

Role Models in Language Learning: Results of a Large-Scale International Survey

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Role models can exert considerable influence in shaping individuals' values, attitudes, and beliefs. A large body of work in the social sciences has investigated the influence of celebrity role models, and in the context of education, several disciplines have a rich research history in this area (e.g. medical education). However, in the context of second language acquisition, research centred on role models has largely remained on the periphery. This study presents a large-scale international survey investigating the role models of English language learners. With data collected from 8,472 participants, analysis investigated whether these learners had English language role models, who the role models were and what characteristics learners valued in them, and investigated systematic variation among subgroups. Results showed that 68 per cent of respondents reported having an English language role model, and four key role model dimensions emerged: overall command of English, paralinguistic features, personal attributes and accent/variety of English. We argue that role modelling may be a highly influential component of the psychological context of second-language acquisition, and conclude by highlighting several valuable areas for future research.

INTRODUCTION

Role models of all kinds can exert considerable influence in shaping our values, attitudes, and beliefs. Individuals, both young and old, can develop what they perceive to be strong and intimate relationships with celebrity role models (Boon and Lomore, 2001; Cashmore, 2006), and it is well documented that these virtual bonds can result 'in powerful forms of personal and social transformation' (Fraser and Brown, 2002: 200). Although role models are often discussed in the context of renowned or celebrated personalities, people who we meet in our daily lives can also function as role models, and role models can even be fictional or animated characters that we watch or read about.

Role models can affect change through multiple processes. The process which is arguably most relevant to educational contexts is that of 'vicarious learning' (also referred to as observational learning). The notion of vicarious learning is a well-established principle in psychology, and, in his seminal book on social learning theory, Bandura (1977: 12) submits that 'virtually all learning phenomena resulting from direct experience occur on a vicarious basis by

observing other people's behaviour and its consequences for them'. People continually and actively search for models they perceive as representative of what they wish to achieve, and in doing so, Bandura concludes, this 'guides and motivates self-development' (Bandura 1997: 88).

However, owing to the everyday familiarity of the term it has been argued that the 'conventional wisdom of role models' (Solomon, 1997: 396) has curtailed their rigorous empirical investigation. For example, Carrington and Skelton (2003) submit that government policies with regard to teachers' roles as sex- and race-specific models for students have been 'legitimated by an appeal to common-sense notions about the salience of 'role models' in socialization' (p. 253), rather than solid empirical results. Criticism has highlighted the fact that studies are sometimes loosely grounded in theory (Turner and Shepherd, 1999), and findings are further complicated by the fact that in the social sciences the term 'role model' has been 'inconsistently used and loosely defined' (Gibson, 2004: 135). Partly for these reasons, the potentials of role modelling have not yet been fully exploited across educational domains, and this is even truer of the field of second-language acquisition (SLA). This article addresses this paucity of research by presenting the findings of the first large-scale international study of the role models of learners of English, offering a baseline dataset that researchers will be able to draw on as an important reference point.

We recruited participants globally, and the primary aims of this exploratory study were to map out whether, and which, participants reported having English language role models, and who these role models were. We were further interested to understand the specific characteristics that participants reported valuing in their role models, and whether there was systematic variation in responses among discrete participant subgroups. We begin by offering a brief overview of relevant literature, before laying out the methodology of the study. We go on to present the results and discuss their implications both with regard to theory and pedagogy. We conclude by highlighting the limitations of the study and by highlighting what we believe to be fruitful areas for future research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical foundations of role modelling

At the heart of this article is the educational significance of role modelling which, as noted above, has its roots in Bandura's (1977) social learning theory. This posits that the vicarious experience of observing models involves four key processes. First, behaviour will only be learned from models to whom individuals *pay attention*. Within an individual's immediate context, the availability of models may be limited, but this can be expanded through the mediated frame of the press and the mass media, providing important models with 'high status, competence, and power' (p. 88).

The second and third processes—*retention* and *motor reproduction*—highlight the importance of the way the observed stimulus is processed and stored,

involving first the strengthening of this information by repeated exposure, and then various forms of practice through which these ‘symbolic representations’ can be converted into action. The final aspect relates to accompanying *motivational processes*, as people are more likely to enact a modelled action if they observe the action resulting in positive consequences. Indeed, Bandura (1977: 87) emphasized that ‘Seeing or visualising people similar to oneself perform successfully typically raises efficacy beliefs in observers that they themselves possess the capabilities to master comparable activities’. We should also note caution that these processes may not always be successful—that is, not all observed behaviour will be modelled—for reasons including weaknesses or gaps in any of the above stages, physical inability or a lack of sufficient incentives.

More recent investigations of vicarious experience have involved assessing the potential for learning without direct observation through discussion or dialogues (Cox *et al.* 1999; Northedge 2003), through utilizing students’ imagination as well as ‘the vicarious experience afforded through good fiction’ (Fox 2003: 99), and through storytelling (Krietemayer and Heiney 1992; Spouse 2003). As Roberts (2010: 14) explains, exposure to such discourses ‘enables students to develop concepts of themselves in different roles’. Ibarra (1999) refers to this process as the construction of *provisional selves*, thereby allowing individuals to ‘try on’ possible identities before they are required to act them out.

Role modelling in education and SLA

Given the close links of role modelling with social learning, the notion has been explored in multiple areas of education. Medical education has a particularly rich history, and the cumulative body of research amassed in this context lends support to the conclusion that role models have distinct educational relevance (cf. Wright *et al.* 1997; Althouse *et al.* 1999; Paice *et al.* 2002; Perry 2009).

In SLA, role models have been most directly investigated in the context of ‘near peer role modelling’ (see below), but it is fair to conclude that discussion of role models has largely been on the periphery of other research objectives. In research on language learning motivation, role models have been identified as an important impetus for the creation and refinement of an ideal L2 self (Dörnyei and Kubanyiova 2014), and as able to help learners conceptualize ‘roadmaps to success’ along with effective strategies to realize these possible selves (see Thompson and Vásquez 2015). The notion of possible selves (Markus and Nurius 1986), which underpins the L2 motivational self-system (Dörnyei 2005, 2009), links these theories indirectly yet inherently with the notion of role modelling. An intriguing variation on these principles is ‘video self-modelling’ (see Collier-Meek *et al.* 2012, for a detailed overview of the procedure; and Adolphs *et al.* 2018, for a further innovative approach with regard to visualization and technology). Video self-modelling involves first

producing a ‘success video montage’ made up of edited clips of a person performing a target behaviour well, and then asking the person to regularly watch these images of him/herself. In this way, the participant serves as his/her *own* role model. Dörnyei and Kubanyiova (2014) have argued that this technique lends itself particularly well to being utilized in language learning contexts.

Near peer role models. Murphey and Araq (2001: 1) define ‘near peer role models’ as ‘people who might be “near” to us in several ways: age, ethnicity, sex, interests, past or present experiences, and also in proximity and in frequency of social contact’. Findings in the context of SLA have confirmed that exposure to near peer role models can result in immediate benefits relating to student motivation and excitement, risk-taking and the amount of English used (Murphey and Murakami 1998). Evidence has also suggested that these positive changes can be long-lasting (Murphey and Araq 2001), that relatively little class time is required to achieve them (30 minutes in Murphey and Murakami’s 1998 study) and that a conscious emphasis on near peer role models in the L2 classroom can lead not only to student change, but also to positive teacher development (Murphey and Araq 2001). Moreover, when non-native speaker teachers are positioned as representing desirable language models for their students—significantly, with knowledge of more than one language system—they can also represent a powerful form of near peer role model (Duff and Uchida 1997; Nemtchinova 2005; He and Zhang 2010; Barkhuizen 2016).

Related research in SLA. We have noted above the lack of research into role models in the field of SLA. However, we would be remiss not to recognize several bodies of research which touch on the same core issues, even if they do not draw on the same terminology. For example, Bonny Norton and her colleagues’ work on the notion of identity, investment, and imagined communities (Anderson 2006) exemplifies this. To use their words: ‘a learner’s hopes for the future (or their children’s future) are integral to a language learner’s identity’ (Norton and Toohy 2011: 415). Drawing also on the notion of possible selves (Markus and Nurius 1986), Pavlenko and Norton (2007: 670) submit that as humans, we ‘are capable, through our imagination, of perceiving a connection with people beyond our immediate social networks’. They go on to argue that ‘For both Wenger [1998; situated learning theory] and Markus and Nurius, possible selves, linked to memberships in imagined communities, shape individuals’ present and future decisions and behaviors and provide an evaluative and interpretive context for such decisions, behaviors, and their outcomes’ (Pavlenko and Norton 2007: 670). Social comparison processes (Festinger 1954), whether upward or downward, therefore also have clear links with our discussion of English language learner role models (see e.g. Henry 2015, for a discussion of the dynamic, real-time revisions of learners’ ideal L2 selves).

Research has also investigated changes in students' L2 goals, motivations, and in the perceptions of their target language community during periods of study abroad (see e.g. Kinginger 2008), and processes of second language socialization are also rooted in the existence of clear L2 cultural and linguistic models (Duff 2007). Even when students do not or are not able to travel, teaching materials and other resources can help learners develop imagined transnational networks and identities, through imagining themselves engaging in communication with communities worldwide (Curdt-Christiansen and Weninger 2015; Duff 2015). These approaches doubtless all have links to the core principles of role modelling, and we return to expand this discussion in exploring the implications of our study.

Research questions and aims of this study

The previous overview suggests that role modelling occurs daily in classrooms around the world, yet research in the field of SLA has not yet examined the scope and the nature of the process in a systematic manner. Drawing on a large-scale online questionnaire survey of learners of English, the current exploratory study strives to begin addressing this gap by seeking answers to the following five research questions:

- 1 How common is having a language learning role model?
- 2 Who are participants' role models?
- 3 Are there any salient role model archetypes?
- 4 Is there any systematic variation in role models described by specific participant subgroups?
- 5 What characteristics do participants value in their English language role models?

METHODS

Participants

Participants for this study were 8,472 English language learners from 155 L1 backgrounds (see Table 1 for the eight most frequent). The male/female split was 54.5 per cent /44.2 per cent (with 1.3 per cent of participants opting not to say), more than 60 per cent of participants were under the age of 30, and over 80 per cent under the age of 40. Most participants (57.7 per cent) self-reported having an English language proficiency level of upper-intermediate and above, and 28.2 per cent an intermediate level. Participants were from a wide range of teaching and learning contexts (see Table 2), and a special feature of the dataset was the large number of participants who were English language teachers ($N=1,189/14.0$ per cent). In order to aid analysis, five broad geographical groupings were created from the largest participant clusters in terms of their mother tongue and reflecting their nationality/the place that they call home: Chinese (all dialects; $N=1,038$); Russian ($N=576$); languages

Table 1: Eight most common participant L1s

| L1 | <i>N</i> (per cent of respondents) |
|------------|------------------------------------|
| Chinese | 1042 (12.3) |
| Spanish | 938 (11.1) |
| Arabic | 603 (7.1) |
| Portuguese | 591 (7.0) |
| Russian | 577 (6.8) |
| Hindi | 463 (5.5) |
| Vietnamese | 436 (5.1) |
| Turkish | 326 (3.8) |

Table 2: Participants' learner/teacher status and context

| Learner/teacher status and context | <i>N</i> (per cent) |
|---------------------------------------|---------------------|
| Studying at a private language school | 794 (9.4) |
| Studying at school | 833 (9.8) |
| Studying at university | 1648 (19.5) |
| Studying on a year abroad | 137 (1.6) |
| Studying on my own | 3871 (45.7) |
| I am a teacher | 1189 (14.0) |

spoken in India ($N=898$); languages spoken in the European Union (EU) ($N=1,799$); and languages spoken in Central and South America ($N=1,134$).

Instruments and procedures

This study was part of a collaboration between the University of Nottingham and Cambridge University Press. The two institutions have a long-standing relationship, and Cambridge University Press did not have any financial stake in the results of the study. Ethical approval was sought and gained from both institutions and fully complied with. Participants were given the opportunity to participate in a prize draw to win a single £200 Amazon voucher. Contact details were drawn for this at random after data collection ended, and these participant emails were then immediately deleted. The link to a bespoke questionnaire (see [Supplementary Appendix A](#)) was placed on the Cambridge Online Dictionaries website, and data were gathered over the course of 21 days from 15 February to 7 March 2017.

The questionnaire was split into three sections. In the first, participants were asked if they had an English language learning role model, and those

who did were invited to share details of up to two such models. Participants were asked to indicate the sex of their role models (with a separate option e.g. a fictional character/animation); whether they were native English speakers and whether they were the same nationality as them; whether the role models were younger, of a similar age or older than them; and whether they worked in a similar field/profession. Finally, participants were also invited to identify their role models by name (e.g. ‘Barack Obama – former US president’ or ‘my grandmother’; note that these examples were only given after participants had answered these initial questions describing their chosen role model). This section was introduced with a brief description of a ‘role model’, and examples of role models in a different context:

A role model is someone that you respect and that you want to become more like – for example, if you are sportsman/sportswoman, your sporting role models might be Muhammad Ali or Serena Williams. We would like you to think about your English language role model: it might be a teacher, a famous actor or singer, a politician, a friend...but it could be anyone who speaks or writes in English!

In the second section, participants were asked to rate a set of characteristics in terms of how important they considered them, either regarding their existing English language role model(s) or for a role model if they were to choose one. These characteristics were drawn from a previous study that identified a set of features and attributes highlighted as important by English language learners (Adolphs *et al.* 2018). They included, for example, accent, fluency, use of gestures and the perceived ‘naturalness’ of the role models’ English usage. Participants were asked to indicate their responses on five-point Likert scales, and were also given the opportunity to share additional characteristics that they valued in an open-ended question.

The third section of the questionnaire collected background information concerning participants’ pronunciation goals, the variety of English they wanted to learn, and various demographic details as well as their current and intended future patterns of English use (some of which is not analysed in this article).

Data analysis

In order to develop a detailed picture of the role models described by the participants, comprehensive descriptive statistics were collated and chi-square analyses were conducted to interrogate the data. Drawing on the acknowledged self-organizing capacity of systems—a core tenet of complex dynamic systems theory (CDST)—we sought to identify key role model archetypes nested within the vast dataset (Dörnyei 2014). Exploratory factor analysis was also used to examine the underlying factor structure of the role model characteristics that the participants were asked to rate, first computed with the whole

dataset and subsequently separated with key participant subgroups (male/female, teachers/students, and by geographical grouping). Qualitative data obtained from open-ended questions were interrogated through thematic analysis (Nowell *et al.* 2017): once the initial coding had been completed, wider themes were identified with the coding categories reviewed and refined through an ongoing iterative process. Owing to the size of the dataset it was not double coded in its entirety. Coding was completed by the first author (C.M.), coding categories and examples were discussed in detail with the second and third authors (Z.D. and S.A.), and adjustments and re-coding were completed as necessary to achieve consensus. This was an iterative process, and these discussions took place at regular points throughout the process of analysis, with an aim to collaboratively find the best fit with the data.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Research Question 1: How common is having an English language learning role model?

A total of 5,767 participants reported having an English language role model, a total of 68.1 per cent of all respondents. Of these, 2,582 also described a second English language learning role model, leading to a dataset comprised of 8,349 role model descriptions. In evaluating this proportion, we must take into consideration that our respondents constituted a self-selected sample, leading to the likely inflation of the proportion of positive responses: one could rightly argue that people who completed the questionnaire were interested because they felt they had something substantial to contribute. We likewise note that participants were users of the Cambridge Online Dictionaries website, possibly a reflection of a high motivation to study. Curiously, the best evidence of the fact the participant sample was not entirely biased is the large number of learners (38.1 per cent) who completed the survey even though they did not have a role model. This suggests that the call for participation was attractive enough to a wide range of language learners, and further evidence of the general appeal of the survey is provided by the unexpectedly large sample that was recruited during the short period the link was active.

Thus, although some systematic bias in favour of those who had role models is inevitable, the above considerations suggest that the main attraction of the survey was not restricted to this aspect. This is indicative that the investigation of role models is indeed a worthy topic for the field of SLA. While the proportion of English language learners with role models may not turn out to match the figures reported in other educational disciplines (e.g. over 90 per cent as noted by Wright *et al.* 1997, in the context of medical education), further research will clarify the pedagogical potential rooted in L2 role models. The wider relevance of L2 role models is further supported by the international spread of the respondent sample, with the exact figures exhibiting natural variation reflecting differences in these learners' wider cultural contexts (see

Table 3: Number of participants with role models from different geographical groupings

| Geographical grouping | N (per cent) |
|---------------------------|--------------|
| Chinese | 612 (59.0) |
| Russian | 396 (68.8) |
| India | 641 (71.4) |
| EU | 1181 (65.5) |
| Central and South America | 831 (73.3) |

Table 3 and “Research Question 4” section for further discussion of these results). Overall, we feel confident in arguing that role modelling may be a highly influential component of the psychological context of SLA.

Research Question 2: Who are participants’ role models?

Let us start characterizing the role models that our participants described with some demographic statistics. Of the 8,349 role models in our dataset, 4,980 (59.6 per cent) were male and 3,140 (37.6 per cent) female; 229 role models belonged to the ‘Other’ category, for example, animated or fictional characters. Most role models described were English native speakers (64.2 per cent) and most role models (78 per cent) were older than participants. Of the role models, 37.8 per cent were personally known by the participants (see Table 4), and 55 per cent were famous (i.e. not personally known; see Table 5).

Most participants reported wanting to learn British English (see Table 6), likely influenced by the fact that data were collected from visitors to the Cambridge Online Dictionaries website. This was reflected in the fact that the majority of the most frequently mentioned famous role models were also British (see Table 7). It is significant that there was a substantial category of personally known role models made up of teachers and professors (see Table 4), highlighting the potentially large role modelling impact of educators.

It is also noteworthy that the two most popular role models, Barack Obama and Emma Watson, are both personalities well known for their social activism (Obama was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2009 and Watson was appointed as a UN Women Goodwill Ambassador in 2014). Although we cannot know whether participants were aware of this, there is an interesting connection here with our qualitative data, which highlighted role models’ character, ethics, and moral stance as important factors contributing to their selection (see “Research Question 5” section). We should note, however, that in the context of the overall sample size the frequency numbers attached to named celebrities are very small, indicating significant variation. Even Barack Obama only accounted for 3.2 per cent of all role models described, and we

Table 4: Top five categories of personally known role models

| Personally known role model categories | <i>N</i> | Percentage of personally known role models | Percentage of all role models |
|--|----------|--|-------------------------------|
| All known role models | 3,156 | 100.0 | 37.8 |
| Teacher/professor | 1,848 | 58.6 | 22.1 |
| Friend/classmate | 588 | 18.6 | 7.0 |
| Family member | 275 | 8.7 | 3.3 |
| Boss/colleague | 252 | 8.0 | 3.0 |
| Partner/spouse (current or ex) | 99 | 3.1 | 1.2 |

Table 5: Top five categories of famous role models

| Famous role model categories | <i>N</i> | Percentage of famous role models | Percentage of all role models |
|--------------------------------|----------|----------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| All famous role models | 4,590 | 100.0 | 55.0 |
| Film/TV industry | 1,170 | 25.3 | 13.9 |
| Politics | 728 | 15.9 | 8.7 |
| Author/poet | 493 | 10.7 | 5.9 |
| Singer/musician | 448 | 9.8 | 5.4 |
| YouTuber/vlogger (ELT related) | 263 | 5.7 | 3.2 |

Table 6: ‘What variety of English would you like to learn?’ (Participants were able to tick multiple responses)

| Variety | <i>N</i> |
|--|----------|
| British English | 5,471 |
| American/Canadian English | 3,691 |
| It is not important to me | 2,453 |
| Australian/New Zealander English | 1,073 |
| A specific variety of English (e.g. Chinese English/Chinglish) | 345 |
| Other | 232 |

acknowledge that the example of ‘Barack Obama – US president’ was given to participants at the end of Section 1 when participants were invited to write the full name of their role model (along with e.g. “my grandmother” or “my first English teacher”); while this may have influenced participants to

Table 7: Top eight most frequently reported famous role models

| Famous role models | <i>N</i> (per cent) |
|----------------------|---------------------|
| Barack Obama | 267 (3.2) |
| Emma Watson | 125 (1.5) |
| Benedict Cumberbatch | 113 (1.4) |
| J. K. Rowling | 70 (0.8) |
| Stephen Fry | 58 (0.7) |
| Queen Elizabeth II | 54 (0.6) |
| Michelle Obama | 48 (0.6) |
| Adele | 46 (0.6) |

volunteer Obama as a second role model, the vast number of mentions of Obama— $n = 199$ of 267 total mentions—can be found as a first role model described by participants). The overall variation in responses is doubtless considerable.

Research Question 3: Are there salient role model archetypes?

It appears that just as individual tastes differ, so do individual preferences regarding role models. This would imply that role models display a virtually unlimited variety, yet, a principle of CDST is that the self-organization capacity of systems works to reduce variation, almost always resulting in a finite number of archetypes (Dörnyei 2014). Therefore, we examined our role model pool to identify any templates for role model archetypes that were particularly frequent. In order to capture robust tendencies without becoming lost in the richness of detail that characterizes such vast datasets, we formed five dichotomies from the basic role model rubrics given to participants in section 1 of the questionnaire:

- 1 *Sex*: male vs. female
- 2 *L1*: native English speaker vs. non-native English speaker
- 3 *Relationship to participant*: famous vs. personally known
- 4 *Job*: same job vs. different job
- 5 *Nationality*: same nationality vs. different nationality

The permutations of these primary categories provided 32 possible combinations (e.g. famous + male + native speaker + different job + different nationality), and we began the analysis by computing the frequency of role model occurrences for each combination. Because we were interested in salient trends, we discounted the combinations which yielded the lowest frequency numbers ($N < 2$ per cent). The two tables we enclose in [Supplementary Appendix B](#) include a full summary of the remaining archetypes ([Supplementary Table B1](#) summarizing famous role models, and

Supplementary Table B2 summarizing personally known role models), and the frequency statistics relevant to the current discussion can be found presented in the first column of these tables.

Although participants described almost 50 per cent more famous than personally known role models, the substantial frequency of the latter ($N > 3,100$) underlines their significance. Within the ‘famous’ category, the primary role model archetype is a male native speaker (NS) in a job different to that of the respondent. This category represents 34 per cent of all the role models reported in our study, and the most popular named role model, Barack Obama, is a prime example of this. The second most endorsed archetype is the female counterpart of the first, epitomized by the second most popular named role model, Emma Watson. Interestingly, a third famous archetype also emerges different from the first two types in that it involves a non-native speaker (NNS) of English of the respondent’s nationality (i.e. a local celebrity).

The primary archetype in the personally known subgroup was a female non-native speaker of the same nationality as the respondent, representing roughly 12 per cent of the total number of role models reported. The second archetype in this category was its male counterpart, and as we might expect these two NNS role model archetypes are roughly twice as common as the corresponding personally known NS speaker archetypes.

Thus, we *can* identify a small set of role model archetypes that explain a significant proportion of the variance in the overall pool of role models reported. The next section continues this discussion by examining their interaction with discrete respondent subgroups.

Research Question 4: Is there any systematic variation in role models described by specific participant subgroups?

It is clear that the characteristics of a person choosing a role model are in a dynamic relationship with the characteristics of the role model chosen. In order to explore any systematic variation in this respect, we divided the respondents into basic subgroups according to their sex, status (student/teacher), geographical grouping, and age group. When we displayed the frequency data on a comprehensive spreadsheet, some robust patterns became detectable. We then examined the occurrence of the 32 role model types identified in the previous section across these participant subgroups, computing the relevant frequencies and adding these into the two tables included in [Supplementary Appendix B](#) in new columns.

In some areas, various subgroups do not represent unique variation, as certain role model types are equally relevant across the subgroups. However, a closer look at the figures did reveal some systematic variation, indicating interesting and possibly fruitful areas for further research. After analysing the frequency data in a visual manner and identifying possible trends (an established approach in qualitative research to processing ‘display data’; see e.g. [Miles and](#)

Huberman 1994: 11), we verified our observations through chi-square statistics. Let us look at findings from the four participant subgroups separately.

Variation stemming from participant sex. Famous NS role models were a key archetype for both male and female participants, with this archetype accounting for 49 per cent and 43 per cent of all role models described by men and women, respectively. A 3×3 chi-square analysis (including participant sex 'prefer not to say' and role model 'other' e.g. animated character) confirmed a significant relationship between the sex of participants and their English language role models, with male respondents more likely to describe male role models, and female participants female models, $\chi^2 (4, n = 8,349) = 652.6, p < 0.001$. Concordant with research in other disciplines, the reporting of other-sex role models was more marked for female participants, and female participants in fact described more male famous NS role models than female famous NS role models (24 per cent versus 19 per cent). Nevertheless, many male respondents did have female role models: while 494 (45.2 per cent) of these models were famous, there was also a substantial number of female role models personally known to male participants ($N = 539/49.3$ per cent), most of whom ($N = 319/29.2$ per cent) were their teachers/professors.

A 2×3 chi-square analysis further confirmed a significant relationship between the participants' sex and whether or not they reported NS role models, with men more likely to describe NSs and women NNSs, $\chi^2 (2, n = 8,349) = 7.866, p < 0.05$. Importantly, a 3×3 chi-square analysis also confirmed a significant relationship between the participants' sex and their relationship with their role model, with male participants more likely to describe a famous role model and women a model personally known, $\chi^2 (4, n = 8,349) = 79.96, p < 0.001$.

Teacher and student role model archetypes. The most common role model archetypes described by both teachers and students reflected the overall primary archetypes (male and female NS celebrities), and the third most common archetype—personally known female NNS—may be explained in light of the fact that 62 per cent of the teachers in our sample were female. A 2×3 chi-square analyses also indicated significant differences between teachers and students with regard to whether their role models were famous/personally known and whether they were in a similar job to them: teachers were more likely to report personally known role models, $\chi^2 (2, n = 8,349) = 31.255, p < 0.001$, and role models in a similar profession to themselves, $\chi^2 (2, n = 8,349) = 243.61, p < 0.001$.

Variation across different geographical groupings. Chi-square analyses also indicated significant and intriguing differences across the geographical/mother tongue clusters, with two superordinate clusters emerging: (i) Central and South America, EU, and Russia and (ii) China and India. The distinction between them concerned whether the selected role models were

L1 English speakers, whether they were the same nationality as respondents and whether they were personally known. A 2×5 chi-square analysis confirmed that the second cluster—China and India—were more likely to describe NNSs than the first, $\chi^2(4, n = 5,310) = 343.49, p < 0.001$. This was particularly marked for India (for which 59.1 per cent of all role models described were NNSs), and was further underscored by the self-reported pronunciation goals which indicated that Chinese and Indian learners valued communicative ability over native-like pronunciation (see Table 8). A 2×5 chi-square analysis confirmed that China and India were more likely to report on role models of the same nationality as them, $\chi^2(4, n = 5310) = 533.61, p < 0.001$, as well as on personally known role models, $\chi^2(8, n = 5310) = 68.35, p < 0.001$. These consistent differences indicate the importance the two most populous ethnolinguistic communities of the world place on ‘local heroes’ over western celebrities. The particularly high figures in India are also likely to be due to the large number of Indian speakers of English who can be considered native-like having been brought up and educated in English. In the context of this exploratory study, we asked participants themselves to make the judgement as to whether they perceived their role model to be a native or a non-native speaker of English, and have likewise not been able to delve as deeply as we would like in our analysis into issues surrounding ‘accent’ (both of role models themselves and with regard to participants’ personal L2 goals). The initial findings we present here therefore highlight a fascinating area for future research.

Variation across participant age groups. Multiple chi-square analyses indicated significant differences between the age of participants, the nationality and L1 of their role models, and their relationship with them. A 5×2 chi-square analysis confirmed that younger participants were more likely to report role models that were NNSs, $\chi^2(4, n = 8349) = 93.40, p < 0.000$; a 5×3 chi-square analysis confirmed that younger participants were more likely to report on role models that were personally known, $\chi^2(8, n = 8349) = 26.07, p < 0.001$; and a 5×2 chi-square analysis confirmed that younger participants were more likely to report on role models of the same nationality, $\chi^2(4, n = 8349) = 87.17, p < 0.000$. Although we might have expected the opposite (namely, that younger participants would turn to popular celebrity culture for English language role models), our results suggest the draw of younger learners towards ‘near peer role models’ (we also note that this may be because younger learners, more likely to still be in formal education, may be more likely to be surrounded by near peers than their older counterparts).

Interim summary. There is evidence of systematic variation between role model choice and characteristics of the various subgroups. However, to some extent, the overall archetypes interfere with this. For example, even though a same-sex preference in choosing role models was found for virtually all role

Table 8: Pronunciation goals reported by different geographical groupings

| Geographical grouping | 'Sounding like a native speaker is important to me, even though it is hard', <i>N</i> (per cent) | 'Being able to communicate is a more important goal to me than to sound like a native speaker', <i>N</i> (per cent) |
|---------------------------|---|--|
| Central and South America | 500 (44.1) | 468 (41.3) |
| EU | 781 (43.4) | 652 (36.2) |
| Russian | 297 (51.6) | 181 (31.4) |
| Chinese | 436 (42.0) | 450 (43.4) |
| India | 278 (31.0) | 551 (61.4) |

model types, the absolute figure of male celebrity role models chosen by female respondents was higher than that of female famous role models. Similarly, while we observed a preference for younger respondents to choose personally known NNS role models, here, too, the absolute frequency figure for celebrity NS role models remained higher.

Research Question 5: What characteristics do participants value in their English language role models?

In order to investigate the basis on which participants selected their role models, the survey asked respondents to rate 19 potential role model characteristics/features. To assess the underlying factor structure of their evaluations, we submitted their responses to exploratory factor analysis. The data were ideally suited to exploratory factor analysis: the ratio of subjects to items is over 400 and the sample size likewise appropriate (1,000 participants or more is considered excellent by [Tabachnick and Fidell 2001](#)). Maximum likelihood extraction with oblimin rotation produced a four-factor solution ([Table 9](#); see [Supplementary Appendix C](#) for means and standard deviations of each item), which explained 54.1 per cent of the variance. There was only one item that did not load onto a factor at a level of at least 0.3 ('Their rate of speech'), and the factor matrix was likewise clear in the sense that there were no cross-loadings. Bartlett's test of sphericity was significant (<0.000), and the Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy was well above the necessary 0.6 threshold (0.856; see [Pallant 2005](#)). The clarity of the picture presented by the factor matrix offers strong support for the claim that all respondents conceptualized their role models along the following four main dimensions: *overall command of English*; *paralinguistic features*; *demographic features*; and *accent/variety of English*.

To further investigate the claim that these four dimensions were representative of the way in which participants conceptualized their role models,

Table 9: Factor analysis of the role model characteristics in the whole sample (maximum likelihood extraction; oblimin rotation; loadings under 0.30 deleted)

| Role model characteristic | Factor | | | |
|--|--------|-------|-------|--------|
| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| The size of their vocabulary | 0.729 | | | |
| Their ability to explain themselves | 0.682 | | | |
| Their spoken fluency | 0.682 | | | |
| Their grammatical accuracy | 0.677 | | | |
| Their ability to adapt their English for different contexts (at a business meeting, dinner with friends) | 0.645 | | | |
| Their written English | 0.614 | | | |
| Their confidence when they speak English | 0.530 | | | |
| Their reaction when they do not understand/know a word in English | 0.363 | | | |
| Their understanding and use of humour (telling jokes) | 0.344 | | | |
| How 'natural' they look when they speak English | 0.305 | | | |
| Their rate of speech (how fast they talk) | | | | |
| Their facial expressions (eye contact, smile, etc.) | | 0.852 | | |
| Their gestures (how they use their hands and arms when they talk) | | 0.813 | | |
| Their personality more generally (if they are friendly, patient or nice, for example) | | 0.321 | | |
| Their age | | | 0.762 | |
| Their job/profession | | | 0.624 | |
| Their nationality | | | 0.609 | |
| Their accent | | | | -0.730 |
| The type of English they speak (American English, British English, etc.) | | | | -0.660 |

additional exploratory factor analyses were conducted for key subsamples: male and female participants, teachers and students, and each of the five created geographical/mother tongue clusters. For all of these subgroups, a four-factor solution produced factor structures similar to the above, lending further support to this underlying structure. However, quantitative analyses are inevitably limited by the restricted number of pre-determined items that are included in a questionnaire, and with this in mind participants were invited to

list further characteristics that they felt were important in their English language role models. A total of 1,872 participants responded, and after excluding responses that were unclear, too broad or irrelevant, a pool of over 1,600 responses remained.

Thematic analysis identified 29 categories underlying this qualitative dataset. In [Supplementary Appendix D](#), we include the full mapping of these categories onto the four dimensions described above ([Supplementary Table D1](#)). The qualitative data offer a rich illustration of the content of these dimensions, and we include this detailed information here so that it can be drawn upon in future research. The mapping exercise also helped to identify a key aspect of the role models concerning their *personality and appearance* that was not covered by the questionnaire data, for example, including attributes such as role models' charisma, general demeanour, personal appearance, and integrity/ethics (a full overview of these results and sample data for each category can likewise be found in [Supplementary Appendix D](#), see [Table D2](#)). This can be viewed as complementary to the *demographic factors* emerged from the factor analysis, thereby forming a broader dimension that we have labelled *personal attributes*. We can thus answer the fifth research question by concluding that the role models reported in our study were evaluated by participants according to four broad dimensions: *overall command of English*, *paralinguistic features*, *personal attributes*, and *accent/variety of English*.

IMPLICATIONS AND LIMITATIONS

Theoretical implications

The findings of this study lend strong support to the claim that role modelling is thoroughly deserving of more systematic and detailed investigation within the field of SLA. The variation identified among geographical groupings highlights the importance of local context, and the interaction of this with the international and transnational networks that students directly engage in, or that they imagine themselves to be a member of. Other theoretical links can be made to the notion of social capital and interesting questions surround, for example, the description of other-sex role models, particularly men describing female role models. There may be little coincidence that over three quarters of the female role models described by men in this study were in positions with influence or high social capital, often their teachers/professors (see [Bandura 1986](#); [Gibson and Cordova 1999](#)). Investigation of changes in language learners' role models over time is a further key area for future research, both related to learners' increasing proficiency in the L2 (see e.g. [Gibson 2003](#), for discussion in the context of investment banking and management consulting documenting the changing descriptions of individuals' role models at different stages in participants' careers), and changes stemming from experience and exposure to different networks and communities ([Kinginger 2008](#); [Duff 2015](#)).

Linked to this, research is also needed to investigate variation in learners' construal of their L2 role models (cf. Trope and Liberman 2010). For example, in what contexts/situations do learners interact with or imagine their role models, and in what types of communicative encounters? Investigation of the frequency of any form of contact (real or imagined) of learners with their L2 role models is likewise critical. The implications with regard to L2 development (or on intermediary variables such as motivation) are clear: if learners have a L2 role model but rarely meet/imagine them, their existence is likely to have little relevance. This might be investigated, for example, in relation to motivation, engagement (Mercer and Dörnyei, in press), discrete aspects of L2 development (see Ushioda 2016), or learner emotions. The latter is particularly timely considering the recent emphasis in the field of SLA on positive emotions (MacIntyre *et al.* 2016), and research investigating the types of emotions triggered by L2 role models (both positive and negative) and their varying impact would be an interesting line of inquiry.

Pedagogical implications

The immediate practical implication of this study implies that teachers might capitalize on the fact that so many of their students may already have L2 role models. For example, they may help students to build links with them, whether in person or—more likely—virtually, via tailored textbook or other classroom resources, through various mediums of technology or via learners' imaginations. Darvin and Norton's (2015, 2017) work highlights the shifting technological landscape, and 'the capacity of both learners and teachers to move fluidly across both time and space in an increasingly digital world' (2017: 227). In fact, a classroom environment that cannot accommodate learners' role models may lead to significant negative consequences, as underscored by Norton's (2001, 2013) related research on student non-participation. As Pavlenko and Norton (2007: 678) explain, and as may be equally true with regard to the recognition and inclusion of language learner role models, 'If we do not acknowledge the imagined communities of the learners, we may exacerbate their non-participation and impact their learning trajectories in negative ways', leading even to withdrawal from study.

Pavlenko and Norton further highlight Kanno's (2003) work, emphasizing the importance of not only the future visions of learners' themselves, but also the visions that schools have for their learners, and the impact of this on students' identity and academic development (see also Darvin and Norton 2017, for a discussion of the importance of the language learning environment in affording learners opportunities to enact their identity, and to fully invest in the language learning process). This again underlines the importance of adopting a *person-in-context-relational-view* (Ushioda 2009), and of Ushioda's call to understand and engage in the classroom all aspects of learners' transportable identities (Ushioda 2011): to include and acknowledge their visions for the

future and the role models they hold dear with regard to their L2 goals and aspirations.

As has been discussed in the context of the motivational potential of learners' ideal L2 selves (Dörnyei and Kubanyiova 2014), so is it likely that there is a specific set of conditions that must be met before any pedagogical value from L2 role models might be realized. As a starting point, we propose that it is highly likely that many of the conditions identified in relation to the former are equally relevant to the latter. For example, conditions relating to the *perceived plausibility* of reaching competence similar to that of learners' role models, or understanding *how* they might achieve this (i.e. the existence of a roadmap of relevant plans and strategies). In considering potential pedagogical applications, research investigating this supposition is needed, and also in relation to the varying levels of importance of each condition. In the context of ideal L2 selves there has been little research emphasis on this important question, yet one interesting study has found, for example, that the *frequency* with which an ideal L2 self is imagined is strongly associated with participants' motivation to attain it (Hessel 2015).

Finally, we wish to highlight the pedagogical relevance of role models not only to students but also to *teachers*. The large subgroup of data collected from English teachers in this study has clearly provided an initial demonstration of relevance, and pedagogical implications with regard to teacher training may stand as a further line of research that could prove to be particularly fruitful. This may link, for example, to the importance of L2 teacher role models in the development of specialized 'craft knowledge' that cannot be learned from textbooks (in the context of medical education see e.g. Perry 2009, for discussion of the importance of this with regard to learning to use silence as an effective communicative tool).

LIMITATIONS

Our study has several limitations, the most serious arguably being that the pervasiveness of the term 'role model' in everyday parlance may have overridden the definition given to participants: some participants may have described mentors rather than role models, or have mixed up role models with English speakers they looked up to but whom they did not necessarily try to imitate. Moreover, the number of role models was capped at two, and it is not clear whether participants described current or past role models.

Further limitations pertain to the online questionnaire format. We have not been able to account for participants completing the questionnaire more than once, the likelihood of which may have increased due to the prize-draw offered. This may also have occurred from participants wishing to describe more than the two role models the questionnaire design allowed for. With regard to the former, we believe it is unlikely that if some participants did complete the questionnaire more than once that this will have impacted significantly on the results of this exploratory study, particularly because our

analysis focused on identifying broad trends. With regard to the latter, we feel participants would have been discouraged from doing this because of the additional information they would have needed to complete in the questionnaire prior to resubmitting. We further acknowledge that we cannot verify that the background information given by the participants was correct.

A final source of limitation concerns the fact that no variables were included that allowed for investigation of the *impact* of these role models on either participants' motivation or other learning behaviours, yet this can be accounted for in the design of this study as an initial exploratory investigation into these issues. Existing research on role models in other disciplines has been criticized for not offering sufficient evidence that the attitudinal influences role models exert are translated into actual attainment, and research has suggested that the primary influences of sex- and race-specific role models might be exerted more broadly and indirectly, for example, in the creation of a more inclusive school environment (Carrington and Skelton 2003). This again highlights clear links between role modelling and notions of identity, investment, and possible selves. In order to usefully utilize the concept of role modelling in SLA, future research must address this directly by including a broad range of criterion measures (both behavioural and attitudinal).

CONCLUSION

Our research project was motivated by the initial belief that role models play an important part in language learning, an assumption supported by investigations elsewhere in the field of education as well as across other disciplines. We conducted an exploratory study to establish the main parameters of the subject and to address the fundamental questions of how widespread role models are and what characteristic features people highlight about them. We aimed to present an extensive baseline dataset that can act as a useful reference point and springboard for future work in this area. Based on the results, we have outlined a four-component framework of the underlying structure of role model appraisal—*overall command of English, paralinguistic features, personal attributes* and *accent/variety of English*—and in [Supplementary Appendix D](#) have provided rich qualitative illustrations of the content of each dimension.

We believe that our findings offer sufficient evidence for the importance of L2 role models within the process of mastering an L2, and that our initial findings warrant further, more focused investigations. An important question to be answered by future research is whether role modelling is gradable; that is, are there weaker and stronger role models? Although this issue was not addressed directly in our study, the information we have gathered suggests that role models exert variable influence, and if this indeed turns out to be the case, it may be an interesting research programme to identify correlations between aspects of role models' behaviour and the impact they have on others. Related to this question, Bandura (1977) has suggested that some people are

more likely to be susceptible to modelling influences than others, and it may well be the case that there is a dynamic interaction between certain types of role models and recipients. This received indirect evidence from the fact that certain participant subgroups in our study displayed marked preferences for certain role model types. Finally, future research might also examine any possible barriers that stop an individual from considering someone a role model, such as negative stereotypes or clashes with other possible selves (see e.g. Buck *et al.* 2008). In sum, investigations into the intriguing subject of L2 role modelling are likely to bring forth several, as yet untapped seams to be mined.

SUPPLEMENTARY DATA

Supplementary material is available at *Applied Linguistics* online.

FUNDING

This study was funded by an Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council Impact Acceleration Account grant (EPSRC IAA Reference: RR1402).

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