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This paper is essentially a consideration of methodological issues in L2 studies, with a focus on collecting production data in non-native contexts. It begins with a discussion of past techniques for investigating L2 speech, and then makes a case for new ways of examining the speech of proficient speakers of second language varieties of English in an attempt to understand how they co-construct English in multilingual settings. Drawing on a multiple case study that was conducted among a selected group of proficient speakers of English in Malaysia, the paper offers a critical description and evaluation of a technique used to gather spoken data generated in a variety of naturalistic contexts. In particular, it evaluates the selection and preparation of participants, the research tools and procedures used, and the roles and relationships involved in the research. It is hoped that the issues raised in this paper will offer new methodological possibilities and serve as a resource for researchers in multilingual communities.

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Capturing L2 Spoken English: Methodological Challenges

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Keywords: methodology, second language, spoken data, case study

Introduction

It is common knowledge that the unprecedented spread of English has resulted in the rapid growth in the number of non-native speakers who possess varying degrees of proficiency in the language. Although SLA research has mainly focused on L2 learners' errors and lack of competence, it has also become apparent that much of their interaction in English is successful, and that a sizable proportion of them are proficient users of the language. These observations have spurred scholars to rethink their assumptions about the use and users of English, and led to calls for research into English as adopted and appropriated by its non-native speakers. The studies that have followed have problematised the nature, status and assumptions of these ESL and EFL speakers, and have raised questions about the methodologies employed to collect and analyse data in SLA studies

Using these past studies as a point of departure, this paper describes and evaluates a methodology used to collect a range of spoken data in an L2 setting. It begins with an examination of some of the common methodological themes that have characterised, and unfortunately, often undermined many L2 studies. The next section then proposes a different technique to gather L2 spoken data, and describes a study undertaken using this practice. Focusing on the ways in which proficient speakers of English in Malaysia used their second language in the lived-in world, data were collected in the form of audio-taped recordings of speech, as well as interviews and retrospective participant commentary on selected recordings. The methodology employed is critically evaluated, with particular consideration given to the participants, the research tools and procedures, and the role relationships established at the research site. The final section draws the discussion to a close by considering how the use of contextualised practices in L2 research can inform methodological principles and practices.

Past Investigations into L2 Speech

Much of past research into L2 speech has tended to rely on artificially-elicited and constructed data obtained in non-interactive settings. Although there are clear benefits to be accrued from these techniques, what may be disputed is the *reliance* on such artificial, unnatural data to provide the sole source of evidence on which descriptions and evaluations are based, which are then generalised to entire speech groups and communities. Even in studies that attempted to elicit ‘natural’ speech as the stimulus material, the laboratory-like conditions under which the experiments are usually conducted negate such attempts.

Perhaps of greater concern is the claim by Sridhar (1985) that most descriptions of non-native varieties available tend to be impressionistic and fragmentary, lacking in important background information on the sources of the data, the contexts of elicitation, and the regularity of occurrence of the specified features, with virtually no attempt to relate linguistic variation to social factors. In fact, an examination of the descriptions of non-native varieties reveals that they have been culled from speakers with different proficiency levels, different mother tongue backgrounds and different styles of usage. Often, generalisations made from such data about L2 competence are treated as legitimate evidence for second language hypotheses and as justification for reinforcing an interlanguage view of all L2 varieties.

Besides these tendencies, most studies done on new varieties of English have been largely parasitic in nature, dominated by either ‘deficit’ or ‘deviational’ approaches. Such approaches view the native varieties as providing the yardstick for assessing non-native varieties and as the model to be emulated, and invariably characterise these L2 varieties in terms of judgemental departures from a native norm. This deficit approach essentially tends to regard all L2 variation as exemplars of L1 transfer, limited competence and inadequate approximations of the target, and the non-native speaker is then routinely and often unfairly “conceived as a permanent language learner, divesting a large proportion of international speakers of English of any socially-recognised authority” (Brutt-Griffler & Samimy, 2001, p. 104).

I would argue that many of these conventional techniques and principles, although prevalent, produce artificial and inauthentic data and consequently place severe limitations on the findings of the studies. Such limited data, decontextualised investigations and distorted assumptions cannot give a clear and real indication of the range of a speaker’s linguistic repertoire. It is the *totality* of a speaker’s repertoire, rather than merely a small part of it, which must form the basis for describing any language variety and for understanding the social meanings underlying linguistic choices (Milroy, 1987; McKay, 2002). Only if reliable information on the socially and linguistically patterned nature of variation in the Englishes of different societies is made available can language attitudes, norms, and functions of the various codes be correctly understood.

Exploring New Research Approaches

Recognising the conceptual and methodological shortcomings of past studies, scholars have embarked on collecting real speech of L2 speakers in a form conducive for analysis and further hypothesising. For instance, the International Corpus of English (ICE) includes both native and non-native varieties of English, and going one step further, the Vienna-Oxford Corpus of English (VOICE) describes itself as exclusively focused on "English as it is spoken by this non-native speaking majority of users" (http://www.univie.ac.at/voice/). Aside from large-scale corpora, Prodromou (2003, p. 11) has collected data from samples of "natural, spontaneous speech produced by proficient non-native users of English as a foreign language" in his quest to describe successful users of English.

Together with other researchers, a case is slowly but surely being built for a shift in focus from the traditional and exclusive native-speaker paradigm, to one that recognises the value of proficient L2 users, and what they have to offer the field of applied linguistics. As the VOICE homepage puts it, "These speakers use English successfully on a daily basis all over the world, be it in their personal, professional or academic lives. They are not language learners but language users in their own right. Thus, it is clearly worth finding out just how they use the language" (http://www.univie.ac.at/voice/). This stance has been echoed by others. Pakir (1999, p. 108) calls for research to be conducted from "the fresh perspective of English-knowing bilinguals as they emerge as the new actors on the world stage" and Tomlinson (2005), discussing ELT in Asia, highlights the urgency of describing the English used by effective communicators.

I believe that there is a clear need to collect, analyse and describe the English used by non-native speakers, and especially, proficient and communicatively successful L2 users. While the large-scale corpus projects are to be lauded, these may be usefully complemented by studies which are more particularistic and descriptive, in which one or a small number of L2 speakers are observed in communicative interactions with those around them, and the patterns of their language use (at any level of language) systematically described. In fact, Mohanan (1992) and Hung (1995) promote the investigation and characterisation of the variable linguistic systems of *individuals* as a valid enterprise in its own right, and one that is necessary if a language variety is to be described.

I would therefore argue that investigations into L2 varieties must attempt to grapple with 'real', natural, everyday spoken language, no matter how unwieldy and messy the data. By focusing on naturalistic uses of English in the community, we would respond to the need for research into "what this English actually looks like when it is used in diverse constellations among non-native speakers" (Seidlhofer, 2001, p. 14). There is also sound rationale for focusing on proficient non-native speakers (Rajadurai, 2005), in line with the growing acknowledgement of this group as a rich, largely untapped resource in research in applied linguistics and intercultural studies.

In addition, I would also contend that research must seek to treat established L2 varieties as distinct systems in their own right, thereby taking a more holistic and sociolinguistically-informed approach to describing and accounting for the variation encountered. This entails a search for patterns in the data, as well as a consideration of the meaning participants give their own direct experiences. This use of a multiplicity of viewpoints promotes the construction of meaning within particular settings, and in so doing helps ensure that the cultural and intellectual biases of the researcher do not distort the collection, interpretation or presentation of the data.

All this calls for a new orientation and methodology that centre on speech representative of the community or a purposefully selected segment of the community generated in naturalistic contexts of use, and then capturing this speech in as clear and unobtrusive a way as possible, without intruding and somehow altering or affecting the speaker's world. This was the fundamental research stance taken in a study conducted in Malaysia, aimed at documenting how proficient and communicatively successful L2 speakers in Malaysia use English in everyday contexts. The primary method of collecting spoken data involved selecting a few proficient, educated speakers of English from among the researcher's social network who would have both the ability and occasion to use English in a variety of situations and with a range of interlocutors, both Malaysian and non-Malaysian. The participants were asked to carry a voice recorder with a built-in microphone with them over a period of several weeks, and to record a wide spectrum of conversations and exchanges that they participated in.

It must be clearly stated that this paper does not attempt to introduce particular research questions, or analyse the data collected. Instead, it grapples with some of the important questions that emerge in the process of creating a small corpus of authentic L2 speech. It is hoped that the discussion of potential pitfalls, as well as strategies to safeguard the investigation will help future researchers navigate their way through the tensions inherent in the process of data collection. The next few sections examine some of these methodological challenges.

Participants of the Study

Selection of Participants

One advantage of the data collection technique described above is that it allows the researcher to select the speakers he or she wishes to investigate according to clearly specified criteria. While it may be argued that such selectiveness leads to a lack of representativeness, this criticism overlooks the specific goals and concerns of the research. In fact, Milroy (1987) cautions the sociolinguistic fieldworker that it is difficult, if not impossible, to obtain data that both represent the speech of the total community and reflect a wide stylistic repertoire. She argues that if representativeness is the primary criterion, research would either have to be carried out in distinct phases, or it would have to be confined to one style, ignoring the stylistic continuum that is present. Thus, if the primary aim is to capture linguistic variation in the verbal repertoires of selected speakers, it may be necessary to sacrifice representativeness in the interest of developing a technique of recording a wide range of naturally-occurring sub-varieties as used by a selected segment of the population.

It can also be argued that the choice of particular speakers of English is compatible with the principles of purposive and theoretical sampling. Purposive sampling allows one to choose a case because it illustrates some feature or process that the researcher is interested in investigating (Silverman, 2000), advances our understanding of that interest, and perhaps leads to theory building or refining (Stake, 1998). This implies selecting participants who are easily accessible, hospitable to the researcher's enquiry, and who provide the means to maximise what can be learnt. Besides purposive sampling, the concept of theoretical sampling is also relevant as it leads to the selecting of individuals or categories to study on the basis of their relevance to the investigator's research questions, his or her theoretical position and the explanation or account he or she is working towards (Mason, 1996). Thus, the rationale for careful selection of research participants can be justified by recourse to the concepts of purposive and theoretical sampling.

Preparation of Participants

The methodology developed is designed to give participants maximum control over the data collection process. However, the degree of autonomy vested in the participants requires that they be adequately prepared for the recording task. In the study carried out, each of them was approached and the general purpose of the research explained. Once their consent was obtained, they were shown how to use the tape recorder, given clear instructions, and a form on which to note information about each speech event recorded.

The responses of participants who were initially approached for the study yielded interesting insights. Among the reactions noted were:

- *I'm so excited as I've never been the subject in any kind of research or experiment before. When can we start?*
- *It's hard to be natural. I'll be too conscious. Moreover, if I know Jo* [her husband]*, he won't open his mouth, and then I'll have to speak to myself!*
- *I'm just afraid I'll make a mistake.*
- *So, you want to make me a laughing stock.*
- *No way – it's an invasion of my privacy.*
- *There was really nothing to record* was the comment of one participant upon returning a blank recording after several days.

These remarks warrant some comment. First, over-enthusiastic reactions to having been included in the study are potentially problematic since they can produce the Hawthorne Effect, as a participant's selection may motivate him or her to look for clues to the true purpose of the study, to discern the researcher's expectations, and thus, behave in ways perceived to meet approval. Second, it is clear that participants were aware of the possible effects of the tape recorder not only on their own behaviour, but also on that of others in the shared communicative situation. Third, despite the assurances that it was everyday language as used in Malaysia that was of interest, (hence stressing the descriptive nature of the study and seeking to remove any pressure to produce a particular speech style), some participants were still preoccupied with prescriptive notions of right and wrong. Fourth, speakers were intensely aware of the fact that some of the sub-varieties of English that they used were highly idiosyncratic and unique to the local context. Their comments about *mistakes* and being made a *laughing stock* may constitute a pejorative view of their own speech patterns, or alternatively, they may be an insightful recognition of the distinctiveness of local speech forms. Fifth, there was an awareness among participants that the study would entail a certain amount of intrusion into their privacy as the researcher becomes privy to private or restricted interactions, and the recorded conversations become the focus of analysis and further discussion. Finally, that some potential actors had second thoughts about participating in the study was only to be expected.

These reactions are indicative of the preconceptions, attitudes and fears of the participants. It is important to listen to their cries of concern, attend to their anxieties, and at the same time, safeguard the integrity of the study. Minimising and accounting for the presence of the tape recorder is crucial and will be discussed later. To assure speakers that they did not have to 'perform' for the tape recorder, a sampling of casual and more formal recordings done by the researcher was used to demonstrate the value of *all* speech varieties. In addition, to appropriate the full cooperation of participants, several measures were designed. First, a clear description of the project and data collection procedures were presented and then negotiated with research participants. Second, a simple consent form was used, listing the research activities planned, the risks involved and the way the data will be reported. While these offer some protection to the participants, they also benefit the researcher in indicating agreement on the part of those selected as participants. The use of such forms also helps in ensuring that ethical principles are upheld, thus avoiding problems like lack of informed consent, invasion of privacy and deception. A third measure to secure the cooperation and commitment of participants, and ensure the successful completion of the project involved some form of payment. Past research has indicated that the ability and willingness of the researcher to provide 'tokens of exchange' may be instrumental in creating a sense of obligation on the part of the subject to fulfil his or her end of the 'recording contract' (Milroy, 1987, p. 49). Lastly, participants were assured of anonymity in all reports of the study, and this policy was also applied to all their interlocutors on the recordings, even though their speech was not the focus of the research. It was clear that although participants may not be very familiar with or interested in the details, conventions, and principles of research, decisions have to be made about how much can and should be explained, at what level of detail, complexity, and sophistication and at what points during the research process.

Research Tools and Procedures

The Absence of the Researcher

One of the biggest problems in obtaining naturally-occurring spoken data from the speech community is eliminating and accounting for the effects of the researcher's presence on the subject and the other participants present, i.e. the observer's paradox (Labov, 1972; see also Cavallaro, 2006). Having worked on second language corpora in the ICE project, Schmied (1996) warns that the tendency for conversations to become less natural and to move towards more formal and prestigious forms in the presence of an outsider is aggravated in ESL environments. It was this concern that prompted the devising of a technique that allows for the collection of spoken data without the researcher being physically present or the participants being overtly observed.

The study also showed that without the presence of an outsider, naturalistic data in a variety of situations are easily recorded. Using this method, there is no need to orchestrate social interactions, or convene contrived meetings with the participants' friends to compel the use of the informal or colloquial sub-varieties. The research design readily allows for the natural interaction of the actors with their own pre-existing social network. This neatly avoids the problems encountered in previous studies which isolated the informant or subject prior to eliciting his or her speech, leading to the possibility that pre-existing norms of behaviour, including linguistic behaviour, no longer applied. Crucially, this study demonstrated that the methodology used is able to tap into informal, colloquial speech, which was rarely captured using the traditional experimental methods.

However, one disadvantage of this method is that the researcher is not at hand to observe and record the behaviour of the speakers and interlocutors, the paralinguistic aspects of the interaction, and the actual dynamics of the speech situation. To rectify this shortcoming, a small measure of covert recording of participants may be done when the researcher is naturally present as part of the interaction or social circle, thus allowing for contextual information and extra-linguistic features of the discourse to be observed and noted. In such cases, following Holmes' (1996) suggestion, speakers can be asked in advance if they would agree to being recorded at some future date without necessarily being informed at the specific time of recording, but upon later notification, they would have the right to veto the use of the tape.

Use of the Recording Device

One advantage of having actors carry the recorder is that it ensures that the microphone is close to them, thus allowing for the best possible recording of their speech. Moreover, having the speakers take control of the recording situation solves the ethical dilemma of surreptitious or covert recording. Using this methodology, if a particular conversation becomes too personal, the actor has the prerogative of switching off the tape recorder. This element of freedom and control in the hands of participants, it was found, goes a long way towards reassuring them and mitigating their concerns about any intrusion into their privacy.

On the other hand, it may be argued that participants would be very much aware of the presence of the recorder and this would inevitably affect their behaviour. It should, however, be pointed out that the presence of a small, compact recorder is far less likely to affect the conduct of speakers than the presence of a researcher. Moreover, it was discovered that there are ways to minimise or offset whatever constraints the recorder introduces. First, the fact that participants are required to carry the recorder with them over a period of time presents the possibility of their becoming accustomed to it and to the fact that recording is taking place. Second, actors should be allowed to "habituate" to the recorder (Brown and Dowling, 1998:40) and this may mean discarding the first few recordings, or the first few minutes of each recording, if necessary. In fact, this study underscored the fact that the presence of the peer group or the pre-existing network impels the actor to speak as he or she normally would, thus ensuring the generation of natural speech and interaction. In short, the fact that this research design causes minimal intrusion into the actors' social world, allowing them to interact in their routine mode with their usual social network acts as a safeguard against affected speech or excessive posturing for the recording device.

Aside from this, it is not very difficult to check for artificiality or affectedness. Quite often, after a short period of stiltedness and awkwardness, speakers and their interlocutors would stimulate a shift to their regular, often semi-colloquial speech patterns. An examination of the data could also reveal numerous cues indicating that the speakers are not paying much attention to the tape recorder. These may include giggles, raucous laughter, lapses into the first language, code-mixing, long pauses or silent portions indicating there was no pressure to 'feed the machine', overlapping talk, interruptions, hesitations and generally speech that typifies relaxed, colloquial speech.

Quality and Use of Recordings

The value of recorded data is undisputed as it enables retrievability of data for repeated and detailed examination, and it also acts as an estrangement device for the researcher. The real predicament rests in the quality of recording spoken data from everyday situations as it would fall short of that which would be obtained under laboratory conditions. This is typical of casual conversational material, which is bound to be characterised by background noise as well as interruptions, and dramatic shifts in voice quality. Clearly, a trade-off is necessary in the dilemma of deciding between clarity and authenticity in the data collected. This dilemma is captured by Carter and McCarthy (1997, p. 11) who state that "it is a paradox of the study of authentic, 'real' spoken English that the clearer the quality of the recording, the less likely it is that the tape will have been produced in completely naturalistic conditions with the speakers interacting unselfconsciously". If obtaining spoken data from 'real world' contexts is fundamental to the research principles and methodology adopted, the clarity factor may have to be sacrificed to some extent.

<u>Examining Roles and Relationships</u>

Membership in the Social Network

The use of a network of friends as participants in the case study carried out proved to be immensely advantageous as it allowed the researcher to side-step some of the problems faced by fieldworkers working outside their own communities or networks, who lament the amount of time it takes to establish credibility and trust, to learn the culture and to test for misinformation. In contrast, the study highlighted the virtue of the researcher being a member of the social network with respect to the relatively quick access, assent and acceptance of her role and investigative methods.

In addition, if researchers are members of the social network, they are able to situate themselves within the conceptual framework of the speakers. Having direct knowledge and experience of community interactional patterns helps them to understand the norms and values that govern linguistic choice, and to discern the meaning of the participants' world.

The Dynamics of Interviews

In the study conducted, semi-structured interviews were used after the recording phase, and these included play-back sessions as conversations recorded earlier were commented upon by the speakers themselves. These interviews offer a means for gleaning ways in which participants view their social world, and interpret their linguistic behaviour.

The interviews carried out highlighted the fact that the familiarity, camaraderie and trust that exist between the researcher and participants can greatly facilitate the interview procedures. However, the research design also problematised the status of the interview. On the one hand, the views and explanations of speakers are sought and valued. As McCarthy (1998, p. 32) argues, "attempting to see things from the participants' viewpoint and how they articulate their own understandings at least avoids the worst excesses of the imposition of an order by the analyst, using rhetorical frameworks that may not reflect in any way the reality of the conversational encounter of those involved in it". But, on the other hand, speakers' views do not necessarily have to be accepted as the 'ultimate truth'. It is worth taking heed of Silverman's (2000, p. 823) criticism of the trend in qualitative research to equate interviews with opportunities for "an authentic gaze into the soul of another", thus wrongly elevating the experiential to the authentic. Instead, it was discovered that interviews can be used to promote the discourse of interaction, as the researcher intervenes to share his or her thoughts with the participants, to probe, invite, affirm and contest their views. It is through joint negotiation that plausible accounts of the social world inhabited by the actors and captured in the data are generated. In other words, triangulation offers a solution to the dilemma - what Sarangi and Candlin (2003, p. 274) call the "alignment of the participants' and analysts' stances, i.e. the fusion of emic and etic perspectives".

The Researcher and the Researched

Despite the advantages of an established bond between the researcher and participants, this relationship can also emerge as a site of struggle. One facet of this revolves around the degree of involvement of the researcher. To profess total remoteness and objectivity is unrealistic, delusory and perhaps even counter-productive. In the first place, in this research design, the researcher is obviously socially located within the sphere of the investigation. This implicates insider knowledge but it also means that, as revealed in other studies, the researcher's biography, and subjectivities are brought to bear on various stages of the research process. In fact, Cameron *et al*. (1992, p. 23) assert that "claims made for non-interaction as a guarantee of objectivity and validity are philosophically naïve."

Cameron *et al.* (1992, p. 22) also argue for the empowerment of subject, which implies "the use of interactive or dialogic research methods, as opposed to distancing or objectifying strategies positivists are constrained to use. It is the centrality of interaction with the researched that enables research to be empowering." In making the case for empowering research, they propose three tenets: First, persons are not objects and should not be treated as objects, second, subjects have their own agendas and research should try to address them, and third, if knowledge is worth having, it is worth sharing. These principles are applicable in various ways throughout the research process. For instance, seeking the active cooperation of participants involves disclosure of goals and details of methods and procedures. Aside from this, the notion of trust emerges as central to the collaborative enterprise at all levels from the collection to the analysis of data, as a great deal of autonomy and decision-making powers are vested in the participants. In addition, the research design also attempts to accommodate participants' own time schedule for recording, and acknowledges their right to ask questions and introduce topics which often prove to be insightful and illuminating. Finally, interaction with the actors frequently entails the sharing of knowledge and the findings of the research, thereby demystifying 'expert knowledge'. The playback sessions and interviews, for instance, present the opportunity for sharing thoughts and observations, and to make available to participants alternative interpretations of their practices and beliefs. To the extent that they are made to critically examine their speech patterns and ideas, the research process may be said to be empowering.

Concluding Remarks

This paper has presented a detailed appraisal of a technique developed and used to collect authentic naturalistic spoken data generated in a range of everyday contexts by proficient speakers of a second language variety of English. The methodology employs purposive sampling and so presents the opportunity to maximise learning and elucidate the focal issues under investigation. Moreover, by centralising authenticity of data gathered in real-world settings using unobtrusive measures, the study recognises that context is heavily implicated in meaning. In addition, through triangulation the research seeks to establish findings and explanations that can be sustained by the data, validated with the participants involved, and checked with the community of researchers of which the analyst is a part.

In so far as the researcher's epistemological stance influences the way in which she interacts with the researched, the positivist insistence on minimising contact with subjects is superseded by an acknowledgement of the researcher as a socially-located presence. Far from undermining the investigations, as a human instrument, the researcher's adaptability, responsiveness, sensitivity, as well as ability to interrogate, clarify, reflect, and explore function to enrich the entire research process. Rather than adopt the role of the detached, objective researcher that entails a dehumanising of subjects and the cultural milieu, this approach views the utilisation of tacit knowledge as inescapable, and the researcher's sharing of the actors' frames of reference as an asset. It responds to the polarity between the researcher and the researched by incorporating the practice of sharing goals, control of procedures, ideas and knowledge, thus helping the 'known' to also take on the role of 'knower'.

Despite the strengths of the methodology employed, several difficulties come to mind. Firstly, the fatigue factor of the actors should be anticipated as enthusiasm may wane and fewer recordings done as the weeks progress. Secondly, it is probably easier to obtain informal data using the proposed method than institutional, formal data, as participants are usually more comfortable recording routine encounters revolving around casual talk. Thirdly, there is an inherent danger in privileging the spoken text and hence ignoring other crucial activities which may be relevant, but are not textualised, like non-verbal communication. While the recording techniques described are strongly advocated, it is suggested that they be complemented by the researcher being present on some occasions, audio- or video-recording interactions and noting contextual and other details. Furthermore, it must also be conceded that the insider advantage employed in this study may not always be an option. Researchers who work outside their social networks may find establishing the requisite social bonds to be a laborious, formidable and protracted process.

As established from the beginning, the principal aim of this paper has been to examine methodological challenges in the compilation of a small corpus of everyday spoken English, and it has thus deliberately avoided reporting on the analysis of the data and the findings of the study. I would argue that the range, variety, creativity and complexity of the language obtained using the innovative methodology employed and described would not have been elicited via the traditional questionnaires, interviews, tests or set tasks. It is hoped this paper, which has proposed and carefully critiqued a methodology for the collection and analysis of a small but meaningful corpus that offers the means for a more robust characterisation of L2 speech and its speakers, will be a useful resource for future research.

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