

THE FOREIGN GIRL'S GUIDE TO ENGLISH ACCENTS

How to tackle the challenge of accent learning
as an English-as-a-second-language-actress

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1 INTRODUCTION

Throughout history, English accents have served as a signifier of class, status and cultural and geographical background of the speaker (see eg. Meier, 2020, p. 4-6). In an acting context, learning an accent different to one's native has provided opportunities for actors to widen their repertoire and castability.

As an aspiring actress, who was brought up outside the English-speaking world, accents have always seemed interesting but daunting at the same time. In my native Finland, I was introduced to a variety of American and English accents through popular culture and media from an early age onwards, and started learning Standard British English as part of my primary school tuition at the age of 9. Having an ear for language, I found learning English enjoyable and effortless, and felt pride over both my grammar and pronunciation. It wasn't until I moved to Brisbane, Australia for a gap year at 18, when I realised that the skills I had so proudly acquired only covered a fraction of the vast world of expression the English language could open doors to. After Brisbane, I lived in Dublin, Ireland; Stockholm, Sweden; Helsinki, Finland, and finally, to start studying musical theatre professionally, I moved to Cardiff, Wales. Having been exposed to all these different languages and cultures has only deepened my interest towards language and accents, also accelerated by my growing understanding of the psycho-physiology of voice through my musical theatre studies

Coming from this background, when I got the chance to research a topic of my choice for the Independent Project module of my BA Musical Theatre degree at Wales Academy of Voice and Dramatic Arts, I knew I had to focus on accents. Studying in a class full of talented people, most of whom were brought up in the UK and speak English as their first language, I was interested to find out if my international background would put me at a disadvantage compared to my peers in regards to accent learning. Or, on the contrary, could I even benefit from

it in some way? What kind of a strategy should I adopt as an international student when it comes to learning accents?

In this dissertation, I use qualitative interviews, thematic analysis and practical application as research methods to find answers to these questions. My research material consists of the interviews of four professional accent coaches conducted in the spring of 2022, the findings of which I will then test in practice through my own learning process.

1.1 Research question and thesis statement

In this dissertation, I seek to find out how professional accent coaches view the accent teaching and learning process when they are coaching an actor coming from a non-English speaking background. This area of accent learning has not been researched widely, as most literature on actors' accent teaching supposes a native English-speaking student. The viewpoint of a non-native learner is mostly taken into consideration in literature focusing on English as a foreign language -teaching and does not involve an actor's perspective. While there are some textbooks breaking down the typical features of major European languages and their effect on English pronunciation, previous research is especially lacking when it comes to the mannerisms of Finnish-influenced English. Hence, to get the most up-to-date and hands-on information, I approach the topic from an accent coach's perspective, seeking answers to the following **research questions**:

- 1. From a professional accent coach perspective, is the process of teaching a specific accent different when it comes to actors who are non-native English speakers? If so, how?*
- 2. What kind of influences does my Finnish background have on my accent?*
- 3. How can I, a non-native actor operating in an English-speaking environment, utilise these findings in my own process of accent acquisition?*

My **thesis statement** is that accent coaches view learning an accent as a very individual process that varies widely depending on the student's background and abilities irregardless of what their mother tongue is. Based on my everyday experiences having worked with both native and non-native actors, I expect to find that there can be both pros and cons to being a non-native when learning a new accent. On one hand, a non-native, having already gone through the process of taking on an entirely new language when learning English, might have access to flexibility and learning tools not as obvious to natives who have not needed to examine their mother tongue in detail. Additionally, a non-native's English accent is often made up of many influences and can change depending on circumstance – sometimes referred to as “code switching” (see eg. Meier, 2020, p. 43) whereas a native might have a strong regional accent that is not easy to fade out. On the other hand, it is likely that a non-native actor lacks the sensitivity and intricate ear for English possessed by those brought up surrounded by the language.

Although not an extensive study, I expect the findings of this dissertation to provide insight into the accent learning process of non-natives. In addition to peeking into the hands-on information possessed by industry professionals, I aim to build a practical toolkit that can serve myself and other non-native learners in their quest of taking on new accents.

1.2 Dissertation structure

This dissertation is made up of an introduction, literature review, methods, thesis and analysis, findings and discussion. Bibliography and appendix can be also found at the end of the document.

Chapter 2 presents a brief introduction into topical literature on accent learning. I will first cover what kind of literature is available for English-native actors wishing to take on a new accent (subchapter 2.1) and then review what kind of resources are available for learners coming from non-English-speaking backgrounds (subchapter 2.2). Finally, I will summarise how these resources

break down the key elements of accent learning, ie. “what accents are made up of” (subchapter 2.3).

Chapter 3 is about the methods, data and practical application used in this dissertation. I explain how a themed interview can be used as a means of collecting data (subchapter 3.1.), describe the data collected (subchapter 3.2.) and my method of analysing it through thematic analysis (subchapter 3.3.). I conclude the chapter by describing how I aim to put my findings into practice through a personal learning process (subchapter 3.4.).

Chapter 4 is all about analysis and is divided into two sections: my findings based on my interview data (subchapter 4.1.) and my findings based on my practical application (subchapter 4.2.), which consists of my personal experiences trying to learn a monologue in two accents.

Chapter 5 is reserved for conclusion. I wrap my central findings up and reflect on them through the lens of my research questions. Finally, I review my analysis and findings in a discussion (chapter 6), where I interpret and evaluate my research process and ponder on further questions borne out of my findings.

Bibliography can be found in chapter 7. The appendix containing my interview questions and voice notes used in my practical application is provided under chapter 8.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

Below, I will introduce literature and theoretical approaches that link closely with my dissertation's subject: accent learning from the perspective of a non-native actor. There is an ample supply of theoretical and practical material aimed at actors wishing to take on a new accent. These are looked at in chapter 2.1. However, as Finnish-speakers are a small linguistic group internationally, accent coaching literature that would take into account the perspective of a Finn is virtually non-existent. Therefore, in chapter 2.2 I will briefly review how literature aimed at non-native speakers covers the topic of accents and pronunciation. Finally, in chapter 2.3 I will combine the findings from these two different types of resources in a rough summary of the most important building blocks of accent learning.

2.1 Accent learning for native speakers and actors

There is quite a good supply of textbooks and research available for actors wishing to take on new accents as part of their repertoire. Most of these resources, however, suppose a native reader and an overall good understanding of the English language as the basis for learning.

“How to Do Accents” by Sharpe and Rowles (2007) offers an easy-to-approach toolbox for actors wishing to understand the inherent structure of learning a new accent. It is not a book on linguistics or phonetics, but a beginner friendly yet comprehensive take on accents. The writers have “taken the language of the linguist and translated it into the language of the actor [and] distilled the very detailed work of phoneticians and extracted the elements relevant to the specific goals of the actor at work” (p. 17). The book covers how speech is physically produced, introduces some phonetic principles (like the phoneme, allophone and syllable), covers how to produce all English sounds, talks about rhythm and intonation and covers sound systems like Spanish, Japanese, French, German, Polish and Italian. In the same vein “How to Do Standard English

Accents” by the same authors (Sharpe & Rowles, 2014), breaks down the varieties of Standard British English historically from RP to more neutral modern-day applications.

“Accents and Dialects for Stage and Screen” (Meier, 2020), details professor Paul Meier’s approach to breaking down accents and covers 27 different accent varieties. Paired with Meier’s online catalogue, the International Dialects of English Archive (2022), which offers primary recordings of English-language accents from 135 countries around the world, the book is a great crash-course in learning the most common accents required in auditions. Similarly, the Robert Blumenfeld book “Accents: A Manual for Actors” (2004) and his “Teach Yourself Accents”-series covering the British Isles (2013a), Europe (2014) and North America (2013b) offer actors concise information on how to learn accents from around the world. Even though these resources are often aimed at native speakers of English or at least suppose an excellent level of spoken English from their readers, I find them very useful for my purpose of understanding how to take on new accents as a non-native speaker.

The field of linguistics offers an even wider variety of resources for understanding what language, speech and pronunciation are made up of. As I am an actor, not a linguist, I don’t find it useful to delve too deep into the academic research of linguistics. Some basic textbooks about phonology, however, provide useful information about how we make speech and sounds. “A Practical Introduction to Phonetics” (Catford, 2019) explains how to use the International Phonetic Alphabet to learn the sounds of a language and provides practical exercises accordingly. “English Phonetics and Pronunciation Practice” (Carley et al, 2017) provides similar information.

2.2 Resources for non-native learners (especially Finns)

According to Encyclopædia Britannica (2022), English is the *global lingua franca*, a bridge language used to connect many different people groups speaking different languages. It is the dominant language of the United States,

the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, Ireland, New Zealand, as well as many Caribbean and the Pacific Ocean island nations. It is also an official language of India, the Philippines, Singapore, and some African countries. Approximately a third of the world's population, some two billion people, use English.

As English is the first choice of foreign language in many countries of the world (Encyclopædia Britannica, 2022). It is, thus, clear that there is a lot of literature available on how to teach English to non-native speakers like myself. Many of these resources are highly specialised, aimed at teachers in various countries and focusing on how to teach English to a specific language group. I learned English in school during ages 9–18 through the “OK English” textbook series (Heino et al, 2005) used by my teacher. Obviously, these types of school textbooks are written in the learner's first language and, while they usually teach “Standard British English” as the default accent, they don't usually address the differences between English and the learner's original accent. So, it is up to an individual teacher how much they focus on how, say, a Finnish soundscape interferes with the learning of the required RP sound. Additionally, these kinds of school textbooks don't provide information for English-speaking teachers wishing to teach finns with a focus on accent reduction.

A great resource that addresses this need is “Learner English” (Swan & Smith, 2001), a reference book that is aimed at teachers of British English and provides information on the typical mistakes English learners from different language backgrounds make. In addition to explaining grammar, the book covers topics crucial to accent learning, like the influence of phonology (vowels, consonants, rhythm and stress, intonation) of the source language to the way a speaker of said language speaks English. Unfortunately, while this wonderful resource covers nearly 30 languages, including all other Scandinavian languages (p. 21–37), it does not have a breakdown on the Finnish way of speaking. So, while a wonderful tool when trying to learn other accents with foreign influences, it does not provide help in trying to understand the influences my Finnish background has on my English accent. The same goes for “Practical English Phonetics & Phonology” (Collins et al, 2019), a wonderful textbook breaking

down the essentials of the subject of how speaking English sounds – but again, in addition to the accents of the English-speaking world, it only breaks down accents from Spanish, French, Italian, German, Polish and Japanese backgrounds, and hence does not address Finnish.

All in all, I was not able to find many academically credible resources that would be specialised in teaching accents of the English language to non-natives – and if there were some, they were aimed at students coming from bigger language groups than Finnish. Resources aimed at Finnish-speakers are generalised, focused on second-language learning with a heavy emphasis on grammar and usually only cover one accent, Standard British English. An actor's point-of-view is especially lacking.

For entertainment and curiosity purposes, there is a wide variety of non-professional internet resources available, breaking down different accents – and the Finnish English accent is also represented. The *YouGlish* (2022) online search engine mines the internet to provide real-life examples of ordinary people's pronunciation in different accents, allowing the user to search for single words spoken in a desired accent. YouTube tutorials like "How to Pronounce Words in Finnish Accent" (Vuohensilta, 2019), "Pronouncing English the Finnish Way" (Jake and Emma, 2017) and "The Stereotypical Finnish-English Accent" (Villevn, 2011) showcase the Finnish way of pronouncing English in a humorous way, but only offer a layman's perspective.

While these non-academic resources allow practical glimpses into the Finnish (and other non-native speakers') way of pronouncing English, they mostly focus on showcasing the accent without breaking it down or singling out concrete differences to eg. the Standard British English or General American accent. Hence, they don't provide any kind of blueprint for myself as a Finn to actually start analysing my own way of speaking English.

2.2 The building blocks of an accent

Drawing from the variety of resources presented above, in this chapter I will try to draw together a concise view on “what accents are made up of”. Obviously, every accent coach, academic, researcher and textbooks has their individual philosophy on the process and structure of accent learning, but I’ve summarised the concurring themes as phonetics (subchapter 2.3.1), physiology (subchapter 2.3.2), tone rhythm, melody and intonation (subchapter 2.3.3) and history and culture (subchapter 2.3.4).

2.2.1 Phonetics

The dictionary definition of phonetics is:

“1. the system of speech sounds of a language or group of languages

2a: the study and systematic classification of the sounds made in spoken utterance

2b: the practical application of this science to language study” (Merriam-Webster, 2022)

It is, hence, a very vast subject of study that can’t be covered here in depth. To serve as an aid in accent learning, one can however benefit from basic understanding of phonetics. In a nutshell, when approaching a new accent, one should understand how consonants and vowels in the desired sound system work. A complete system that covers all the possible variations of these sounds is the International Phonetic Alphabet (Figure 1), IPA for short. While one does not have to be fluent in IPA to be able to practice accents, it is a wonderful tool for understanding different sounds.

(PULMONIC)

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	Bilabial	Labiodental	Dental	Alveolar	Postalveolar	Retroflex	Palatal	Velar	Uvular	Pharyngeal	Glottal
Plosive	p b			t d		ʈ ɖ	c ɟ	k ɡ	q ɢ		ʔ
Nasal	m	ɱ		n		ɳ	ɲ	ŋ	ɴ		
Trill	ʙ			r					ʀ		
Tap or Flap		ɸ		ɾ		ɽ					
Fricative	ɸ β	f v	θ ð	s z	ʃ ʒ	ʂ ʐ	ç ʝ	x ɣ	χ ʁ	ħ ʕ	h ɦ
Lateral fricative				ɬ ɮ							
Approximant		ʋ		ɹ		ɻ	j	ɰ			
Lateral approximant				l		ɭ	ʎ	ʟ			

Symbols to the right in a cell are voiced, to the left are voiceless. Shaded areas denote articulations judged impossible.

CONSONANTS (NON-PULMONIC)

CONSONANTS (NON-CELESTIAL)		
Clicks	Voiced implosives	Ejectives
◌ Bilabial	◌ Bilabial	' Examples:
Dental	◌ Dental/alveolar	p' Bilabial
! (Post)alveolar	◌ Palatal	t' Dental/alveolar
≠ Palatoalveolar	◌ Velar	k' Velar
Alveolar lateral	◌ Uvular	s' Alveolar fricative

OTHER SYMBOLS

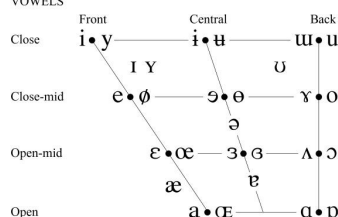
M Voiceless labial-velar fricative	Ç Z Alveolo-palatal fricatives
W Voiced labial-velar approximant	ɭ Voiced alveolar lateral flap
U Voiced labial-palatal approximant	fj Simultaneous f and x
H Voiceless epiglottal fricative	
ġ Voiced epiglottal fricative	Affricates and double articulations
ʒ Eniglottal plosive	can be represented by two symbols
	joined by a tie bar if necessary.

DIACRITICS

PRACTICES									
◌ _o	Voiceless	n̥ d̥	..	Breathy voiced	b̤ a̤	~	Dental	t̪ d̪	
◌	Voiced	s̬ t̬	..	Creaky voiced	b̰ a̰	~	Apical	t̟ d̟	
h	Aspirated	tʰ dʰ	..	Linguolabial	ɮ ɖ	~	Laminal	ṭ ḍ	
◌ _y	More rounded	ɔ̞	w	Labialized	tʷ dʷ	~	Nasalized	ẽ	
◌ _e	Less rounded	ɔ̜	y	Palatalized	tʲ dʲ	n	Nasal release	dⁿ	
+	Advanced	u̟	j	Velarized	t̠ d̠	l	Lateral release	dˡ	
◌	Retracted	e̠	ɣ	Pharyngealized	tˤ dˤ	ˀ	No audible release	dˀ	
..	Centralized	ẽ	~	Velarized or pharyngealized	ɫ				
×	Mid-centralized	ẽ̞	ⱱ	Raised	e̝ (ɿ = voiced alveolar fricative)				
◌ _i	Syllabic	n̩	Ⱶ	Lowered	e̞ (β = voiced bilabial approximant)				
◌	Non-syllabic	e̯	◌	Advanced Tongue Root					
~	Rhoticity	ə̃ ə̆	◌	Retracted Tongue Root	e̙				

Some diacritics may be placed above a symbol with a descender, e.g. $\overset{\circ}{n}$

VOWELS



Where symbols appear in pairs, the one to the right represents a rounded vowel.

SUPRASEGMENTALS

ˈ Primary stress
 ˌ Secondary stress
 ː Long
 ˑ Half-long
 ˘ Extra-short

TONES AND WORD ACCENTS

LEVEL		CONTOUR	
ē or ǣ	Extra high	ē or ǣ	Rising
é	High	ê	Falling
ē	Mid	ě	High rising
è	Low	ě̇	Low rising
ě̇	Extra low	ě̇	Rising-falling
↓	Downstep	↗	Global rise
↑	Upstep	↘	Global fall

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sounds that can be singled out, explaining how the accent uses the consonants **R, L, H, NG** and **TH**.

Rhoticity vs. non-rhoticity describes the use of the consonant r. In simplistic terms, in rhotic accents, whenever the letter r is written, it is also pronounced (eg. order, cart), while in non-rhotic accents it is only said if there is a vowel sound after it (eg. Harry, hero). (Sharpe & Rowles, 2014a; Blumenfeld 2013a, p. 27). Most American accents as well as eg. the Canadian, Irish, Indian and Scottish accents are rhotic, while most accents in England as well as eg. the New Zealand, New York and Boston accents are non-rhotic. (Sharpe & Rowles, 2014a). In a rhotic accent, the consonant R can be pronounced in many ways: it can be **tapped** (tongue makes rapid contact with the roof of the mouth) or **trilled** (a trill is made up of multiple taps), and the taps can be made up through different placements (gum-ridge taps, uvular taps etc.). R can also be made by **curling, bunching** or **bending** the tongue in different ways. R can also be substituted with a soft W. (Sharpe & Rowles, 2014a).

The consonant L can be **light** (like in Welsh), **dark** (like in North American) or a combination of the two. The consonant H can be either **said** or **dropped** (eg. 'Arry, 'oliday). NG can be **hard** (with a "clicked" K or "bounced" G), **soft** (sound goes into the nose) or **dropped** (replaced with an N-sound). The TH sound is crucial as there are many variations which set accents widely apart: TH can be **standard, plosive** (air is stopped and "explodes" out into the vowel), **voiced** as D, **voiceless** and airy as F, voiced as V and so forth. (Sharpe & Rowles 2014a).

In addition to consonants, a sound system consists of vowels, single sounds "made by passing air through the vibrating vocal cords and then through the vocal cavity without the flow of air being stopped" (Blumenfeld, 2013a, p. 25). Even within the same language or accent, vowels are very context specific – they can be pronounced very differently depending on where they are placed within a word and what kind of sounds are located next to them. That is why vowels are often examined through **lexical sets** – "words in the same lexical set, to a large extent, are pronounced with the same vowel. So if you know the signature

sound of the set [...], you can pronounce it with some reasonable confidence of being correct” (Meier, 2020, p. 23). For example, the words like last, master and dance belong in the *bath* lexical set, and the a-vowel is always pronounced the same within the same accent. (ibid.) In addition to understanding lexical sets, it is useful to know that how vowels sound will be affected through **shape** (of the tongue, lips and jaw), **length** (is the time spent on one vowel long, short or in between?) and **movement** (is the vowel steady or does it glide?). (Sharpe & Rowles, 2014a).

2.2.2 Physiology

As all speech is produced physically, in order to understand accents, we must understand the basics of vocal production. Or, as Sharpe and Rowles put it: “Accents are physical. They are made by your body. In order to adapt you will need to have some basic knowledge of the physical equipment you have and how it works.” (Sharpe & Rowles, 2014a)

Below (Figure 2), Sharpe and Rowles (2014a) illustrate the basic makeup of the physical elements involved in vocal production: teeth, gums, hard palate, lips and cheeks, jaw, tongue and soft palate. Each accent has a different “placement” within this system, and small changes in lips, jaw, tongue and soft palate affect where the voice resonates. To start taking on different accents, we must be conscious of where in the vocal system we feel the voice resonating and how that changes as we change the physiological “settings”. (Sharpe & Rowles, 2014). According to Blumenfeld (2013a, p. 20), “the general position of the vocal apparatus [...] is determined by [...] the place of articulation of the consonants; the positioning of the tongue when forming vowels; how much the lips are protruded; and how tight or loose the muscles are at the corners of the mouth”.

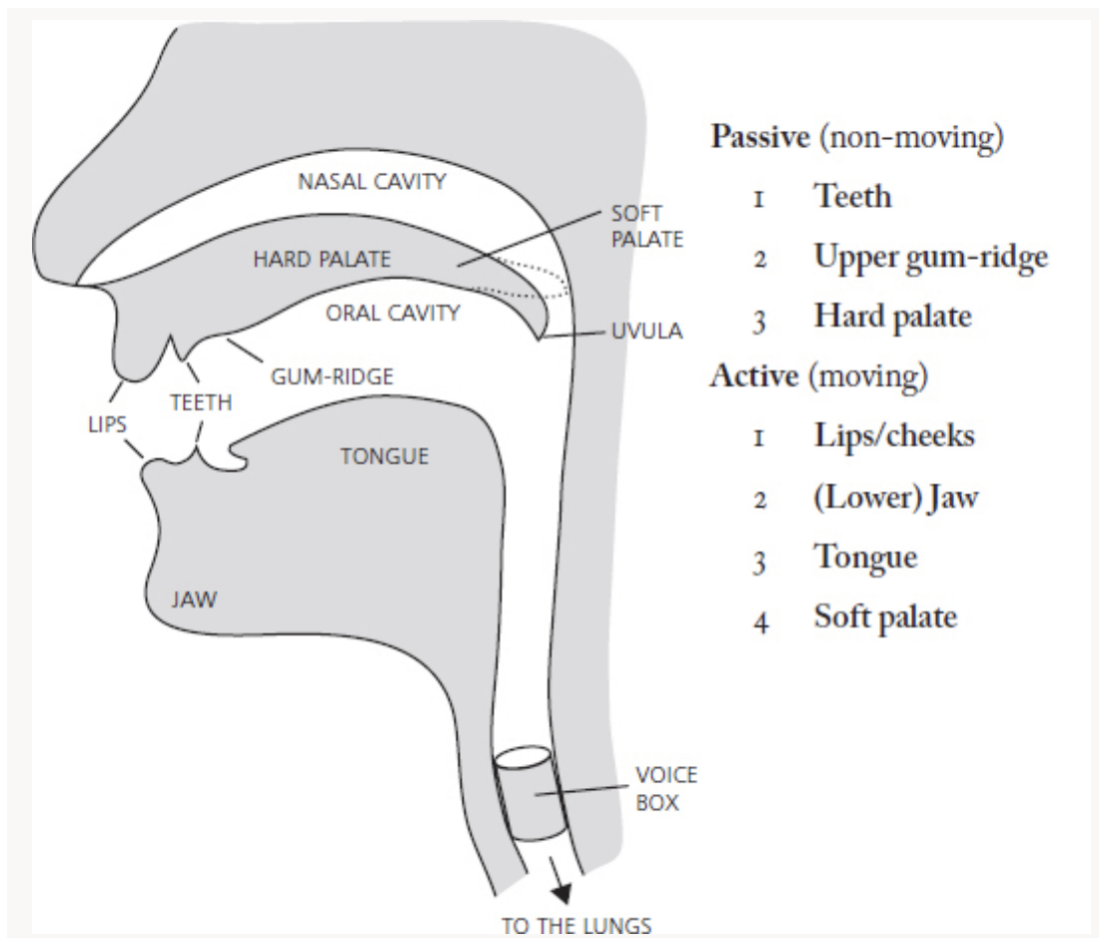


Figure 2 (Sharpe & Rowles, 2014a)

2.2.3 The “groove” of an accent: tone, rhythm and intonation

Every accent has its own tone, which is created by the placement of our throat, outh, tongue and soft palate. Tone is not about how the words are pronounced but about the quality of the sound, its individual blueprint which can be described in various adjectives ranging from lightweight, ‘soft’, ‘harsh’, twangy, airy, light, sweet, brassy, throaty, nasal etc. (Sharpe & Rowles, 2014a). Another signifier of an accent is its direction. The sound can travel forwards, backwards or even sideways in the mouth, and this directly affects how the sound is projected. This, in turn, affects the tone. (Sharpe & Rowles, 2014a).

The rhythm and melody of an accent make up the “unique groove” of an accent. Sharpe and Rowles (2014a) use Rudolf Laban’s movement theory as a basis of

their way of interpreting the “groove” of an accent: an accent can be examined and broken down by examining **space** (direct or indirect), **weight** (heavy or light) and **time** (sudden or sustained) of the speech’s movement. Based on these elements, the vocal movement of an accent can appear to **glide, float, dab, flick, press, wring, punch** or **slash**. These are abstract metaphors that aim to verbalise how to embody the culturally influenced flow of the accent. (Sharpe & Rowles, 2014a).

The intonation of an accent essentially means “how to break the material up into chunks, what is to be accented, and what tones are to be used” (Wells, 2006). Intonation serves as a way of conveying expressive meaning by stressing different parts of words or sentences, and can be achieved through changes in pitch or rhythm (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2022). Rhythm is made up of the stress patterns of an accent (Blumenfeld, 2013a, p. 21) It is affected by **vowel lengths, consonant strength, glottal stops** (like in the Cockney pronunciation of “butter”) and **suspension**, while the pitch or “melody” is affected by how the syllables and words in a sentence sound in relation to another: do they **step up, down** or **glide** into each other? (see eg. Sharpe & Rowles, 2014a; Blumenfeld, 2013a, p. 23). Pitch, duration and volume are often also referred to the *dynamics* of an accent (Meier, 2020, p. 45).

2.2.4 Culture and history

Accents and dialects have formed over time, influenced by geography, culture and historical events. Sharpe and Rowles (2014a) highlight that to learn an accent, you have to know where you are on the map – “everywhere exists in relation to somewhere else”. That is why learning as much as possible from the desired accent’s context is essential. Cultural references like music, art and dance can give hints on what an accent sounds like: Country and Western songs or Yiddish Klezmer music can give us insight into the nuances of an accent. Accents also change over time, and the historical context of your script affects the way you must approach an accent as much as its geographical location. (Sharpe & Rowles, 2014a).

The tone, groove and rhythm of an accent (see subchapter 2.2.3) are closely linked to “cultural values, historical legacies and geographical influences”. The pace of an accent can be higher in a culture that values efficiency, while agricultural communities might have a more patient pace to both life and speech. (Sharpe & Rowles, 2014a).

3 METHODS

As the literature review above does not provide direct answers to my research questions (presented in subchapter 2.1) about non-native accent learning, I aim to find answers to them by interviewing accent and dialect coaches.

Interviewing is a very popular method of acquiring data when conducting qualitative research (Eskola & Suoranta 1998, p. 63). Eskola and Suoranta (*ibid.*) describe interviewing as a simple and sensible method: If you want to find out something about a person – their thoughts, motives and so on – why not ask them directly? This philosophy offers an excellent premise for my research. As presented in my research questions, my aim is to gather up to date, hands-on information on the process of accent learning, so what could be a better way to acquire this data than to directly ask professionals who deal with these processes daily? Qualitative research on accent learning could be done in numerous other ways, for example by analysing voice recordings of actors playing different accents or focusing on the speech of natives from different parts of a specific region. However, as my goal is to build a practical toolbox to benefit my own learning, I regard interviewing as the most effective method.

It is, however, necessary to acknowledge that interview as a research method can have its downsides. The biggest potential challenges posed by the method lie in the relational dynamics of an interview. The extent of trust – or the lack thereof – between the interviewer and the interviewee can directly affect the contents of an interview (Eskola & Suoranta, 1998, p. 68). Eskola and Suoranta (1998, p. 68) note that an interviewer is never passive, but instead plays a central role in creating the dynamics of the interaction.

When it comes to my research questions, I doubt that trust and relational dynamics pose a massive threat to my interviews. First of all, with a career

background in communications, I have good and established interviewing skills. Secondly, the subject-matter of the research is not particularly sensitive. It is likely that seasoned professionals are very eager to share their knowledge on a topic they have spent their career on. It is worth remembering, though, that when in a professional role, people seldom talk very directly about negative feelings.

As studying musical theatre is a very practice-led subject, I also want to test my findings in real life. Utilising the information acquired through my literature review and interviews, I will expand into practical application by trying to learn a short monologue in two accents.

Below, I will further describe my chosen method of themed interview (subchapter 3.1), my sources of data (subchapter 3.2), my method of thematic analysis, (subchapter 3.3) and my practical application (subchapter 3.4).

3.1 Semi-structured interview

Interviews as a method for gathering data can be structured in various ways. Different types of research interviews differ from each other in how fixed the questions are and how rigidly the researcher has decided to structure the interview situation (Eskola & Suoranta 1998, p. 63).

The most fitting interview method for my research questions is a *themed interview*, which is *semi-structured* in its approach. The researcher predetermines the themes of the interview, but questions can vary to some extent. Themed interview is a popular research method, supposedly for two reasons (Eskola & Suoranta, 1998, p. 64). Firstly, the semi-structured approach gives room for a fairly free expression, allowing the interviewee to emphasise what they deem important. The findings of an interview are not constrained by a rigid set of questions. Secondly, predetermined themes ensure that the interviews between different interviewees will cover somewhat similar topics. Additionally, themes can make processing the acquired data easier as they provide a framework for analysis from the get-go. (ibid.)

As opposed to a completely free-flowing *in-depth interview*, a themed interview provides necessary boundaries to a potentially unlimited wealth of source material. On the other end of the spectrum is a *fully structured interview*, which is carried out in the form of a survey and poses a uniform set of questions in a fixed order to all interviewees. A themed interview lacks this rigidity of form and order and allows for more freedom. (Eskola & Suoranta 1998, p. 63–64.) The set of themes and potential questions that I use as the basis for my interviews can be found in the appendix.

3.2 Research material

The empirical data of my dissertation consists of interviews with four accent coaches who work mainly in the performance and entertainment industry in the UK or US, tutoring actors in the accent learning processes necessary for auditions and character work for roles in film, theatre or television. Some of the interviewees also coach English as a foreign language learners, who wish to eliminate their native accent for example for employability reasons. All of my interviewees have an academic degree in acting or vocal studies and have worked both freelance and within institutions. Two of them have previous experience working with clients coming from a Finnish-speaking background.

I found my interviewees partially through my existing networks, partially by searching online. As accent coaching is in very high demand, many professionals I contacted simply did not have time to participate in my research. Hence the number of interviews was narrowed down to four. I am aware that this is not an extensive enough set of material to make scientifically valid, generalised assumptions. I do, however, believe this set of interviews can highlight perspectives and practical tools that can be somewhat representative of how industry professionals view the accent learning process.

The interviewees will remain anonymous in this dissertation but have given me permission to use their quotes in the analysis.

3.3 Thematic analysis

My chosen method of analysing the research material described above is *thematic analysis*. As the name suggests, it is an apt method for unwrapping research material acquired through themed interviews (Saaranen-Kauppinen & Puusniekka, 2009). Eskola and Suoranta (Eskola & Suoranta 1998, p. 128) maintain that thematic analysis is particularly effective in searching answers for practice-oriented research questions. As my research questions revolve very much around the practical aspects of accent learning, I feel this research method is the right fit for this dissertation.

The aim of thematic analysis as a research method is to comb through research material to recognize, organise and highlight themes that shed light on the research questions. The themes used when conducting the themed interview can serve as a framework organising research material, but it is possible that, additionally, new and unexpected themes arise throughout the analysis. As mentioned above (subchapter 3.1), a themed interview allows for freedom in expression, which gives room for discussion on themes which the researcher did not include when planning the interview but which enrich the analysis. (Eskola & Suoranta 1998, p. 126; Saaranen-Kauppinen & Puusniekka, p. 105.)

Thematic analysis is very empirical as a research method (Eskola & Suoranta, p. 126). To provide "evidence" of my research material, I will sprinkle quotes from the interviews throughout my analysis. The quotes serve as "leads", providing insight into how the researcher has made findings and drawn conclusions. (Eskola & Suoranta 1998, p. 129; Saaranen-Kauppinen & Puusniekka, 2009, p. 106.)

There are a few potential downsides to using quotes. If used in excess, they can make a research paper a heavy read and steal room for actual analysis. On the other hand, if used too sparingly, the reader has little "evidence" of the claims made by the researcher. There are no set rules when it comes to using quotes in thematic analysis. It is up to myself as a researcher to find the happy medium, so

I can provide an ample supply of evidence while leaving room for analysis and theoretical context. (Eskola & Suoranta 1998, 129).

3.4 Practical application

As part of my thesis, I will not only be analysing my research material but also putting the findings that arise from it into practice. Combining my interview data with what I've learned through my literature review, I will craft a personal process for teaching myself an accent and test it in real life by learning a monologue in two new-to-me accents: Standard British English and Welsh. The outcomes of this learning process will be analysed as part of my thesis (chapter 4.2) and documented in voice recordings included in the appendix.

4 THESIS

The main body of my dissertation, my thesis, is structurally divided into two chapters. In chapter 4.1, I dissect my research material, interviews with accent professionals, through thematic analysis. In chapter 4.2, I describe my process of testing my interview findings on myself through practical application.

4.1 Findings from interviews

A central focus of this dissertation is on the process of acquiring an accent, viewed from the expert perspective of accent professionals. It is therefore not surprising that a central theme stemming from the research material is the professionals' varied opinions on how an accent learning process should be broken down (subchapter 4.1.1). These views were influenced by the interviewees' individual philosophies on how accents are constructed or "what makes an accent" (subchapter 4.1.2) – a second clear theme repeated in the discussion. Another closely related theme that frequently came up in the interviews was how this process differs for learners coming from different language backgrounds (subchapter 4.1.3). Although the interviewees did not all have experience working with learners from a Finnish-speaking background, they all had some kind of understanding of the Finnish soundsystem and were able to make detailed remarks about my accent, and this discussion formed quite a natural theme in its entirety (subchapter 4.1.4). Finally, a rather unexpected theme that I as a researcher neither expected nor prepared questions about, was the interviewees' scepticism for the need for accent reduction altogether (subchapter 4.1.5).

4.1.1 The process of learning an accent

The accent coaches I interviewed had a wide variety of approaches in their process of teaching an accent. Some were very theoretically inclined and appreciated textbook knowledge of the sound systems of various languages before starting on a new accent whereas others relied heavily on their ear and sought real-life examples of the accents they wanted to study. While one starts

their research by reading on a language's sound system on Wikipedia or in academic articles, another approaches the task by listening to voice clips of non-performer natives, for example athletes. But whatever their approach, most emphasised the importance of becoming IPA fluent (see chapter 2.3.1) and understanding the basics of phonation. Additionally, every single interviewee mentioned the International Dialect of English Archive (2022) as a valuable internet resource for audio references.

There was a big difference between interviewees on how specific they wanted to be in their teaching and how they viewed the use of metaphor versus a more scientific approach. One focused on mental images and nurturing confidence, while another wanted to steer away from metaphor.

"Being somebody else, it can be a purple coat. It can be a red coat, you know, something that makes you feel different. And I know that it's about speech, but you have to drop in there with confidence. Don't be tentative. [...] You have to find that way of finding the new coat. The new sounds, the new you, but you have to be clear in whatever you are saying. It's about communication."

"Often accent books for actors make great use of metaphor, which is great because people respond to metaphor. This sounds wider, or this sounds bigger. [...] But there's a problem with metaphors in that metaphors are very personal. And something to me that feels green to you will feel blue."

Some encouraged students to use imitation as an entry-point to an accent and highlighted the importance of clear goals.

"I'd always say, what's your best impression, first. Because people have already got an unconscious idea of what they think the accent is. So that kind of gives us a little leap forward. Then we can go, okay, that's good, but maybe here we can adjust that. "

"I've got a friend from Lithuania [who] wants to sound like Tom cruise. I like people to be specific. If you say, I wanna sound American, I'm like what? America's a big place really."

But whatever the way of a client entering the world of a desired accent, once the goal is established, all interviewees highlighted the importance of understanding vocal physiology when learning new sounds.

"I'm working with a client explaining: I can hear your tongue doing this, here's a diagram, look in your mouth, let's see what's happening, let's see how you make the sound in your native language. Or: this is how we make the sound in English. Notice your tongue is in this different position. That kind of level of specificity helps."

In addition to vocal exercises, most interviewees mentioned recording oneself as an important tool in learning a new accent. Ultimately, despite the amount of theoretical information or coaching available, it is up to the individual learner to do enough detailed repetition and own practice to be able to take on an accent.

"Just record yourself and read words, you know, do the work, be specific and then record yourself, listen back."

4.1.2 The building blocks of an accent

Depending on their background and teaching philosophy, my interviewees focused on different things when asked to describe the different elements that affect what a person sounds like and how their accent is built. Some emphasised things like culture, personality and psychological factors, while others focused on more technical questions. However, the interviewees seemed quite unanimous when naming different aspects of accent learning: the basis of an accent lies in phonetics, ie. how and what kind of sounds are produced and transmitted. This is heavily determined by the sound system of the desired accent, which combines sets of different phones and individual segments of

consonants and vowels in a unique manner. On top of this, intonation, rhythm and breath make up the melody of an accent.

"I always felt [Birmingham accent] was like a figure eight. It's quite flat, but the speakers can go on and on and on and they don't stop and they keep going. It didn't feel to me like it has an end because they're always speaking and they're always continuing, you know? So those things for me as a teacher and hopefully for the student are a way in[to an accent]."

These above described auditory phenomena are produced at a physiological level in the vocal tract, which consists of the oral cavity, the nasal cavity, larynx, and the pharynx. Understanding the basic mechanisms of voice production as the basis of creating an accent was an important theme for all my interviewees.

"I also look a little bit at voice quality or articulatory settings [...], it's basically how you hold your speech muscles or what's happening in the larynx. And that can help you get into a different zone for an accent and perhaps makes it easier for you to create certain sounds in English that don't exist in your native language. [...] Thinking about your default muscle position being a certain way can help you access those sounds much more quickly and easily in the middle of spontaneous speech."

"[It's important] knowing where the sound is coming from. In America, it's really far back in the throat. But in English, you want it very, very forward."

All of my interviewees agreed that culture and history have a huge impact on how people sound. This does not only come down to different language regions and countries, but can also be seen in the differences between, say, big cities and the countryside irregardless of the country. Language and a regional accent set the outlines of an individual's way of speaking on a macro level – on a more grassroots level, personal history and upbringing determine what kind of vocal usage is encouraged or frowned upon.

“In a city, in London, in Manchester and cities, everybody's moving around very fast. So speech is faster. In New York, you know, it's fast, it's furious. So geography, and history, makes a difference. You know, obviously it's massive.”

4.1.3 Differences between native and foreign learners

Mainly, my interviewees regarded the process of teaching an accent to a native and a foreign language speaker quite similar: the student would have to take on the same set of sounds, rhythm and melody of an accent irregardless of their background. Some highlighted the importance of understanding the culture of the desired accent, which might take more work for a non-native. Others said they did not want to delve too deep into culture but to focus on the practicalities of learning instead. However, all emphasised that the process starts from tuning your ear to be sensitive for the desired accent and retraining your vocal system to take on its characteristic features.

A big difference between natives and non-natives, some interviewees maintained, are the psychological aspects of learning. Our cultural programming affects the way we speak on a subconscious level and some sounds of a desired accent can not only feel alien but even threatening or unacceptable to make. Cultural codes can even hinder learning processes in a very practical way: if showing your tongue is regarded disrespectful in your native culture, it might make working with an accent coach quite uncomfortable.

“Between the ages of two and seven, your formative years, you are like a sponge. If you are being told, be quiet [it stays with you]. I've had Chinese clients who have been very kind of subdued. [...] These psychological blocks are real, and we don't even recognize them, they just become who we are.”

The mentality towards learning an accent can also vary a lot depending on your motives. For a native doing it just for fun or to widen their casting possibilities the process might not carry as much psychological load compared to a non-native trying to change themselves to fit in. These pre-set attitudes and expectations can then in turn also affect learning.

"[When teaching a native speaker] there isn't the psycho-linguistic aspect of moving a real person into another group [...], changing your class for greater social acceptance or professional acceptance."

Not surprisingly, all of my interviewees thought that the process of taking on an English-speaking accent would be more difficult for students coming from a foreign background. This was mostly explained by different languages having very different sound systems with different rules that become ingrained into the learner's brain from an early age onwards.

"I've got friends from [abroad trying to learn RP]. [...]. But I still hear that they're not English. No matter how much training they've had. Some people can do it, but you've got quite a lot of work, because this is stuff that you've habituated since birth."

All my interviewees stated that first language learners are likely to have developed a more sensitive ear for English that would be a winning asset in accent learning.

"It's a lot to do with copying, with listening. You've got to have an ear for the sounds, for the tune. It's hard when you're not English. It's not impossible, but it's very hard. English people will have an easier time of it."

As outlined in my thesis statement (chapter 2.1) I expected second language learners to have certain strengths related to learning accents. Drawing from my personal experience, I thought that perhaps the process of already having learned an entirely new language would give some benefits to foreign learners, like having developed their ear, flexibility and learning tools or gaining theoretical knowledge on language and pronunciation. Much to my surprise, not a single one of my interviewees highlighted these or other potential strengths of second language learners. One mentioned, however, that natives with a strong

regional accent might be at a similar disadvantage as foreigners when learning very contrasting accents to their own.

"Physicality and attitude and background are key to finding the right action. Cockney is punchy, RP has flow to it. So going from Cockney to RP, that's hard to lose, as well for a native speaker."

Even though all my interviewees considered non-native learners to be at a big disadvantage compared to natives, some did highlight that it is not useful to make generalisations. Ultimately, there are many more factors in addition to one's native language at play when it comes to accent learning.

"[How quick one learns an accent] depends on the individual, their background, their skill, their motivation and their diligence."

4.1.4 My accent mix

Getting the chance to talk to seasoned professionals, I wanted to know how they would review my accent – what influences did they hear, what sounded distinctively Finnish and what gave away my background? This topic formed a clear and central theme in our discussions.

Even though Finns are a minority in all of my interviewees' pool of clients, all had a general level of understanding of the Finnish soundsystem. Some gave phonetically detailed explanations on the topic, others focused on mental images and generic descriptions. However, the remarks of what sounds "distinctively Finnish" varied a lot depending on the interviewee. One mentioned that Finns put glottal stops before voiceless consonants, creating bigger pauses in between words or syllables (eg. a glottal stop between 'bed' and 'room' in the word bedroom); another focused on Finns' difficulty recognizing the difference between aspirated and unaspirated consonants (eg. still vs. till, phil vs. pill). There were some features of the Finnish soundsystem, however, that were deemed significant by all of my interviewees: a distinctively

low sound, the lack of projection and melody and the pronunciation rules of a phonetic language.

The interviewees explained that in Finnish, the tongue is more retracted, so sound is lower pitched or deeper. This combined with the fact that the breath is not very projected, creates a fairly monotone, non-melodic sound. Low energy can also often result in vocal fry.

“Finns don't throw the voice forward, the air is very back in the throat. Air gets almost stopped and it doesn't project out so much.”

They also remarked that Finnish is a phonetic language: if the letter is there, you say it. For example, Finns pronounce double consonants while most English accents don't (eg. [Henna] vs. [Hena]).

The interviewees' analysis on the Finnish soundsystem described above was mostly generic, and did not address whether or not I have all of these tendencies or not. All interviewees, however, made individual notes on my way of speaking, which, once again, differed quite drastically from each other.

The note I got from all interviewees was that I sound somewhat American, mainly because of rhotic r's and some quite wide vowels. This was, correctly, assumed to be because of the influence of media and popular culture. Some could pick up on Irish and Welsh influences too.

Many also noted the lack of some distinctive sounds of the English language. Retroflex (a consonant articulated with the tongue tip turned up under the hard palate, resulting in a sh, zh or shch sound¹, like in the word 'pleasure') was not sufficiently present in my speech, and I tended to mix up my w's and v's at times. Dropping t's at the end of words was also mentioned.

¹ <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/retroflex>

4.1.5 Accent reduction and appreciation for natural accents

A surprising finding to me, someone looking at the topic from an actor's perspective, was the theme of *accent reduction*. My interest in accent learning stems from an actor's desire to expand their repertoire and casting possibilities, and I imagined that to be the case for most people taking on accent classes. Most accent coaches, however, told me that, in addition to performers, they work a lot with regular people coming from numerous backgrounds and nationalities wanting to reduce their native or regional accents for professional or intelligibility reasons. Some interviewees also pointed out that the tendency of wanting to neutralise one's accent is rooted in the class system and its history.

"[Even before I moved to London I was aware of] Britain's addiction to the class system that you could move up and down the class scale in Britain very easily by adjusting [how you speak] by a millimetre or two."

Coming from social-democratic Finland, I had not really realised how many historically rooted hierarchical connotations accents can communicate, and this definitely made me view my desire of teaching myself accents from a new perspective.

Subsequently, another interesting theme stemming from my interviews was the trend of regional accents gaining more appreciation. Many of my interviewees highlighted that natural accents should be celebrated and that it should not be necessary to change your accent to land a job. According to my interviewees, many contemporary theatrical productions do not require actors to take on new accents anymore, and some might even view changing your natural accent a bit old fashioned. My interviewees emphasised that if your accent does not hinder your communication, there is no need to try and change it unless you want to do so yourself.

"20 years ago, one would've encountered lots of people who wanted to change their class within the English speaking world, but you don't get that so much

anymore. [...] There's generally a greater acceptance of regional accents, which moves people to seek out accent change much less."

"There's also a kind of shifting landscape on it being unethical to ask people to change their accent. [...] Because to say that in order to be someone you have to sound like this, is like saying you're not good enough, or trying to manipulate or change you to something you're not, which is becoming more and more frowned upon."

All of my interviewees even questioned my desire to learn accents to some extent, reassuring me that my English was already at a good enough level. Quite interestingly, most of these people making their living coaching accents said they tend to discourage people from changing anything that isn't required for intelligibility reasons.

"Something I should mention is that, of course, unless you're an actor, or even if you are an actor, there shouldn't be this drive to be perfect in this accent. It's fine if you want to move towards it, but I think having the ambition of sounding exactly like a native can be damaging. It can put too much pressure on somebody."

Going hand in hand with the above findings, I was surprised to hear my interviewees opinions of Received Pronunciation: some considered it old fashioned and outdated and one even wanted to remove the term altogether, preferring "Standard Southern English". Many advised me to read the Geoff Lindsey book "English after RP" (2019) on the topic.

"The issue with RP is that it means so many different things to different people. It also has a lot of baggage. I think it's best just to avoid the term RP really, unless you are training to work in a period drama."

4.2 Practical application

Based on the findings I made analysing the interviews above, using the best practices of industry professionals, I came up with the following practical 5-step plan of how to teach oneself an accent:

1. Identify the central distinctive features of an accent through using a textbook or even Wikipedia. Being able to read IPA helps.
2. Listen to voice recordings of natives of the said accent. The International Dialects of English Archive (2022) is a great resource.
3. Identify what your natural accent has in common with said accent and what is completely different.
4. Retrain your vocal system by doing vocal exercises and then focusing on the physicality of sounds that feel particularly difficult or alien.
5. Record yourself and identify what needs improvement.

To put my findings into practice, I decided to test this toolkit by trying to learn a short excerpt of a monologue – from Nina Shengold’s “Lives of the Great Waitresses” (2008) – in a Standard British English and Welsh accent. The monologue excerpt can be found in the Appendix.

4.2.1 Monologue in Standard British English accent

Following my five step process, I first took on to practising my monologue in Received Pronunciation, RP for short. I started off by reading about the distinctive features of the accent.

Often also called Standard English or Standard British English, RP has been historically established as the “prestige” accent of the UK, signalling education and used extensively by drama schools and BBC broadcasters alike (Meier, 2020, p. 326). According to accent and dialect coach, professor Paul Meier (2020), Received Pronunciation can be broken down into three segments: signature sounds, additional features and rhythm/stress/intonation/tone. There are numerous signature sounds in the Standard English accent (Meier, 2020, p.

329-340), but I found the following the most central: The consonant /t/ is sharp, unaspirated and explosive (like in the words better, eating). The consonant [j] is often added before the vowel u (like in the words duel, during). Long [a] is often used (like in the words bath, dance), although the rules when and how can be quite illogical. The accent is non-rhotic, meaning that r is not pronounced (like in the words bird, warm, heart). Generally, many vowels are produced with rounder lips than in eg. American accents.

The tone, intonation and rhythm of Received Pronunciation is maybe easiest to describe in comparison with another accent, say, general American. Compared to American accents, RP speakers use pitch for emphasising instead of volume. There are also more differences between stressed and unstressed syllables, whereas American accents allocate stress throughout sentences. The RP pace is higher and only select words are emphasised, usually stressing the ends of sentences. (Meier, 2020, p. 341-344).

To be as specific as possible, instead of combing through various voice clips, I asked a friend with a Standard English accent to record me a voice note of her reading the monologue. Listening to her doing the monologue in her own accent helped me to identify the things that stand out a lot faster compared to if I would have had to do all the background work based solely on textbooks and random voice excerpts.

Using what I learned by reading about the accent and listening to my friend, I identified what my natural way of speaking had in common with the accent and what I did differently. I found that I was already familiar with many of the RP features, having been taught school English with a Standard British focus. Hence, accessing most of the required consonants and vowels did not feel that difficult – except for ridding myself of the high-rhotic american r's I've picked up from popular culture growing up. What I found challenging was the rhythm, tone and intonation of the accent. The Finnish accent is very monotone and non-melodic, and using pitch for emphasis felt alien, even pretentious to me. Finns are culturally similar to the English in some ways, stereotypically

considered calm, collected and reserved. What is different, however, is that Finns shun away from any hints of elitism and trying to come across as “higher class” or “more educated” is frowned upon. Perhaps practising the melodicty and rounded lips required for the accent felt preposterous at times because of this cultural difference?

With the help of the above mentioned information I kept practising the accent, recording myself in the process. I do admit the melodicty of the accent is still lacking, but all in all I’m happy with the result. The recordings of my RP speaking friend’s reference point and my attempt at the accent can be found in the appendix.

4.2.1 Monologue in a Welsh accent

The process of attempting to teach myself the monologue in a Welsh accent was identical to that of my modern RP: first, I studied the basic theory of the accent, then asked a friend to do a recording, identified similarities and differences and then focused on physicality, trying to retrain my sound. There are various regional accents in Wales and these can vary quite drastically from each other even within the same region (Meier, 2020, p. 362-363). Because of this, I wanted my reference point to be a clearly Welsh, thick accent, so instead of a Cardiff-based friend I asked someone from west Wales to do a recording for me.

Despite the variety, according to Meier (2020), much like RP, the general south Welsh accent can be broken down into three elements: signature sounds, additional features and rhythm/stress/intonation/tone. I found the following signature sounds of the Welsh accent the most significant: Welsh accent often uses a long vowel [o] with little to no glide (like in the words goat, holy, protein). The vowel a is more of a back vowel than in Standard English (like in the words lamp, sandwich). The unstressed [i] sound at the ends of words is often longer and brighter (like in the words city, lovely). Like in Standard English, r is usually non-rhotic. The final l consonant in words or syllables is light and clear instead of dark (like in the words ball, little). (Meier, 2020, p. 365-371)

As additional features of the Welsh accent, Meier (2020, p. 372-373) mentions that consonants are often fully sounded (like in the words acts, lists) and sometimes consonant clusters are even emphasised using glottal stops (like in the word cluster “walking along). The intonation and tone of Welsh is distinctive for using a lot of range, creating a very melodic feel. Words are stressed using pitch, instead of duration or volume. At the same time, because of how vowels are used, it often appears that stress is divided quite equally between all the words in a phrase. (Meier, 2020. p 374-375).

Based on literature and the recording provided by my West Welsh friend, I identified that I already had a lot in common with the accent. The vowels a and o sound quite similar to their Finnish counterparts, and the even stressing of words is prevalent in both Finnish and Welsh. What is very different to monotone Finnish is the melodic nature of the accent, and that felt really very difficult to achieve when trying to mimic the accent. Having grown up surrounded by American popular culture, I also have a mildly rhotic r, which I had to downplay for the Welsh accent. For the same American influence, the light l’s felt very foreign to me as well.

With these notes in mind, I set out to practice the accent. While I do think I’m nowhere near a welshie, I am happy with the end result, as I was able to take on a set of sounds and a pattern of melody that felt very alien. The recordings of my Welsh reference point and my attempt at the accent can be found in the appendix.

5 CONCLUSION

In the beginning of this dissertation I described how my personal background as an international student and an aspiring actor inspired me to start researching accent acquisition from a non-native's perspective. I set out to interview professional accent coaches to find the answers to the following research questions:

1. *From a professional accent coach perspective, is the process of teaching a specific accent different when it comes to actors who are non-native English speakers? If so, how?*
2. *What kind of influences does my Finnish background have on my accent?*
3. *How can I, a non-native actor operating in an English-speaking environment, utilise these findings in my own process of accent acquisition?*

I acknowledged from the get-go that a pool of four interviewees was not sufficient for making scientifically valid generalisations on the subject. Instead, right from the start, my focus was on mining literature and the interview material to discover a set of practical tools that I as an actor would be able to utilise in my practical work whenever I needed to learn a new accent. While there was literature available on the accent learning process, it neglected the perspective of a non-native learner.

The interviews provided clear answers to my **research question number one**: *From a professional accent coach perspective, is the process of teaching a specific accent different when it comes to actors who are non-native English speakers?* As my **thesis statement** laid out, I expected my interviews to reveal that accent learning is a highly individual process, and that there would be both pros and cons to a non-native background. The interview data proved my assumption to be partially correct: the interviewees agreed that the process is dependent on the individual but mainly highlighted the challenges of a non-native background, not really seeing that many advantages in coming from a foreign language background. On the contrary, the interviewees even quite heavily questioned the

need to reduce one's natural accent and highlighted that a foreigner can almost never pass as a native when it comes to accents. This was an unexpected finding that felt almost defeating from a foreigner's perspective.

The interviews also provided me with direct answers to my **research question number two**: *What kind of influences does my Finnish background have on my accent?* The interviewees happily analysed my accent, and provided me with notes about both my Finnish influences and the influences from living all over the world. What stood out the most, was the lack of melodicity and the low pitch of my accent.

I approached **research question number three** (*How can I, a non-native actor operating in an English-speaking environment, utilise these findings in my own process of accent acquisition?*) both by analysing the interviews and testing my findings in practice.

While the accent coaches all had very individual views on what is the best process of teaching oneself an accent, they were quite unanimous on the makeup of accents: an accent consist of phonetics, physiology, "groove" and history/culture. This breakdown is completely in line with how existing research, presented in my literature review, views accents, and was hence not very surprising. To have these "accent building blocks" confirmed both through existing literature and my own research, it was easy to create a framework and a five-step process (described in chapter 4.2) for my own learning. With the help of the information learned through my dissertation work, I was able to start learning two new accents – and now feel confident that whenever I need to learn additional ones, I have a solid process in place.

In addition to providing answers to my research questions, my interview material also highlighted some themes I had not expected. Many of my interviewees stressed the psychological aspects of learning, something that did not come up in my literature review. They also spoke quite a lot about the classist background of different accents, and described the shifting cultural

landscape, where accent reduction is becoming less important and appreciation for natural accents is growing.

6 DISCUSSION

The process of conducting this research was a laborious one. For this independent project module, we were given a free choice between a practice-based portfolio and a theoretical dissertation. While I knew what I wanted my project to be about (accents) and what I wanted to achieve (practical tools to benefit my own learning), I was unsure of which format would best benefit my goals. On one hand, I felt like a fully theoretical approach would become too disconnected from the very practical realities of being a practising performer. On the other hand, I knew I had very specific questions I wanted to find answers to, and a fully artistic, performance-led approach felt too abstract to provide concrete tools for my own learning.

The result is somewhat of a mix of the two: while this is a fully written academic dissertation, I thought it very important to add in a practical element. I tried to condense the information found through my literature review and research interviews to a practical process that I could test in practice on a monologue.

This in-between format might defy what is considered a proper academic dissertation, but it sure served its purpose: I found answers to my questions, learned much more I ever expected on a topic I am fervently curious about, got to talk to the best industry professionals and established an accent learning process I can return to time and time again. “Form follows function”, as Sullivan’s axiom (1896) states.

In addition to providing me with answers to my research questions, my interview material revealed many unexpected topics that gave me food for thought – most importantly making me question my own desire for accent learning.

Much to my surprise my interviewees, people literally making money off of people wanting to change their accents, stressed that there is no point trying to

learn an accent to change oneself or to try and sound like somebody else. Trying to sound native can put pressure on an actor coming from a non-English-speaking background, and a foreign accent can in some auditions even serve as a competitive advantage and a way of setting oneself apart from the crowd. I also learned a lot of new information about the relationships accents have on the class system and its history, and was educated on the trend of the growing appreciation for natural accents.

There are numerous follow-up questions and research areas that I would be inspired to explore based on this research: it would be, for example, be interesting to do a full breakdown of the Finnish accent and its sound system as I was not able to find one, at least in an acting context.

Even more importantly, though, this dissertation process made me rethink my interest in accents: what do I want to sound like and why? How could I start seeing my Finnish accent more as an asset instead of a hindrance?

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8 APPENDIX

Appendix 1: Interview themes and possible questions

Background and experience:

- Tell me a little bit about yourself: your background in accent and dialect coaching and what made you interested in it?

Process:

- What is your process when you start teaching an accent?
- What kind of factors should one take into consideration when starting to learn a new accent?
- What's your personal view on "what accents are made of" (ie. Culture, physiology, vocabulary etc.)

Accent learning for non-native English speakers:

- Have you taught people for whom English is not their first language? Does teaching them differ from teaching people who were brought up in English? How?
- How does culture affect an accent?

Practical application:

- Have you made any remarks about my accent during this interview? What features give away the fact English isn't my first language?
- Have you worked with Finnish-speakers? What is distinctive of them?
- Anything else you want to add?

Appendix 2: Voice recordings

Reference recording for Standard British English:

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1bfim5xQRj4JGS5SO63pVtTsQq7ujYPx7/view?usp=sharing>

Personal practice recording of Standard British English:

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1YFhAQum2ivnxilDo_4AcKuVJeskfelU5/view?usp=sharing

Reference recording for Welsh:

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1vKahVclG9Tx4R5YqzB6FyK5X79ktQ_Fn/view?usp=sharing

Personal practice recording of Welsh:

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/141vd-l7RQwIO2HoEtz76c66D3c7X7yyI/view?usp=sharing>

Appendix 3: Monologue used in accent recordings

“You either got it or you don’t. If you don’t, you won’t ever. So don’t even bother. Don’t strain. Oh, there’s things you can learn for sure. The fine points. The stance. “Heat that up for you?” “Toasted?” But honey – a truly great waitress is born. You get what I mean? It’s a feel thing. Right under the bones of your bones. In your cells. Some reporter once asked Louis Armstrong what ‘swing’ meant. Louis looked the guy dead in the eyeball and said, “If you gotta ask, you’ll never know.” He would’ve made a great waitress.”

(Lives of the Great Waitresses, Shengold, 2008)