

INSIGHTS FROM ENGLISH PRONUNCIATION MOOC USERS: THE VIEW FROM ‘THE OTHER FORGOTTEN CONTINENT’

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ABSTRACT

Massive Open and Online Courses (MOOCs) are a valuable contemporary learning resource, and they can be used to promote intelligibility in L2 English pronunciation instruction and learning. Learner reactions to such resources, e.g., in surveys, focus group discussions, comments related to MOOC exercises, etc., potentially reflect their broad language ideology. To this end, we analysed user comments from the MOOC English Pronunciation in a Global World (EPGW) created by Laura Rupp in 2019, focusing on users from Central and South America. This is an under-researched region where three pluricentric languages with different statuses co-exist (Spanish, Portuguese and English), and with a long history of population flows for employment and education. Users’ comments from the seven runs of the MOOC reveal how they perceive the notions of fluency and intelligibility, simultaneously providing insights into their aspirations and goals, and thus filling a gap in the research.

Keywords: Central America; fluency; intelligibility; L2 English pronunciation; MOOC; South America

1. Introduction

English is a pluricentric language, like Spanish, Chinese, and several others (see Clyne, 1992), in that it has several standard varieties. It is learned by people of all ages around the world and mastering its pronunciation, while often challenging, is widely accepted as a useful aspect of speaking skills – despite often being neglected in the language classroom¹. One major difference in learning goals across countries, contexts, and individuals is the degree to which people want to aim for nativelike pronunciation or intelligible pronunciation (see Levis, 2005). In the former, one may want to ‘pass’ (Piller, 2002), to sound like a native speaker – with all the associated prestige. Aiming for intelligible pronunciation, on the other hand, foregrounds the practical goal of being understandable to others, and often allows for mixes of pronunciation features from the repertoire available to each person involved in an interaction. Intelligibility is therefore more obviously bound by its immediate, ever-changing interactional context, i.e., if we want a person to

¹ See Levis, J. M. (2019). Cinderella no more...

understand us, who do we have in mind? And do we share a language and/or culture with them? What if another person joins our conversation; do we change our speech? This is what Bell refers to as 'audience design', when we shift our speech and pronunciation to adapt to our interlocutors (Bell, 1984).

The choice to aim for nativelike or intelligible pronunciation can be complex for learners as well as for many of the world's 15 million English teachers; according to Freeman et al. (2015), 80% of them are non-native speakers of English. This raises several issues, both conceptual (e.g., What does 'native' mean? Where are the boundaries of an accent?) and practical (e.g., How can teachers help their learners to hear English inside and outside the classroom? Which English? And which resources?). Where possible, teachers and learners choose resources and modes of learning that suit their context and needs, yet they may not always take into account the reality of language diversity beyond the classroom². Learning a pluricentric language forces one to choose, to take a stance in relation to the varieties on offer, whether this means choosing to learn Brazilian Portuguese because one is going to work with people from there (linked to professional goals), or choosing Standard Southern British English because one finds it 'posh' or a favourite aunt had such an accent (reflecting attitudes and emotional preferences).

On-line tools such as Massive Open and Online Courses (MOOCs) are a valuable contemporary learning resource, and they can be used to promote intelligibility in English pronunciation instruction and learning (see, for example, Bueno-Alastuey, 2010). One good example is English Pronunciation in a Global World (EPGW) created by Laura Rupp in 2019 for the FutureLearn platform (Open University, UK). To date, in eight runs of the MOOC, over 134,000 learners from 191 countries and 35 online tutors have participated in the EPGW community, forming an ideal environment for showcasing and experiencing variation in English.

One of EPGW's stated goals is "to explore a variety of different English accents, helping you to understand some of the differences between your pronunciation and that of other English-speaking people" (Rupp, 2019). To this end, participants complete a number of steps associated with various pronunciation activities designed to:

- encourage discussion around notions such as intelligibility and raise awareness of key issues related to pronunciation;
- bring together a large variety of spoken Englishes, to provide maximally varied exposure to English accents and to generate a maximally varied data set;
- provide practice interacting with speakers from around the world, so people learn to handle variation in spoken English.

In this paper we analyse written comments from an exercise at the very start of the MOOC course, where users describe their personal goals for the pronunciation course. Users' comments reveal how they perceive the notion of intelligibility and also reflect their overall language ideology, e.g.: Nowadays it is essential to be understood around the world! Speak English fluently I want to speak like a native, because it can create more opportunities and better interactions with native speakers.

² Language diversity amongst learners within a class group will not be touched on in this article, but it can also be seen as a pedagogical resource.

We focus on users from Central and South America for several reasons, partially because it is a region referred to as ‘the other forgotten continent’ (Friedrich & Berns, 2003). Dedicating a special issue of the journal *World Englishes* to South America in 2003, the author-editors expressed a hope that:

... a dialogue with the international research community would empower this region often forgotten and neglected by scientific channels. [...] where learning and using English are seen as playing a significant, positive role in the future of the continent. (2003, p. 83)

In line with their hope, and aiming to add to a body of work which has grown only a bit over the past two decades (Friedrich, 2020), we feel it is interesting to understand how L2 English pronunciation is currently perceived in a region where geopolitical realities will continue to evolve, and we sought to use MOOC comments as an entry-point. This paper therefore starts by establishing a theoretical framework (Section 2), before expressing two research questions (§3) and explaining in a methodology section (§4) how we created a corpus and exploited it. In Section 5 we present the results and analysis, followed by a Discussion (§6) and Conclusion.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1 *Accessing language ideologies*

Language ideology has been defined as “beliefs, or feelings, about languages as used in their social worlds” (Kroskrity, 2004, p. 498). As such, they are “morally and politically loaded representations of the nature, structure, and use of languages in a social world” (Woolard, 2020, p. 2, quoting Irvine, 1989). The author goes on to provide potent examples (2020, p. 2):

Language ideologies occur not only as mental constructs and in verbalizations but also in embodied practices and dispositions and in material phenomena [...] for example, a listener’s shudder upon hearing a grating vowel pronunciation, a student’s blush at an instructor’s attempt to use youth slang, or a speaker’s own stammering shame at speaking a language variety she believes she controls imperfectly.

In other words, language ideologies may manifest themselves in our social practices and this manifestation can take place in more or less explicit ways. Another example would be how the decision to use one particular language form rather than another may reflect an ideology, e.g., using a glide instead of a monophthong in the southern US may index an ideology based on rural values. On the other hand, non-participation in the monophthongisation may partake of speakers’ identity construction against the rural South (Brunet, 2023).

Language ideologies can sometimes be explicitly thematised in discourse, through what Canut (1998) termed epilinguistic discourse, i.e., stretches of discourse in which representations pertaining to language are co-created, in which these representations are

rendered (quasi)explicit. MOOC comments are a window onto epilinguistic discourse, in which users are (almost) invited by the exercise instructions to share their language ideological stance(s). For example, their comments provide insight into how they conceive of their learning of English, the motivations they have for learning it (especially in a context like the MOOC), etc. Their writing may also reveal how these individuals conceive of, perhaps even define, the (socio)linguistic entity they have embarked on learning, that is the English language e.g., to be intelligible is to be able to speak English like a native speaker. Similarly, comments about wanting to 'avoid a Latino accent' tap into a paradigm of native speakerism.

Compared to other facets of language use, pronunciation is one of the most salient markers of identity we possess and perform, where "accent comes to be used like a badge, showing a person's social identity" (Crystal, 1988, as cited in Mees & Collins 2014, 233). Accents are audible markers of cultural heritage (Hideg et al., 2021) and social interactions can be strongly influenced by them (Gluszek & Dovidio, 2010), for example when they trigger prejudice (Spence et al., 2022). More optimistically, accent in an additional language can also be consciously used to reflect shifts in identity through language learning (Cutler, 2014; Marx, 2002; Piller, 2002).

Given this importance of accent and pronunciation, EPGW potentially contains vast quantities of written comments which can be analysed from a sociolinguistic perspective. Analysing them will reveal how a given language (here, English) is ideologically defined, qualitatively sketching out the perimeters of what is (or is not) acceptable, valuable, desirable when it comes to speaking English³.

2.2 Choice of geographical region

Central and South America have a long history of north-south contact with the United States (see Casielles-Suárez, 2017; Macías, 2014), constituting a geographic zone rich in English-language educational and employment opportunities, as well as family connections. Flows of people for personal and professional reasons are set to continue, e.g., in 2024, in the top 10 countries of origin for that year's 818,500 naturalized US citizens, Mexico is #1 but the list also includes El Salvador and Colombia⁴. According to the U.S. Department of Labor, in 2024 nearly one-half (48.7%) of the foreign-born labor force was made up of people with Hispanic or Latino ethnicity (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2024). In general population terms, in 2022 the United States' Hispanic population reached 63.6 million (up from 50.5 million in 2010), making up nearly one-in-five people, up from one-in-twenty in 1970 (Pew Hispanic Center, 2024)⁵. Unfortunately, such statistical realities are accompanied by a long list of negative linguistic and national stereotypes, e.g., "the United States imposes English on Latinos by constructing Spanish speakers as inferior subaltern subjects" (Garcia, 2014, p. 58).

In light of this context, we focus on the comments of MOOC users from Central and South America for three reasons. First, this so-called 'forgotten continent' is large-

³ See Wilson (2024) for a detailed case study in another context.

⁴ See Appendix A.

⁵ The Hispanic population is also increasing in Canada, with over a million individuals of 'Hispanic/Spanish-speaking descent' in the 2022 census (3% of the population). See Appendix B for more details.

ly lacking from three widely cited models of Englishes: Kachru's three-circle model of World Englishes (1992, p. 356), Strevens' world map of English (1992, p. 33), and McArthur's circle of World English (1998, p. 97) where only Nicaragua is mentioned. Second, as EFL contexts, they are different to the ESL or EIL settings⁶ that tend to get more research coverage, e.g., in Jenkins' (2015) book Global Englishes Central & South American countries are barely mentioned⁷.

In general, given that these are all EFL context countries and many of them have a history of trade, immigration, and student flows heading towards the United States, we would expect to find comments linking intelligibility and an American accent – whether as desirable or to be avoided –, and comments about specific professional goals or work. While it is encouraging to see research into teacher beliefs and cognition in this region, (see for example Buss, 2016 about Brazil; Couper, 2016 about Uruguay; Gordon & Barrantes-Elizondo, 2024 about Costa Rica), there is still not much about learners' expectations or hopes with regard to L2 English pronunciation. The current study helps to fill that research gap.

2.3 L2 pronunciation: Fluency and intelligibility ≈ understanding

Intelligibility is a key construct that has been defined in different ways. In line with Derwing and Munro (2015), we define it as what is actually understood. This is typically measured by asking listeners to transcribe what they hear and then counting how many words are correct, though other methods exist (see Kang et al., 2018). Intelligibility is distinct from comprehensibility (i.e., a perception of how difficult it is to understand a speaker) and from accentedness (i.e., a perception of how someone's speech is different to our own or to a type of speech we expect) (Derwing & Munro 2015; also Munro & Derwing, 2020). Non-linguists may use *understandable* synonymously with *intelligible*.

Perhaps one of the most crucial findings in the numerous studies by Derwing, Munro and others over the past 30 years is the fact that one can remain perfectly intelligible even if acoustic features are quite noticeable, i.e., one's accent is quite strong. Given this reality, the aim of EPGW is for learners to develop English pronunciation skills in a world where English is used as a lingua franca. English is used by speakers from a range of different languages, so EPGW focuses on intelligibility rather than nativeness (Levis, 2020) and recognizes personal pronunciation features. Notably, EPGW advocates for listeners to have as much responsibility as speakers for intelligible conversation to occur. The objectives of EPGW are, therefore, for learners to appreciate diversity in English, to speak English that is intelligible to other speakers of English, and to be able to understand other English pronunciations.

Fluency is sometimes confounded with intelligibility, and yet one can improve intelligibility without a perceptible improvement in fluency (Derwing et al., 2014). A basic

⁶ EFL refers to English as a Foreign Language, ESL to English as a Second Language, and EIL to English as an International Language.

⁷ According to the book's index, Nicaragua & Brazil are only mentioned three times, Mexico twice, and Argentina, Costa Rica, Panama, Surinam only once (Jenkins, 2015). These can be compared to the number of index items referencing English varieties or non-EFL contexts such as: United States (12), American English (9), Australia (6), Australian English (7), India (14), Indian English (9), Nigeria (7), Nigerian English (4).

definition of fluency is “the degree to which speech flows easily without pauses and other dysfluency markers such as false starts” (Derwing & Munro, 2015, p. 177) and it constitutes a positive goal to be attained when learning another language. And while all speakers vary in fluency, non-native speech tends to be less fluent, partly because more time is needed for lexical retrieval (Derwing & Munro, 2015, p. 4). Speech rate is readily perceived by listeners, as people frequently complain that others speak too fast – and sometimes, too slowly. While speaking rate (i.e., the number of syllables produced per second) is indeed one aspect of fluency, hesitation phenomena are another particularly salient aspect. For example, Hilton (2014, p. 34) found that when speaking English, their native French speaking participants hesitated nearly twice as much as the native English speakers, and their fluent runs were shorter. Thus, speed and hesitations are key parts of fluency which individuals notice and comment on, without specialist knowledge.

3. Research questions

A MOOC is conceptualised here as a shared online space where people may write comments and these constitute valid evidence from which to tease out underlying language ideologies. Thus, for EPGW users from Central and South America we have the following research questions:

1. Which themes appear frequently in these MOOC user comments?
2. What do these comments reveal about their underlying language ideology/gies?

Our hypothesis is that the answer to these questions will reflect a regional specificity.

4. Methodology

The course length of the EPGW MOOC is four weeks, with each week having a topic: (1) diversity in English: intelligibility, credibility and identity; (2) English vowel sounds; (3) English consonants, and (4) suprasegmental features in English. Each course week contains a number of learning activities, such as introducing oneself to fellow learners, pronunciation exercises, listening practice, analytical assignments, discussion forums about pronunciation topics, making a recording of your pronunciation and peer-reviewing that of another learner, and reflecting.

For this paper, we focus on a sub-group of total EPGW users (users from countries in Central or South America) and analyse written comments from seven Runs from one exercise (1.8, step 8 in week 1). In Step 1.8, users explicitly describe their personal goals for the pronunciation course and express challenges or concerns regarding their English pronunciation. This step follows ones in which the notions of intelligibility, credibility and identity in English pronunciation have been discussed.

This study builds upon work done by Rupp et al. (2025) which analysed Step 1.8 comments from all EPGW users of Run 1. The four authors used qualitative thematic analysis (e.g., Naeem et al., 2023) to categorize MOOC users’ replies to the prompt “formulate concrete pronunciation goals for yourself”, identifying one-third of the comments from Step 1.8 as being related to intelligibility. One quarter of such comments from Run 1

came from users in Central or South America: as Run 1 may be atypical, the other Runs needed examining.

The next sub-sections explain how data from the MOOC was extracted to create a corpus, before explaining how the corpus was explored both manually and with text-analysis software.

4.1 Corpus creation

For this study we extracted Step 1.8 comments from all seven Runs (2019-2022) and saved comments only from users who identified themselves as from (or whose IP indicated that they were from) countries in Central or South America; comments containing any explicit mention of being from one of the relevant countries were also included. In this way, we identified 2,169 users from this area of the world, providing 24.6% of all Step 1.8 comments from the seven Runs (Table 1):

Table 1 Number of comments for each run (1-7) produced by EPGW users: All and CAm & SAm.

Run #	1, Feb 2019 (N)	2, Oct 2019 (N)	3, April 2020 (N)	4, Nov 2020 (N)	5, April 2021 (N)	6, April 2022 (N)	7, Oct 2022 (N)	Total # of replies
Total # of participants	11,198	10,260	55,103	20,142	23,837	9,918	6,758	127,982
Total # of comments, Step 1.8	771	593	3,437	1,320	1,617	578	475	8,791 ⁸
Comments from all except C&S Am	543	427	2562	938	1017	406	309	6,202
Comments by users from C&S Am	207	124	740	336	511	132	119	2,169

We thus conclude that the corpus of comments by users from Central and South America is qualitatively coherent (users all from one geographical zone) and quantitatively substantial (representing one quarter of all comments from Step 1.8). The final corpus has a total of 52,437 words⁹.

4.2 Corpus exploitation: Manual and software-aided steps

An initial subset of the 210 comments (30 from each of the seven Runs) was manually coded by the first two authors, before the AntConc software package (Anthony, 2024) was used. The initial manual coding revealed recurrent themes (data-driven), which we then decided to further explore using software (data-informed). Figure 1 visually represents the process.

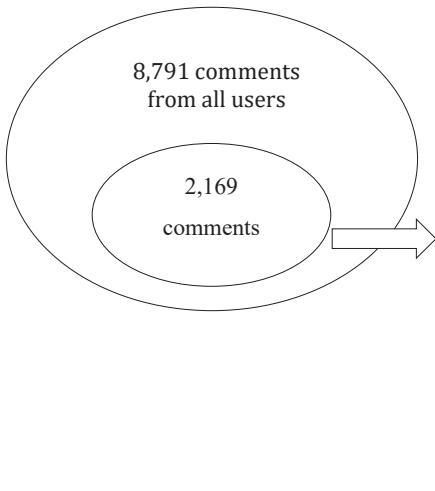
⁸ This amount of 8791 is greater than 6202 + 2169 (= 8366) because it included comments from users whose country is 'unknown'.

⁹ This number (FileTokens in AntConc) does not indicate how often each word is repeated.

Step 1: Forming First Impressions

Extract comments from regional users

Thematically code & discuss subset of 210 comments



	# of comments to code
Run 1	30 comments
Run 2	30 comments
Run 3	30 comments
Run 4	30 comments
Run 5	30 comments
Run 6	30 comments
Run 7	30 comments

Step 2: In-Depth Exploring with AntConc Software

Generate WordList for each sub-corpus (general overview of occurrence):

- ALLusers_7Runs_comments
- CSAM-only-users_7Runs_comments

Generate KWIC concordances for search terms of interest, e.g., <fluen*>

File	Left Context	Hit	Right Context
1 CSAM-only... words I would like to speak English more fluent and improve my intelligibility. I want to be more	fluent!	and be able to use the sounds of the English language without thinking a lot about it. More natural	
2 CSAM-only... s!pl! to repeat every word that you hear to practice." I would like to improve my pronunciation,	fluency	and be able to be understood by people who speak English I want to improve the fluency at the	
3 CSAM-only... ave using English language for communicating. Best Diana Lorena" I would like to speak English	fluently	and be able to talk with anyone and that they understand me. "I want my accent to be clear and	
4 CSAM-only... " and "still/still" for example. I also wish to work on consonant clusters. I want to speak English	fluently	and be more confident I need to speak slowly and clearly to be understood. That is my problem	
5 CSAM-only... re very sincere...LOL I would like to develop a personal English accent, a good intonation, speak	fluently	and be more sure of myself. I would like to develop a personal English accent, a good intonation	
6 CSAM-only... more sure of myself. I would like to develop a personal English accent, a good intonation, speak	fluently	and be more sure of myself. I'd like to sound as a native American speaker, I love the English lan	
7 CSAM-only... op an English accent that is understood by other speakers of English. I would like to improve my	fluency	and be understood by English speakers I'd like to speak confidently and be understood I would	
8 CSAM-only... od by English speakers but to feel confident and good about myself I would like to speak more	fluently	and be understood by other persons. When I have to express ideas in front of an audience I get	

Figure 1 2-step process of exploiting the corpus of comments from Step 1.8.

First, the first two authors manually coded the first 30 comments from each Run, based on the ten categories used by Rupp et al. (2025), such as native speakerism, insecurity, intelligibility, etc. The goal was to get a first impression of the contents and iden-

tify prevalent themes to explore; at this stage, we were open to all frequently occurring themes. After discussing the subset of 210, we decided to focus our further analyses on the theme of intelligibility, because it was the thematically coded category we had attributed most frequently ($N = 86/210$ for Author 1 and for Author 2, with a few comments coded slightly differently at first¹⁰). Looking more closely at these comments, we noticed that fluency was explicitly mentioned in many of them, so it became the concrete entry point to the data.

Thus, tools from the software AntConc were used to generate concordance lists (search term `<fluen*>`¹¹) to reveal collocations (lexical associations) in context. The initial results around the notion of fluency showed that it often co-occurs with intelligibility and understanding, so we also generated concordances for those terms (respectively `<intelligib*>` and `<underst*>`). Moreover, comments about wanting to be understood or to understand were frequently expressed along with a reason for such a desire, and often linked to a personal or professional goal. Therefore, we generated concordances around types of goals (work, job, study, travel) and for proper nouns, to be able to explore the countries and languages related to these goals. In this method for exploring corpus data – where initial analyses inspire follow-up analyses – each new finding moves the analysis forward toward new terms to examine.

5. Results & analysis

The results will be presented in two parts: first, we discuss comments referring to fluency and understanding (5.1), and then we will focus on those expressing professional aspirations and English-language goals (5.2). In each section we provide some descriptive statistics for the number of occurrences, and look in detail at noteworthy and/or representative comments.

5.1 Fluency & understanding

Our initial observation was that word forms related to the notion of fluency came up 482 times (Appendix C), even though the term is not used in the course before Exercise Step 1.8. Thus, fluency seems to be a tangible concept for these MOOC users.

In the comments from Central and South American users, word forms related to understanding occurred frequently: `<understand>` (496 occurrences) and `<understood>` (498 occurrences)¹². Some expressed a desire to understand others, while some wanted to be understood, with many referring specifically to being understood by more than just native speakers of English, as evidenced by the co-occurrences of `understood+by`:

¹⁰ Each comment typically was labelled as touching on 2–4 different categories, e.g., intelligibility and native speakerism or credibility.

¹¹ Characters between `< >` are used for the exact search terms used in AntConc, with `*` indicating any character string which follows.

¹² Search Terms: `<underst*>` and `<unde*>`. The asterisk makes it possible to find misspelled forms, such as `<undestand>` (9 occurrences), `<undertand>` (7 occurrences).

everyone/anyone/other speakers/native and non-native speakers/every English-spoken person:¹³

- *I wish I could be easily understood and not to have a strong accent. My goals are: - being understood by a wide range of English speakers around the world, not just natives speakers;*
- *to develop an English accent that is understood by other speakers of English I would like to improve my accent, so that I could be understood by nativ and non-nativ English speakers;*
- *to improve the pronunciation of some words and also have a greater fluency speaking English so that people understand me. I'd like to be understood by everyone, especially in my career. I would like to improve my pronuntiation to try to sound like a native speaker of the UK.*

Given the frequent reference to these notions (fluency and understanding), we examined whether MOOC users' language highlighted an awareness of intelligibility, and whether they associated being fluent with being intelligible. The proportion of mentions of the term <fluen*> co-occurring with <underst*> and <intelligib*> (Table 2) is different between all EPGW users and the subset of users from Central and South America:

Table 2 Fluency occurrences & co-occurrences: CAm & SAm EPGW users vs ALL other users.

	CAm & SAm Users, 2,169 comments	ALL Other Users, 6,202 comments
Word form	# of mentions	# of mentions
fluen*	482 (22%)	1161 (18.7%)
fluen* + underst* or intelligib*	116 (24%)	137 (11.8%)

MOOC users from this region write about fluency roughly in the same proportion: 22% vs 18.7%. However, they combine <fluen*> with <underst*> or <intelligib*> proportionately twice as much (24%) as all other users (11.8%). This suggests that, for this subset of EPGW users, fluency is linked to being intelligible and understood.

Moreover, fluency is positioned not simply as a goal to be reached, but also as something which is associated with being more confident and even more credible. These ideas co-appear often in the corpus:

- *I would like to be more fluent in order to be more confident. I would like improve my fluency and i would like to develop an English accent that can be understood by other speakers of English;*
- *I would like to improve my English pronuntiation in order to speak more fluently and more confidently, and also be more self-confident about myself at the moment of speaking with foreign;*
- *I would like to improve my pronunciation to be understood and to be confident talking in English I want improve on accent. I want to be more confident when speaking English;*

¹³ Comments have been reproduced without any modifications.

- *develop an English accent that is understood by other speakers of English. Pronunciation and fluency, Speak natural, Have credibility. I would like to speak english fluency and my accent can be clearly and understood.*

These comments do not mention native speakers; the goal is to be understood by ‘other speakers of English’ or with ‘foreign’. Other comments explicitly link credibility to a personal accent, e.g., *I would like to be understood and credible in my own accent*. This was, however rare; the expression ‘my own accent’ occurred 53 times, while ‘my personal accent’ occurred 20, co-occurring with ‘credible’ respectively only 7 and 4 times.

The previous examples are typical in that they frame credibility and confidence in the context of being understood: <understood> co-occurs with <credib*> 33 times in a total of 82 comments, and <confid*> 51 times in 231 comments. This is different to explicitly valuing one’s ability to understand others, which was quite rare: <to understand> co-occurs only 4 times with <credib*> and 5 times with <confid*>:

- *fluent to sound credible. Also, I would like that my ears get used to the different accents of any country. I would love to be fluent and develop a higher confidence towards recognizing accurate stress in words.*

In this comment the concept of fluency is located in the same stretch of text as both credibility and confidence. However, the key point is that the MOOC user wants their ‘ears get used to different accents’, i.e., being able to understand others is valued.

5.2 Aspirations and English-language goals

To tap into MOOC users’ broader aspirations, plans and even motivation – all topics we hoped they would mention when asked about their English pronunciation goals – we ran two searches (whose results partially overlapped). First, proper nouns of countries and languages in the region were searched (Table 3)¹⁴, given the geographical closeness to North America, the long-established contact with English, as well as the substantial population movements from the south to the north. Then, we also searched for terms related to work, study and travel (Table 4). In both steps, the obvious search candidates were supplemented by items we noticed, as we read through all the comments.

Table 3 presents the results of the proper noun search, to reveal which countries and languages were mentioned in the comments. Abbreviated forms of all the regional countries were searched in AntConc; French and Dutch appeared in a search for capital letters.

In terms of language variety, only two varieties of English are referred to, with <Brit*> being more frequently used than <Amer*> and <US*>:

- *I prefer to maintain my (Dutch) accent, while for my Argentinian students I would prefer to teach them a British or international accent...*

One individual commented on how at school they learned American English but “now I feel the British was lovely” so that had become their goal. Another comment expresses a bit of dilemma between a preference and future employment:

- *I would like to have a British accent, but I am planning to work in the US.*

¹⁴ The search term <English> gave 1314 occurrences, mostly co-occurring with <pronunciation>, so they are not analysed here.

Table 3 Proper nouns used by CAm & SAm EPGW users, in decreasing order of occurrence.

Search term	# of occurrences
Brit*	203
Americ*	152
Span*	45
US*	15
Braz*	12
Portu*	11
Argent*; England	7
Chile	5
Cana*; Mex*	3
French; Urug*; Venez*	2
Dutch	1
Total #	490

There is little mention of local languages (Spanish, Portuguese) and none of other varieties of English. The proper nouns frequently overlapped with aspirations to live and/or work somewhere:

- *... my Brazilian personality. I want to improve my English pronunciation because in my future I would like to live in America, also to join a work where English is the base on speaking. I would like to develop my accent to speak with American people fluently and be understood.*

Goals were not always expressed in relation to specific countries or language varieties, so as a second step we searched for the terms in Table 4.

Table 4 Comments from CAm & SAm EPGW users with terms related to work, study, and travel.

Search term	# of occurrences
stud*	47
work	44
profession*	38
job*	37
travel	24
live*; opportunit* (22 each)	44
school*; universit* (7 each)	14
clients	4
trainer	2
trip	1
Total #	255

MOOC users were responding to a request to describe their personal goals for the pronunciation course and express challenges or concerns regarding their English pronunciation. The number of occurrences referring to employment ($193 = 47 + 44 + 38 + 37 + 22 + 4 + 2$) is vastly higher than those referring to travel ($25 = 24 <\text{travel}>$ and $1 <\text{trip}>$) or the 14 occurrences clearly referring to studies, i.e., 7 *<school*>* and 7 *<universit*>*. The occurrences of *<live>* are ambiguous in relation to employment or studies, and thus are not categorised here.

Two comments illustrate how work-related goals may be affective as well as pragmatic, professional:

- *develop an British accent because I learn at school the American and now I feel the British was lovely, it's only personal not for work or thinks like that. I would like to learn those unique features that make pronunciation native-like!*
- *A good English is usefully for my work and this help me to grow up in my personal life.* Some goals are very precise:
- *I would love to work and care for elderly people in England and I know I need to speak in an understandable way;*
- *to make myself understood ... I would like to develop an English accent because I want to work as a reporter at a TV station I would like to speak English in such a way that other people understand me;*
- *I work in a airline company and all the time I need to speak english;*
- *As an actress, I want to learn how can I be understandable.*

Others are more general, about how improving one's pronunciation would be useful on the job:

- *I would like to work in an international environment;*
- *I would like to improve my English performance at work;*
- *I would like to upgrade my English accent because I work with English;*
- *in my new job I have to speak frequently with people that only speak English or French;*
- *I have different needs. First, It is necessary to learn excellently English for my new job. Second, I should be speaking perfect because I will work in New York. Third, I would like to develop an English accent that is understood by other speakers of English.*

Concerning opportunity, almost all of the comments below are examples of people undertaking language investment (Duchêne, 2016), investing time and/or money and/or effort in learning particular language skills in the hope that there will be a return on investment later on, often in the form of new professional opportunities:

- *it can open doors to new opportunities;*
- *I want to improve my pronunciation in English to have better job opportunities;*
- *there are many opportunities in the US, in my field, which is Mathematics;*
- *I want to speak English very well to get better opportunities in my profession, I'm an accountant;*
- *I would like to learn English for the PT test, with this I can have more opportunities to study abroad;*
- *it woul help me to avoid some discrimination problems and would help me to get better opportunities in my job.*

Overall, the comments above frame pronunciation as a key marker of professional success, which is a central motivation in improving one's pronunciation. In general,

this pursuit reflects an instrumental motivation, as described by Gardner and Lambert (1972), where language learning is driven by concrete goals such as professional success or social recognition. Anxiety and insecurity are also expressed in relation to professional contexts:

- *being more and more exposed to foreing clients at my work and I don't feel; confortble yet talking with them. I'm here to work one of my insecurities with my speaking, the pronunciation.*

Such insecurity also appears when teachers' perspectives are explored, because accent and pronunciation are major features of their professional identity. In order to gain credibility, one must approximate a native-like model:

- *to be more confident at my job. I am an English teacher. So, It is important for it.*¹⁵

That pressure to model nativelike pronunciation – and the insecurity it engenders – is clearly visible in what teachers or tutors wrote:

- *My goal is to learn more about how to teach pronunciation to help my students. My personal goal is to break the wall of insecurity when speaking;*
- *I would like to develop an accent that can be attributed to a confident language teacher trainer and trainee;*
- *nowadays english is used as lingua franca (ELF) that's why we have to lead our students into being confortable intelligible when using the foreign language, especially if the aim is communicating with other nonnative speakers.*

The final quote reflects a clear choice to orient teaching by the intelligibility principle (Levis, 2005), rather than nativelike pronunciation.

The desire to work in another country was only voiced four times in the total of 255 comments. Although 22 comments include the verb 'to live', proportionately few (8) mention planning to live in a specific place elsewhere: *I am going to live in the US; before I live in an English-speaking country; to live in London is my biggest dream; live in Switzerland; my dream is to live in an English-speaking country; working towards the opportunity to emigrate to Canada.* Present verb forms are used twelve times, mostly to talk about where oneself lives now (e.g., *I live in a tourist place; the American accent is more noticed where I live*), but two comments are about others (e.g., *my son lives in England; some friends lives there*), and one negative comment is given: *I have never lived in an English-speaking country.* Only two comments refer to the past: *When I lived in the UK; I lived in the USA for five years.*

Living abroad is often a logical extension of studying English at university:

- *I would like to learn English for the PT test, with this I can have more opportunities to study abroad;*
- *to understand the accent of other people in different countries because in the future I want to study and obtein a degree in other country in Europe;*
- *I would like to speak it and understand it very well for my future, because I plan to work when I finish studying, in another country, in a large company.*

¹⁵ See for example Gordon's case study of L2 English pronunciation teachers' identity in Costa Rica (2024).

The verb tenses reveal how individuals assert their agency in looking beyond their current situation to the future, where the United States is not the only destination in their sights:

- *I'd LOVE to have the British accent, I think it's lovely. I'm already studying English at the University, but since one of my biggest dreams is to leave Brazil to live in England, I'll need to improve;*
- *an English accent that can be understood by everyone. I would like to speak more fluently and faster since I am going to study at university to be a translator I need to improve my pronunciation I would like to develop an English accent that is understood by other speakers;*
- *I want to learn how to speak more clearly between english speakers because I want to study an MBA in a contry that the first language it's the english;*
- *My goals are : to be able to enter a university like Harvard and study my specialization or master's degree, travel to Paris, see Niagara Falls, visit the pyramids of Egypt, go to Dubai;*
- *I want to improve my pronunciation so that people can understand me better when I travel or meet foreigners that live in my neighborhood. I think this will give me more confidence.*

Finally, confidence underlies many of their goals, as in the final comment which astutely observes that language is useful not only when traveling, but also in contexts close to home.

6. Discussion

The MOOC EPGW has shown itself to be a suitable environment for enquiring into sociolinguistic issues. Concerning EPGW users from Central and South America, we hypothesized that there would be some regional specificity in the most frequently appearing themes and in the expression of underlying language ideologies.

First, words related to fluency co-occurred with understanding and intelligibility proportionately more frequently among this sub-group of MOOC users, compared to all other users. From a technical, linguistic perspective fluency has no unified scientific definition, and similarly from our analysis of the comments, it does not become clear what EPGW users mean by fluent. Our analysis seems to indicate that they may be equating the nebulous notion of fluency with intelligibility. It is also possible that the EPGW users believe that they are using a word which is in no way fuzzy; it is a very common lay term used to explain language learning goals, to praise someone else's language competency, etc. As shown above, while it is clearly conflated from time to time with intelligibility, fluency also overlaps with the notions of confidence, speed, fluidity, etc. Therefore, we argue that this is another one of those lay terms that functions as a "floating signifier" or "empty signifier", to use a term from critical theory (see Mehlman, 1972; Oxford Reference Overview). This floating quality makes it a quasi-universal goal among language learners, but one that no doubt has different real-world meanings for everyone. We found evidence of MOOC users investing in learning language skills today (language investment) in the hope of more opportunities in future, so their motivation seems to be primarily instrumental.

Second, intriguingly few comments were explicitly linked to the geo-political reality of being an English user in Central & South America. In general, goals were not always associated with specific varieties of English or countries, and the United States was definitely not their primary focus. We had expected there to be far more mentions of wanting to study or work specifically in the United States, given the statistics on mobility related to education and immigration. In reality, references to *<Brit*>* and *<England>* (210 = 203 + 7) were slightly more frequent overall, compared to *<Americ*>* and *<US*>* (167 = 152 + 15). This may be due to the fact that English more generally is now seen as the global language – more than simply as the language of the USA. Another possibility is that EPGW users know they are taking part in a MOOC which is global and/or explicitly not based in Central/South America. This might orient their responses. Yet another possibility is that some people are not comfortable with disclosing future migration hopes on the internet, especially given American politics around migration from that part of the world – even at the time of the MOOC's Runs.

Third, it may be that in this region of the world, English users are less hampered by a nativist language ideology, as manifested in the many comments of wanting to be understood by more than just native speakers, as well as the absence of comments about purity in other languages or other varieties.

The pedagogical implications are two-fold, one at the institutional level and the other at classroom level. First, Central and South American countries represent EFL contexts in the global English-language teaching landscape. While an intelligibility-focused teaching paradigm has seemingly gained a firm foothold in the published research carried out in ESL contexts in North America or Australia, many EFL contexts remain anchored to the nativeness paradigm. In countries like France, for example, this may be because the competitive exam to become a tenured schoolteacher requires candidates to have native-like pronunciation. The flexible, open-minded goals expressed in the MOOC user's comments encourage us to think that in this region of the world, individuals' perceptions of English have the potential to evolve and absorb the inevitable societal and global changes to come. Second, in teaching contexts a key issue needs to be clearly addressed: who gets to decide whether to focus on achieving intelligibility or nativelike pronunciation. Arguably once people are old enough to put words to their hopes and dreams, open discussion would be useful; learners tend to stay motivated if they have a personal stake in a goal. This holds regardless of whether the context is ESL, EFL or EIL.

In terms of future directions for research, in general, further scientific research on (perceptions of) fluency would be helpful to find out exactly what it is people are referring to – similarly to the notion of intelligibility (Kang et al., forthcoming). More specifically, we would like to explore EPGW users' comments about specific pronunciation features, their beliefs or concerns, and how those evolve over the course of the MOOC, e.g., which specific features are associated with fluency? For example, if a learner mentioned fluency as part of her goals in Step 1.8, in later modules did she change her mind, perhaps become more precise, and explain that in an exercise comment? Similarly, it would be interesting to look at the comments of people who want to improve for professional development and those who need it for travelling, and see how keywords such as *fluency* and *intelligibility* occur, or whether there are any other differences in their comments. It would also be possible to compare our current results with those of other regions (e.g.,

Africa, Asia), to see where nativist language ideology, for example, has a hold. Finally, it would be interesting to look at a subset of MOOC users from all over the world – English teachers and teacher trainers – with regard to their professional identity, because pronunciation plays a central role in this.

7. Conclusion

In 2020 Friedrich updated her sociolinguistic description of the region’s “immense diversity – linguistic, ethnic, cultural, musical, geographic, and climatic” (p. 201) in her chapter for the *Handbook of World Englishes*. Her conclusion is bittersweet, in that she (still) finds this landscape underexplored, despite the publication of some works:

Yet such work, although qualitatively inspiring, remains quantitatively small if compared to the descriptions offered about other areas of the globe, particularly and especially Asia, but also notably Europe. [...] There is a great deal of new, creative world Englishes research to be conducted in these fascinating and complex environments. (2020, pp. 201–202)

To conclude, as researchers from outside this area of the world, the analysis of the comments led us to appreciate how much broader are these individuals’ views, motivations, and aspirations than our initial preconceptions. Quality and quantity combined to open our eyes to the existing richness and potential of this ‘other forgotten continent’ and we look forward to further investigations of its sociolinguistic reality.

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RESUMÉ

Studie se zabývá širší jazykovou ideologií studentů, konkrétně zkoumá jejich postoje ke koncepcím *plynulost a srozumitelnost*. Metodika výzkumu se opírá o vysoce ceněný internetový zdroj MOOCs (Massive Open and Online Courses) a komentáře jeho uživatelů. Výzkum se soustředí na zdroj zaměřený na osvojování anglické výslovnosti (*English Pronunciation in a Global World* by Laura Rupp) a na uživatele ze zemí Střední a Jižní Ameriky, což je region z tohoto hlediska velmi málo prozkoumaný. Komentáře dávají mimo jiné i nahlédnout na aspirace a cíle studentů a jsou takto využitelné didakticky.

APPENDIX A

Approved Naturalizations for FY 2024 and Top 10 Countries, in thousands.

Country of birth	FY 2024
Mexico	107.7
India	49.7
Philippines	41.2
Dominican Republic	39.9
Cuba	33.7
Vietnam	33.4
China	24.3
El Salvador	21.9
Jamaica	20
Colombia	17.9
All Others	428.8
Total	818.5

Source: USCIS, ELIS. Data accessed October 2024/July 2025.

Note. Due to rounding, the totals may not sum.

APPENDIX B

Immigrant Status and Period of Immigration by Place of Birth (October 26, 2022)

status and period of immigration	Total – Immigrant status and period of immigration	Non-immigrant grants	Immi- grants	Before 1980	1980 to 1990	1991 to 2000	2001 to 2010	2011 to 2018	2011 to 2015	2016 to 20219	Non-permanent residents
Place of birth:											
Central America	239.915	13.185	187.25	10.085	36.665	45.545	41.53	53.42	28.445	24.97	39.48
South America	426.365	10.855	354.395	58.385	49.375	55.715	101.69	89.225	40.85	48.375	61.115

Source: Statistics Canada

APPENDIX C

Occurrences of <fluen*> Mentioned by CAm & SAm EPGW Users

Word form	# of mentions
fluency	181
fluent	126
fluently	161
fluenty	9
fluencity	2
1x each= fluence, fluencly, fluenly, fluetyl	4
Total #	483

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