2023, 2024).

Accent bias affects speakers beyond inequitable treatment. Accented speakers can develop heightened awareness of being judged negatively (Gluszek & Dovidio, 2010), which can lead to

perceived status loss, negative emotions, and social avoidance (Kim et al., 2019). The stigma of accented speech compounds these challenges, such that speaking in an L2 can feel cognitively effortful (Ghazi-Saidi et al., 2015) and anxiety-provoking, as speakers carefully monitor their speech and behavior (Aichhorn & Puck, 2017). Together, these experiences foster feelings of exclusion, incompetence, and workplace withdrawal (Kim et al., 2019), with consequences for psychological wellbeing and life satisfaction (Freynet et al., 2020).

Addressing Accent Bias and Promoting Accent Awareness

Despite growing population mobility, accent misconceptions remain entrenched. Children encounter accent stereotypes early through media (St. Pierre & Johnson, 2026), quickly developing preferences for speakers with accents similar to their own (Kinzler, 2021). Accent attitudes persist into adulthood, with hierarchies of dispreferred accents remaining stable across studies conducted over the period of 50 years (Sharma et al., 2022). Misconceptions also permeate professional domains. Even speech-language pathologists hold mistaken beliefs such as attributing accent to jaw shape and believing that accents can be clinically eliminated (Foote & Thomson, 2021). Similar views have been attested among non-language professionals such as employees of a petrochemical company and organizational stakeholders, including HR specialists (Derwing & Munro, 2009; Ramjattan, 2026; Trofimovich et al., 2024), likely because business and professional training rarely focuses on accent diversity (O'Brien et al., 2026).

Addressing accent bias requires dedicated interventions. In higher education, several projects have targeted students' negative language attitudes through structured contact activities promoting familiarity with accents and respectful communication (Kang et al., 2015; Subtirelu et al., 2022). Outside university, however, few initiatives have equipped non-specialists with knowledge about accent bias. Derwing et al. (2002) found that cross-cultural awareness training

and linguistic instruction helped social workers develop greater empathy toward accented speakers and confidence in interacting with them. More recently, Henderson (2026) ran workshops for library staff to practice strategies for communication with accented speakers (e.g., use simple vocabulary, rephrase rather than repeat), while Drummond and Ryan (2025) explored how podcasts can challenge accent bias.

While open discussion has value in identifying and addressing linguistic prejudice, existing efforts remain infrequent and restricted to specific audiences, with limited attention paid to sustained reflection and action. One promising direction is community–researcher partnerships, where community members actively explore language inequalities. Such partnerships reflect a bidirectional flow of knowledge (Sato & Loewen, 2022), bringing research findings into communities of practice while enriching research through community insight (Rose, 2019; Sato et al., 2024). Examples include collaborative reflections between language researchers and teachers (Anwer & Reiss, 2023; Sato & Loewen, 2019) and language awareness projects with secondary school students (Molek-Kozakowska & Laihonen, 2025). Where L2 pronunciation and accent are concerned, however, such collaborative efforts remain confined to language classrooms or teacher training programs (Jeong et al., 2025; Sweeting & Carey, 2025).

One model of community–research collaboration is citizen science, where members of the public participate as co-researchers, working to co-produce knowledge across varying levels of engagement—from taking images of insects to enacting community policy plans (Kullenberg & Kasperowski, 2016; Ozolinčiūtė et al., 2022). A related approach aimed at effecting change is participatory action research (Kindon et al., 2024). Unlike traditional research, participatory action research treats participants as integral team members who contribute knowledge through an iterative cycle of observing, reflecting, planning, and acting to identify social issues and consider

what needs to change (Reason & Bradbury, 2008). Academic researchers serve as facilitators, helping co-researchers develop and enact an action plan (Kindon et al., 2024), with success measured by the extent to which co-researchers develop personal and professional skills as advocates for social change (McIntyre, 2008).

The Current Study

Despite extensive scholarly discourse, biased evaluations of accented speakers continue to be reported across educational, professional, and public contexts (Roberts, 2021; Spence et al., 2024). Persistent issues include nativeness ideologies in language practices (Jeong & Lindemann, 2025), misconceptions about accents (Hansen, 2020), accent bullying (Dovchin, 2020), public pressure to modify or eliminate accents (Ennser-Kananen et al., 2021), and limited accent bias training among HR professionals (O'Brien et al., 2026). A key challenge is that proposed solutions have largely remained within academic or instructional settings, rarely translated into sustained efforts to engage non-specialists in reflecting and acting on accent bias.

To address this challenge, we—academics and community co-researchers—collaborated to explore and address accent bias. The academics, who served as facilitators, were interested in community-oriented work and saw participatory research as a way to foster accent awareness through knowledge creation, iterative cycles of reflection and action, and an aim to effect societal change (Reason & Bradbury, 2008). The community co-researchers saw the project as a way to confront accent-related inequalities and promote dialogue with accented speakers, who often stigmatize their own accents, and listeners, who tend to perpetuate accent-focused stereotypes. We conducted our study over eight weeks concurrently in two Canadian cities (Burnaby and Montréal) as a team of six academic facilitators and 12 community co-researchers, who observed and reflected on accent bias experiences before planning and enacting projects focused on accent

diversity and awareness.

We designed our study to address practical concerns around accent bias. In this article, we present the community co-researchers' understandings of accent and accent bias and their experiences as agents of change, interpreted through the retrospective application of Kolb's experiential learning theory (Passarelli & Kolb, 2023) by the facilitators. Together, we discuss our views on addressing accent bias through the community–researcher partnership. Kolb's theory posits learning as a cycle, from participating in or observing an experience, through reflection before creating new or reorganizing existing knowledge, and finally to active experimentation through action (Kolb, 2014). This framework was a good fit, as it emphasizes active engagement across multiple learning stages and maps clearly onto the observe–reflect–plan–act cycle of our initiative. Our insights—gathered through informational workshops, four sets of collaborative clinics, and a final reflection and dissemination meeting—addressed the following question: How do community co-researchers understand accent and accent bias and see themselves as agents of social change through participation in a collaborative project working alongside applied linguistics researchers as academic facilitators?

Methodology

Research Collective

The research collective included 18 co-researchers: (a) six academics, all applied linguistics researchers, two from Simon Fraser University in Burnaby, four from Concordia University in Montréal, (b) five community members (working across nursing, retail, software development, education, and HR management) unaffiliated with a university in Burnaby, and (c) seven undergraduate students enrolled in an English-medium HR management program in Montréal. The collective (13 women, 5 men, aged 20–63) self-identified as first- or second-

generation immigrants from 13 countries, representing diverse ethnolinguistic profiles. All but four were L2 speakers of English and/or French (Canada's two official languages), reporting Arabic, Cantonese, Farsi, French, German, Japanese, Korean, Mandarin, Marathi, Russian, Spanish, Portuguese, Tagalog, and Vietnamese as first or additional languages. Apart from the facilitators, no co-researcher had formal training in linguistics or communication research.

After setting the initial research focus, the facilitators recruited community members based on practicality and impact. Although the academic facilitators had no previously established community partnerships, they had prior contact with HR students in Montréal, documenting the lack of accent bias training in HR programs (O'Brien et al., 2026), and saw research with future organizational stakeholders a natural step toward change in communities of practice. Because no established links with HR specialists existed in Burnaby, the facilitators prioritized wider outreach to mobilize local insight. Community members were recruited for an initial in-person informational workshop on accent bias in the workplace through posters in public locations in Burnaby and on the university campus in Montréal. A total of 22 community members (nine in Burnaby, 13 in Montréal) attended the initial workshops across the sites and were invited by the facilitators to join and co-create a collaborative project on accent bias as co-researchers. Initially, seven attendees in Burnaby and nine in Montréal responded positively to the invitation. Of those, two attendees in Burnaby (one majority and one minority language speaker) and two in Montréal (both majority language speakers) discontinued their participation after the action research orientation meeting (see below), mentioning work or study obligations. Two attendees in Burnaby (one majority and one minority language speaker) and four in Montréal (two majority and two minority language speakers) declined the initial invitation to join the project. Those who decided to continue on with the project as co-researchers (described above) provided written informed

consent and received a $50 honorarium per attended discussion session but were not remunerated for project work.

Project Structure and Meetings

The project consisted of several phases spanning approximately 8 weeks of collaborative meetings and individual or group work, followed by approximately 12 months of data analysis and ongoing dissemination activities (see Table 1 for phase details and research team responsibilities). We held five collaborative meetings combining synchronous and asynchronous activities with the goal of facilitating the development of small-scale, action-oriented mini-projects by the community co-researchers raising awareness of accent bias. In each city, we began with a 2-hour in-person workshop developed by the facilitators from a prior instructional initiative (O'Brien et al., 2024), where they introduced research-based evidence on accent bias, prompted personal reflection, and established shared terminology for subsequent discussions. During the next meeting (orientation), we worked through guided simulations of the observe–reflect–plan–act cycle to discuss hypothetical scenarios involving accent bias. Two subsequent co-design clinics supported individual or small-group mini-project development. In the first clinic, we collectively identified issues of interest to the community co-researchers, articulating the need for change, and brainstorming actions; in the second clinic, we focused on timelines, resource needs, completion criteria, and subjective indicators of success. Over the next two weeks, the community co-researchers worked individually or in small groups completing 10 mini-projects (five per city)—personal narratives, community member interviews, awareness-raising videos, and knowledge-sharing events and materials—most shared publicly on LinkedIn. During the final reflection and dissemination meeting, held first separately in each city and then jointly online, the community

co-researchers presented their mini-projects, and together we discussed challenges, learning outcomes, and future directions.

All meetings followed semi-structured agendas prepared by the facilitators and adapted in real time to co-researcher needs, with formats, dates, and venues decided collaboratively, except for the informational workshop. In Burnaby, the workshop, orientation, and reflection meetings took place in a community center, while co-design clinics were conducted online to accommodate scheduling constraints. In Montréal, all meetings were held in person in a university classroom. Additional details about the study's structure are available in a published procedure-focused report (Teló, Suzuki, et al., 2026), and all materials and data are shared through the study's OSF profile. Ethics approval for this study was obtained from Concordia University Human Research Ethics Committee (certification number 30021271) and Simon Fraser University Research Ethics Board (certification number 30002912).

Regarding the division of research labor and author contributions, this article emerged from a reciprocal collaboration between the community co-researchers and academic facilitators, all of whom are co-authors. The facilitators, who strove to co-construct a horizontal community–researcher partnership, led the project's initial conceptualization, secured funding, established baseline procedures, and obtained ethics approval. Within this structure, the community co-researchers identified the issues that mattered to them, determined the form their action would take, and set their own criteria for completion and success. While the facilitators offered iterative, project- and team-specific guidance to keep each mini-project aligned with the initiative's broader goal (i.e., engaging in small-scale, actionable work on accent awareness), the community co-researchers retained creative freedom and control over the content, scope, and dissemination channels of their mini-projects. For this article, the facilitators led data analysis and drafted the

Literature Review, Results, and Discussion sections, drawing on data generated through our documented contributions, with input from community co-researchers throughout. The Results section foregrounds the community co-researchers' perspectives as individuals whose voices are rarely heard in academic discourse, while the Discussion reflects joint insights from all co-researchers. All co-authors approved the final content and report no conflict of interest.

Table 1

Summary of Project Phases

Phase	Timing	What happened	Responsibility
Initial project design, ethics, and recruitment	Fall 2024	Established conceptual/ontological orientation; established research goals; initially conceptualized the project structure; ethical clearance	Facilitators, with feedback from one HR student on a potential project structure
Informational workshop	February 2025: Week 1	Two-hour in-person workshop; introduced research evidence on accent bias, prompted personal reflection, and established shared terminology; activities included video-based discussion and drafting advice for HR specialists. Attendees were invited to join the project as co-researchers	Facilitators
Action research orientation	February 2025: Week 3	Teams in each city co-designed the project structure, then used guided simulations of the observe–reflect–plan–act cycle to map hypothetical workplace scenarios of accent bias; activities included reflection on participatory research, mapping of bias episodes, and mini-case analysis.	Facilitators (lead); community co-researchers (supporting)
Co-design clinics (two)	March 2025: Weeks 4–5	Community co-researchers identified the accent-related issues their mini-projects would address, reflected on why change was needed, brainstormed steps, and discussed implementation timelines, resource needs, completion criteria, and subjective indicators of personal success; activities included storyboarding and peer- and self-feedback	Community co-researchers (lead); facilitators (supporting)
Asynchronous implementation	March 2025: Weeks 6–7	Community co-researchers piloted or implemented 10 mini-projects, with optional discussion and feedback via email/Zoom or Moodle/Canvas shell	Community co-researchers

Reflection and dissemination meetings	April–May 2025: Week 8	Each community co-researcher or team presented their mini-project, followed by a whole-group debrief on lessons learned, challenges, and future goals, ending with dissemination plans; held separately by city, then jointly online	Shared, following a plan proposed by facilitators
Non-academic dissemination	May–December 2025	Community co-researchers made plans to publicly share (or not) a short summary of their experience or mini-project and posted it on social media channels (LinkedIn, YouTube)	Community co-researchers (lead); facilitators (supporting)
Initial data analysis	May–December 2025	Facilitators independently reviewed transcripts and collectively generated a deductive scheme of six categories; all transcripts were coded by teams of three facilitators, following cycles of independent coding, peer review of decisions, and whole-group consensus	Facilitators
Participatory member checking	December 2025	Two online sessions scaffolded by a summative document of prompts, themes, interpretations, and quotes; seven community co-researchers attended, and two provided comments asynchronously	Shared, following a plan proposed by the facilitators
Final coding	Winter 2026	Coded categories and member-checking insights were integrated across multiple discussion cycles; Kolb's experiential learning theory applied retrospectively to map categories onto learning stages	Facilitators
Academic dissemination	January–August 2026	Preparation of academic articles and presentations, including the present article, a procedure-focused report (Teló, Suzuki, et al., 2026), and chapter focused on the collaboration between facilitators and community co-researchers (Author, forthcoming)	Facilitators (lead); community co-researchers (supporting)

Data Analysis

The primary data included transcribed audio recordings from the informational workshop, two collaborative clinics, and final reflection and dissemination meeting per site (Burnaby, Montréal), each lasting approximately 90–120 minutes. Supplementary written data were collected after the workshop and during the final reflection meeting, in response to prompts targeting the community co-researchers' perceptions of accent bias, learning experiences and challenges, and intentions for future action.

The facilitators analyzed all data through a multistage, iterative, and collaborative thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019). In the first stage, the six facilitators independently reviewed the transcript from the final collaborative clinic at each site, then collectively generated an initial deductive coding scheme with category descriptions and representative quotes, remaining open to inductive refinement (King, 2012). The six initial categories were: "definitions of accent & accent bias," "examples of accent bias and how to address it," "perceived project impact on self," "perceived project impact on others," "reflections on the project journey," and "reflections on collaborative experience."

In the second stage, the remaining transcripts were coded using this scheme by teams of three, with at least one member from the relevant site who had attended the recorded session, balancing insider and outsider perspectives. After independently coding each transcript, team members reviewed one another's decisions before a whole-group meeting where consensus was reached. This process was repeated until all data across both sites were jointly coded and agreed upon, with minor subcategories (e.g., "questioning the meaning of accent," "deepening the meaning of accent") merged under broader categories.

In the third stage, synchronous online member-checking sessions with community co-

researchers supported collaborative interpretation and dialogic meaning-making, scaffolded through a summative document with prompt questions, key themes, interpretations, and representative quotes (Kullman & Chudyk, 2025). Seven community co-researchers participated across two sessions. To minimize power imbalance, only two or three facilitators attended each session (Birt et al., 2016). All community co-researchers, including those unable to attend, were subsequently invited to review the summative document asynchronously (Birt et al., 2016), with two providing additional comments.

In the final stage, the facilitators integrated coded categories and member-checking insights through multiple cycles of discussion. Following co-researcher feedback, the six initial categories were organized under two major themes: (a) understanding accent and accent bias and (b) being an agent of change, which reflect how the community co-researchers made sense of their participation in the project. The facilitators then retrospectively applied Kolb's experiential learning theory (Kolb, 2014) to organize all categories according to learning stages of participatory action research. Ultimately, the finalized dataset (Table 2) encompassed two major themes, each unfolding across the concrete experience and observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation stages.

Table 2

Summary of Coded Categories Contributing to the Final Themes

	Major theme	
Kolb's learning stage	Understanding accent & accent bias	Being an agent of change
1. Concrete experience & observation	examples of observed accent bias; lived experience related to accent bias	personal and professional growth through project participation
2. Abstract conceptualization	awareness of accent bias; facts and myths about accents	collaboration and co-learning; ways to connect research and

		community
3. Active experimentation	envisioning institutional and interpersonal change; awareness-raising, bias mitigation strategies	implementation of mini-projects; ongoing advocacy and action

Positionality of the Research Collective and Trustworthiness

We are a diverse team with a shared interest in accents and their role in society. The 12 community-based co-researchers (most multilingual speakers and visible minorities) were drawn to the project and remained actively engaged because of their own or their family's experience with accent bias and a desire to make meaningful change in their professional or personal networks. The facilitators are four graduate students and two faculty members in applied linguistics specializing in pronunciation research. The faculty members, each with over 20 years of experience and 10 years of joint work, serve as supervisors to the graduate students. The faculty saw the project as a way of reaching out and learning from community members, something they felt they had not done sufficiently in prior work. The students were inspired by the prospect of participating in community-oriented collaborative work early in their careers. Throughout the study, we shared a co-working dynamic characterized by joint authority and co-creative partnership, with decisions reached through consultation and consensus.

In our majority, we are recent immigrants to Canada who, as L2 English or French speakers, experienced various degrees of struggle navigating academic or professional environments. Our experiential profile might therefore be especially sensitive to the stigma of L2 accents. To establish trustworthiness, the facilitators employed a "critical friend" protocol (Costa & Kallick, 1993), regularly challenging each other's assumptions and interpretations. The facilitators and the community co-researchers also engaged in regular check-ups and updates through shared goal setting for mini-projects, member checking of coded comments and their

interpretations, and decision-making about the dissemination of findings (Ozolinčiūtė et al., 2022). We are also aware of the perceived and actual power imbalances inherent in community–researcher collaboration, in part reflecting a common belief that "real" research is only done by scholars (Rose, 2019). The facilitators were therefore invested in providing the community co-researchers with support, agency, and space to engage in personally meaningful actions. We also always strove to achieve equitable and reflexive practices, taking turns to share individual perspectives, then positioning ourselves as active listeners to center another co-researcher's lived experiences.

Results

Understanding Accent and Accent Bias

Through this project, we as community co-researchers have made sense of accent bias through real, contextualized accounts drawn from our own workplaces, families, and daily interactions. We have reorganized our assumptions into working definitions of what accent is and is not and begun to imagine how accent bias can be addressed.

Experiencing Accent and Accent Bias

We have come to share an understanding of accent bias as a real, situated, and consequential phenomenon that remains unnoticed and largely absent from descriptions of prejudice. As one of us puts it, "when you think about discrimination towards people in general, it's either their race, their gender; [but] their accent, their language is never brought up" (Zineb). We realize that this bias often "slips through under the guise of communication issues" (Sawri), disguising itself as something other than discrimination (Thi Thuy). We ground this perspective in our lived experience, where we have been misunderstood or judged in public spaces (Byunghak), have witnessed public insults of a person's accent and appearance (Annika), have heard a manager

admit that accents made job applicants hard to take seriously (Flora), have seen accented coworkers sidelined from customer-facing tasks (Flora, Zineb), and have observed colleagues blame "the accent" for problems that are really about static or volume on a call (Sawri). For us, accent bias is personal. We have felt shy, insecure, or silenced because of our accents (Zineb), and have observed similar self-consciousness in our families and communities (Alet, Zineb), including our newcomer parents whose accents have led others to avoid engaging with them directly (Tahiyyah). Even so, we have come to embrace our accents as part of our identity and heritage: "I still… don't have a perfect English accent [and] it's not because I'm not willing to adapt, it's just that… the first language that I learned happen[s] to be part of me" (Zineb).

(Re-)Defining Accent

We consider accents as natural, deep, and stable—everyone has one, native speaker or not (Annika, Byunghak). We emphatically separate accent from a speaker's intelligence and character, recognizing that accent "is not equivalent to ability" (Mah) and reveals little about a speaker's competence or personality (Sawri). We recognize that language can be a form of privilege (Tahiyyah, Thi Thuy). We reject an effort-based account of accent, attributing it instead to the culture, place, and schooling speakers grew up with and to the difficulty of learning languages that are often different from one's mother tongue, rather than to an unwillingness to adapt (Alet, Tahiyyah). Changing an accent, we acknowledge, would require "time and efforts and money" that newcomers who "have to find a job and feed [their] family" rarely have (Tahiyyah). We treat intelligibility as more important than accent: "as long as the message is conveyed clearly… the task is done well" (Thi Thuy). More than that, we call for shifting focus away from accent altogether once people "are able to express themselves" and be understood (Mah). Finally, we understand communication success as shared and contextual, requiring openness and intentionality

from all parties in what is a two-way endeavor (Alet, Mayra). And personally speaking, our thinking has moved from “the problem is me” to recognizing that listeners, especially native speakers, must engage as receptive partners in communication (Byunghak).

Envisioning Change

Through our participation in this project, we have envisioned ways to address accent bias, proposing to embed accent into HR practice through employee-led training programs that “can change the [workplace] culture and get people involved” (Karolyn). We suggest raising awareness through posters, talks, and videos (Karolyn, Thi Thuy), and an online presence that helps “target companies” (Tahiyyah) and “get more people to comment and post to spread awareness” (Sawri). We also recommend empathy-building work, such as videos documenting the lived experience of accented individuals (Karolyn). We understand that responsibility for change lies with listeners and institutions, not accented speakers. Change begins with mindset and expectation as “the most important piece[s] that… need to change” (Mah), and it requires empathy in recognizing that every person “comes with a package of things,” including an accent (Mayra). Yet we remain candid about the limits of our individual agency, understanding that it can be difficult to instill openness toward accent diversity (Alet). We do not always know what we can do to fight accent bias except “being fair” and refusing to let an accent “take away all the good qualities or skills” a person has (Zineb), and we call for support from government and organizations to recognize accent bias as a specific form of discrimination. Ultimately, as one of us puts it, “we all have to play a role in this” (Zineb).

Being an Agent of Change

Beyond learning about accent bias, we have come to see our participation in this project as a process of becoming agents of change. We have grown both personally and professionally and

remain committed to continuing this work beyond the project's end.

Experiencing Being a Co-Researcher

We have found personal significance in our participation, often perceiving it as an accomplishment. For some of us, this is rooted in new insight (Annika, Flora, Mah), while for others it comes from bringing an idea to life (Karolyn) or doing something new, such as co-leading "the first event ever in my life that I [led] in gathering people" (Thi Thuy). We also tie this achievement to the work's significance, feeling purposeful to take part in "very meaningful work" (Sawri). In terms of concrete personal outcomes, we have found satisfaction in helping others (Mayra), have grown more confident in our relationship with our own accents as we witness the attention accent bias receives in research (Mah), and have moved away from seeing accent as a personal deficit, realizing that what we once saw as "just my problem" is "actually part of a bigger issue" (Byunghak). Beyond the personal, our participation shapes us professionally as well, especially for those of us studying or practicing HR. We anticipate that this experience "is going to be very important when making decisions in the future" (Lia), feel more motivated to become HR professionals who "bring more diversity within the workplace" (Tahiyyah), and for some, find that it exposes a gap in our understanding of diversity and inclusion that motivates us to take "actual steps to make sure that we are building a better workplace for everyone" (Karolyn).

Reflecting on Being a Co-Researcher

We have come to see this project as a different way of doing research, one grounded in collaboration. We have learned not just the subject itself but the act of coming together toward a collective purpose in a space where we can share our voices (Alet), have felt the impact of working with a diverse group of people, prompting us to reflect deeply on how we listen to and evaluate others (Sawri), and have moved from mere curiosity to fully embracing a collaborative

experience of bridging theory and practice in an interconnected world (Mayra). We have come to see research differently—not as "mostly... reading" but as work conducted "with citizens," rooted in a connection with the community that "people in the academic world needed… and also we as citizens... need" (Mah). We also recognize our own collective agency in social change, acknowledging that advocacy against accent bias should not be confined to institutions or experts, but should belong to every citizen, each of whom has an important role to play (Mah). We see our participation as contributing to a broader public discourse, helping "start meaningful conversations, raise awareness… and encourage professionals to think critically" about how accents shape perceptions of "competence, professionalism, and job fit" (Sawri). Finally, we frame this project as an ongoing process, feeling it "was too short" and remaining "a group of passionate citizens" who feel "more than happy to continue" (Mah). In the words of one academic facilitator, this is "just the beginning" (Mary).

Acting as a Co-Researcher

We see ourselves as agents of change committed to moving beyond reflection to community engagement, acting as initiators, contributors, and disseminators of awareness about accent and accent bias. As Annika puts it, "it's a change that starts with awareness, but more importantly it requires action." We have channeled this into 10 mini-projects (summarized in Table 3), developed individually or collaboratively and made available on LinkedIn, spanning critical reflections, community engagement activities, and practical resources for inclusive communication—all aimed at making accent bias more visible, discussable, and actionable in public and professional discourse. In terms of plans for our workplaces, social circles, and future careers, we hope to extend this change into our own personal surroundings (Flora, Lia, Mayra), feel a passion for making workplaces more inclusive and aware (Sawri), and intend to design a

workshop addressing the challenges accented individuals face both at work and in daily life (Tahiyyah). We also embrace sustained, everyday action, recognizing that “we can’t change the entire world, but we can make a small change around the area” (Thi Thuy). For us, no gesture is too small—“you don’t know how many people you will impact with any simple idea or tip” (Mayra).

Table 3

Summary of Mini-Projects

Project	Goal	Intended audience	Scope or approach	Deliverable
Accent bias workshop (Alet, Thi Thuy)	Confront manifestations of accent bias and prompt participants to examine assumptions	University community	Developed a workshop with small-group debates and guided discussions on accent bias; served as a hub integrating other mini-projects from co-researchers in Montréal	One-hour in-person workshop on accent bias
Accent & competence video (Flora, Karolyn, Zineb)	Surface how peers link accent to judgments of competence	Workshop attendees; LinkedIn audience	Interviewed 11 university students eliciting their thoughts on the relationship between a person's accent and professional competence	Two-minute video used as discussion input at the workshop and shared on LinkedIn
Newcomer experiences essay (Lia)	Reflect on lived experiences of accent bias and convey them in writing	Herself; workshop attendees	Wrote a short essay synthesizing interview with recent newcomers to Montréal; distributed in hard copy at the workshop	Reflective essay on newcomer experiences
Workshop reflection post (Tahhiyah)	Extend workshop conversation beyond the occasion	LinkedIn audience	Reflected on her experience at the workshop	LinkedIn post
Documentary review (Tahhiyah)	Reflect and document her engagement with a documentary on accent bias	LinkedIn audience	Watched the documentary *Not just words: Accent prejudice* and wrote a LinkedIn post with reflections	Reflective review of a documentary on accent bias shared on LinkedIn

Accent as identity post and video series (Byunghak)	Encourage L2 speakers to embrace their accents as part of their identity	L2 speakers; LinkedIn audience	Wrote a post sharing insights gained on accent as part of a person's identity; created a series of unpublished AI-generated videos documenting first-hand experiences of accent bias	Reflective post shared on LinkedIn; AI-generated videos
Reflective video on accent bias (Mah)	Document her understanding of accent bias and frame accents as core to diversity	LinkedIn audience	Created a reflective video sharing her insights into accents and diversity	LinkedIn post with video
Accent bias anecdote (Sawri)	Pair a lived experience with research evidence on workplace bias	LinkedIn audience	Wrote a narrative account of an individual's experience with accent bias followed by related research findings	LinkedIn post
Customer service reflection (Annika)	Advocate for equity, respect, and inclusion in multilingual environments	LinkedIn audience	Wrote a post reflecting on an experience with accent bias, closing with research findings and open questions for readers	LinkedIn post
Guidance for interacting with L2 speakers (Mayra)	Encourage empathetic communication practices	Professionals interacting with L2 speakers; LinkedIn audience	Wrote a reflections and advice piece with tips for more empathetic communication with L2 speakers	Reflective post shared on LinkedIn

Discussion

We explored our understandings of accent and accent bias and how we see ourselves as agents of social change, anchoring insights in the concrete experience, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation stages of Kolb's experiential learning theory (Passarelli & Kolb, 2023). After contributing to this project, we feel a sense of agency necessary for social change. We reconsidered widely held assumptions about accents, developed insight into accent bias as a socially embedded and often invisible form of discrimination, and drew on experiences, professional aspirations, and community connections to imagine and enact responses in everyday life. Our intention to continue work beyond the study suggests that participation fostered not only awareness but lasting commitment among both the community co-researchers and the academic facilitators. In this sense, the project illustrates the potential of community–researcher partnerships to connect academic knowledge with action on language-related inequalities, moving from research *about* communities to research *with* them to enable ongoing change (Kindon et al., 2024; McIntyre, 2008).

Reshaping beliefs and enacting change, however, requires sustained commitment embedded in the learning-through-action cycle. At a member-checking session six months after the study, several of us were still working through how to apply our knowledge in practice, often feeling unsure whether our personal growth in awareness was sufficient. Sawri explained:

> I was thinking about all the changes that I'm making as a communicator, as a career advisor, as a recruiter… in all my capacities, whether it's in a conversation or in my professional life… I am also making sure that others are aware that it's not their disadvantage if they have an accent… Does that go and impact on others?… There's like a bit of confusion from my side, just in terms of the change not just that we are aware, but

> we are also bringing change.

In response, Zineb implied that positive treatment of others might naturally follow a personal transformation but did not elaborate how a change might come about:

> I feel like as a human being, the impact [on self] is so strong that's causing us to actually act right towards other people… I think [that impact on] others is going to come along while you set yourself to these changes.

Following up, Lia appealed for more time to see personal change and its effects on others:

> It's like progressing, like as professionals, that project just happened. So you need some time, like it can even be years for you to actually see the impact that the project or these discussions and research had on you as a person. And then you see the impact it had on others when you put it into practice, as a practitioner, in a sense.

This exchange traces our developing self-awareness as community co-researchers, moving from internal cognitions and behaviors to our influence on others (Carden et al., 2022). This learning path required time, even among already motivated community co-researchers supported by academic facilitators, suggesting that addressing accent bias in others may take considerably longer (Sharma et al., 2022). These reflections also resonated with the facilitators. Pavel found it "grounding and inspiring" to hear about the community co-researchers' continued experiences because they "connected with the project and related to it in ways that are extremely meaningful on a personal level," while being mindful that sustained change comes from partnerships that continuously "grow and develop."

We found few empirically tested resources for addressing accent bias in real-world settings. Unlike research on race bias, where multiple approaches have been described and tested (e.g., Guo et al., 2023; Kalev & Dobbin, 2024), no comparable resources or systematic evidence

exist for language- and accent-based discrimination. This gap created ongoing challenge, even frustration, for us in developing actionable plans. At the end of the project, Tahiyyah noted, “I had a hard time find[ing] a project that [would] make a small difference to change our perception of accented individual[s],” and Alet wished to know “what methods or platforms we have in order to raise awareness and mitigate these biases.” We embraced this challenge through diverse, personally meaningful mini-projects, yet the impact may have been greater with access to research-backed resources, including mini-interventions (Miao et al., 2025) or in-situ responses to bias (Sue et al., 2019). A key goal for future initiatives is therefore to equip stakeholders with accessible tools (e.g., training resources, bias-auditing frameworks, and inclusive communication guidelines) that can be integrated into workplace practices.

Relatedly, we saw a need to evaluate community-focused action research and specific initiatives targeting accent bias (Farrell et al., 2024). Henrick et al.’s (2017) framework for assessing research–practice collaboration includes general indicators of progress across the dimensions of building trust, conducting rigorous research, supporting partners, and generating actionable knowledge. However, it largely leaves research teams to develop qualitative or quantitative measures and choose between bespoke and general evaluation tools. Without clear indicators of success, especially given the diversity of mini-projects, it remains unclear to what extent the mini-projects created meaningful impact, led to change, or built capacity for further action. This points to the importance of continued community-engaged work developing assessment tools for the effectiveness of collaborative partnerships and real-world impact of their actions.

Finally, the collaborative model itself presented challenges. Though committed to equitable and reflexive research practices, each of us entered the collaboration with lived experiences and

perspectives shaping our work. Beyond scheduling difficulties, we navigated an unfamiliar research journey. Several of us, like Sawri and Byunghak, began the collaboration believing that our accents were barriers, which may have affected our participation. Byunghak, who had lived and worked in Canada for many years, commented, "I sometimes felt like an outsider," and felt that his accent could affect how others perceive him. Lia, who interviewed community members about accent bias, found it challenging to balance their honest responses with a need for neutrality. "[B]ecause accent bias can be a sensitive topic," it felt crucial "to create a comfortable environment where [mini-project interviewees] felt at ease sharing their perspectives." For us as facilitators, working with community members as partners required adjusting our approach and relinquishing the control familiar from traditional research settings. Broadly, we recommend that researchers new to participatory action research work to remove potential barriers for community members—by scheduling off-campus or online meetings outside working hours, reimbursing travel expenses, providing meals, offering meaningful honoraria, and co-authoring papers and presentations (Resnik, 2019; Vohland et al., 2019).

Limitations and Future Work

One conceptual limitation is our inability to trace a developmental trajectory of the community co-researchers' awareness during the eight weeks of participation and subsequent months of data analysis and dissemination. Most community co-researchers were L2 speakers and visible minorities with rich lived experience of additional language use. Moreover, the project introduced the team to research-based facts about accents early, beginning with the informational workshop, so many may have had heightened awareness of accent bias from the outset. Although data collection spanned multiple meetings, we purposely refrained from making time-sensitive interpretations of meaning-making, given that learning is often nonlinear and dynamic. We also

acknowledge the inductive, static nature of our analysis and the retrospective application of Kolb's theory, and invite researchers to ground their work in such dynamic approaches to learning as participatory sensemaking (De Jaegher & Di Paolo, 2007).

A further limitation concerns the group dynamic of learning within and across project meetings. Consistent with Kolb's (2014) learning theory, individuals differ in learning preferences, gravitating toward leader, follower, naysayer, or observer roles. Leaders prefer active experimentation, followers gather resources and information, and naysayers generate reflective observations and novel perspectives (Dowell et al., 2020; Laroche et al., 2024). Learning preferences may also have shaped our engagement with the study, for example, with some community co-researchers opting for in-person workshops and others for individual reflective essays or resource creation. Understanding meaning-making and engagement in relation to personal preferences would require using group as a unit of analysis, describing participation roles and learning stages, and documenting the affordances created by collaboration (Kronsted et al., 2026). Relatedly, the collaborative model itself was not uniform, varying across phases and team members (see Table 1) and reflecting practical realities (e.g., uneven demands of academic publishing for those with and without formal research training). As a result, the knowledge presented here was co-produced in some respects and academic-led in others. Mah, for example, noted a desire to engage with the research process more extensively, illustrating how community-engaged work involves ongoing conversations about participation and roles.

As a research collective, we are self-selected individuals with academic, professional, or personal interest in language or communication. While diversity in ethnicities, races, languages, and accents is our strength, open calls—at a university (in Montréal) and community locations (in Burnaby)—attracted mostly speakers of additional languages with experience of accent bias. This

introduces competing pressures between involving people who may themselves experience discrimination in efforts to reduce bias while also ensuring sufficient community representation. The L2-speaking community co-researchers also likely represent early adopters, corresponding to the initial stage of innovation diffusion (Rogers, 2003). A key challenge for future work is translating these efforts into the next stage, where majority adopters embrace the innovation. Such efforts depend on engaging speakers of dominant language varieties, particularly those with institutional influence and power. How to involve such populations in community-driven initiatives remains a critical challenge.

Conclusion

Accent bias is a persistent yet under-acknowledged form of discrimination, extending from hiring decisions to the everyday silencing of speakers made to feel their voice does not count. Through opportunities to observe, reflect, plan, and act, community members can deepen their understanding of accent and position themselves as advocates for change. As with any social shift, progress is uneven, reaching the already motivated before the resistant. Working professionals and HR students may be well-positioned as early adopters: Entering the workforce with heightened awareness, they can promote equitable practices and challenge assumptions that disadvantage accented speakers. As Mah observed, however, meaningful change starts with mindset, so reducing accent-based inequalities calls for ongoing dialogue, storytelling, and shared experiences that challenge misconceptions about accent and professional competence. Combined with institutional interventions and broader societal awareness, these personal efforts are key to fostering the attitudinal shifts needed to reduce accent bias long term.

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