

Exploring Saudi EFL Students' Attitudes Towards NES and NNES Teachers' Accents

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ABSTRACT

Various studies have examined EFL students' attitudes towards accented English. However, this topic has rarely been studied in the Saudi context. The current study examined the attitudes of Saudi EFL university students towards teachers with British or American-accented English (a native speaker model) and Arabic-accented English (a nonnative speaker model) in the language classroom. Thirteen Saudi EFL students participated in this study. An online questionnaire was administered using the matched-guise technique. The results of the study showed that EFL teachers with an American accent is the most favored by their students. Nevertheless, there was little support for this finding. Another important finding is that the examined EFL students had similar positive attitudes towards both British and Arabic accented English. This similarity might suggest that having an accent as an EFL teacher might not be perceived negatively as long as the teacher has the ability to deliver information properly.

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1. Introduction

The fact that English has spread as an international language has sparked attention in the different accents spoken by English speakers. Today, the use of English is no longer limited to native speakers. Instead, English is used among non-native speakers which make a varieties with distinguished features. The definition of accent according to Lippi-Green (2012) "accent is used to refer to the breakthrough of native language phonology into the target language". The current study examined the attitudes of Saudi EFL university students towards teachers with British or American-accented English (a native speaker model) and Arabic-accented English (a nonnative speaker model) in the language classroom.

Although many studies examined students' attitudes towards accented English, this topic has rarely been studied in the Saudi context. In addition to the relative lack of research in this context, a second motivation for this research is that there is a popular belief among EFL students at Al-Imam University that the more native-like the teacher's accent, the more she/he would be valued and accepted. Therefore, the results of the study will help us in truly understanding Saudi EFL students' perceptions of accented-English.

The rest of the paper is organized as follow. After introducing the research context in the first section, the second section outlines the main terms used in this paper followed by a review of related research, then the research question and hypothesis. The adopted methodology is described next followed by the results of the analysis and a discussion. Finally, the conclusion section is presented.

1.1 Defining attitude

The concept of attitude has been approached from several aspects, and as a result, researchers have not agreed on one definition only. One of these definitions is that attitude refers to our relatively enduring evaluation of something, where something is called the attitude object. The attitude object might be a person, a product, or a social group (Albarracin, Johnson, & Zanna, 2005; Wood, 2000). Furthermore, attitude can be captured using several research methods. However, the most reliable technique to measure accents' attitude is matched-guise, which was developed by Lambert, Hodgson, Gardner, and Fillenbaum (1960). In the matched-guise technique, the participants asked for listening to different accents on tape-recorded to judge the speaker's personality traits such as being intelligent and well-educated.

The reason for using this technique is to absorb the listener's assumption towards the speaker's personality traits based on their accents. Therefore, the matched-guise technique was adopted in the present study (Butler, 2007).

1.2 Previous studies

Numerous studies have found that accents do not influence students' attitudes towards their teachers (e.g., Abdul Qadeer, 2019; Walkinshaw & Oanh, 2014; Wardak, 2014). Also, it shows that attitudes toward the accent of the speakers can differ depending on the listener and context. For instance, Abdul Qadeer's (2019) study aimed to examine the students' perception of the native English-speaking teachers (NESTs) and Arab non-native English-speaking teachers (NNESTs). Abdul Qadeer carried out his study at King Khalid University, and this study focused on the male instructors and students while the female was excluded. The research tool in this study is a questionnaire, and 136 students did it. The overall findings indicate that the majority of the students prefer their NNESTs, and they were rated as their first preference whereas the NESTs come as the second category. Moreover, the reason behind the preference towards the NNESTs due to their proficiency in English skills, especially reading and writing skills. Meanwhile, the NESTs were preferable as well according to their skillfulness in listening and speaking skills.

In addition, Lan Walkinshaw & Oanh (2014) conducted a study to (1) investigate the attitudes of English learners in Vietnam and Japan and (2) examine the advantages besides the disadvantages of the native English-speaking teachers (NESTs) and Vietnamese and Japanese non-native English-speaking teachers (NNESTs). The data collection instrument was a self-report questionnaire with two participant groups totaling 100 learners of English. All the participants were under the age of 24. The gender imbalance of the study was the research limitation because they collected the data from a women's university. His final findings indicate some excellent advantages of NNESTs, which are their ability to teach complex items, sharing the same culture with their students, and their pronunciation of words is easy to comprehend. On the other hand, NESTs have an ideal pronunciation, have the correct language use, and their cultural knowledge preference.

Moreover, Wardak (2014) prepared a questionnaire and structured interview to explore the advantage and disadvantages of having native English-speaking teachers (NESTs) and Afghani non-native English-speaking teachers (NNESTs). This study was carried out in two locations, a private university in Kabul Afghanistan and a government-funded language school in Wales. The study has answered three following questions: (1) the advantages and disadvantages of NESTs and NNESTs throughout the learners' perspective and (2) how do the NESTs and NNESTs perceive themselves and weigh their advantages and disadvantages and (3) how do NESTs employers and NNESTs see each other, NNESTs in particular. Furthermore, the interview goes by discussing these questions with the students and their attitude towards NESTs or NNESTs. The second research question aims to formulate both NESTs and NNESTs teacher's views and opinions about themselves. The results show that both NESTs and NNESTs are satisfying to study with. Although much of the empirical research on student's attitudes towards accent (e.g., Abdul Qadeer, 2019; Walkinshaw & Oanh, 2014; Wardak, 2014) indicates that students can relate to their NNESTs for various reasons such as sharing the same culture, yet many students value NESTs classes.

In Rao (2010), twenty third-year students of English were selected to answer a questionnaire about the NESTs performance. First, the students were asked to provide an insight into the teachers' nationalities, age, educational backgrounds, and teaching experience, which was checked by the university for its accuracy. In-depth interviews were held to examine students' perceptions of NESTs and their effects in the classrooms and how to improve their ability. The result showed that students enjoy NESTs classes. Although some of the teachers did not have experience in teaching, some students were optimistic about this, and others were not. Overall, students appreciated the teacher's authenticity in their education (Rao, 2010).

By looking at the reviewed literature, only one study examined Arabic accented English speech as used by teachers (Abdul Qadeer, 2019). However, this work is limited in terms of the methodology. Abdul Qadeer (2019) examined attitudes using only a questionnaire asking students about their general opinions on several accents. This type of questionnaire is unlikely to gauge students' perspectives on the accents as it hypothetically asked students rather than presented them with a reliable attitude test such as the matched-guise technique. To avoid this problem, the present study aims to use a matched guise technique in investigating students' accents perception.

1.3 The present study

The current study examined Saudi English as a foreign language (EFL) students' attitudes towards British and American native English-speaking teachers (NESTs) and Arab non-native English-speaking teachers (NNESTs) accents. Specifically, this study was set out to answer the following research question:

- What attitudes do college students hold towards EFL teachers' accents usually encountered in Saudi College- level classrooms (i.e., Arab-accented English, American- accented English and British- accented English)?

In answering this question, this study is based on the hypothesis that Imam university students majoring in English language have a negative attitude toward EFL teachers who speak Arab-accented English compare to those with American- accented English or British- accented English.

2. Methodology

Thirteen Saudi EFL students participated in this study. All of the participants were female participants under the age of 27, and all of them were in their senior level. As for the test instrument, we have used an online questionnaire to test the students' attitude towards the NES and NNEST teachers' accent. In the questionnaire, there were 3 audio records containing 3 different accents, English British accent, English American accent and English Arabic accent. All the audio records were done by one of the group members who can speak in the three accents fluently. There were under each record 8 questions, the participants were asked to guess by listening to those records if the English British speaker is friendly, educated or intelligent more than the English American or Arabic speakers or not. The idea of our questionnaire was taken from a previous research (Nejjari et al., 2012). The test was shared via WhatsApp by using the Google Forms platform (see appendix for the full questionnaire) .

3. Result and discussion

The researchers collected 13 valid questionnaire samples. The results, as shown below, point out that the preferred accent is American since 43% of them agreed upon the quality of American accented English teachers. At the same time, 35% of students prefer Arab-accented English, and British-accented English took 34%. The majority of participants prove that students prefer American accents more than British and Arab- accented English. (See the appendix for the questioner).

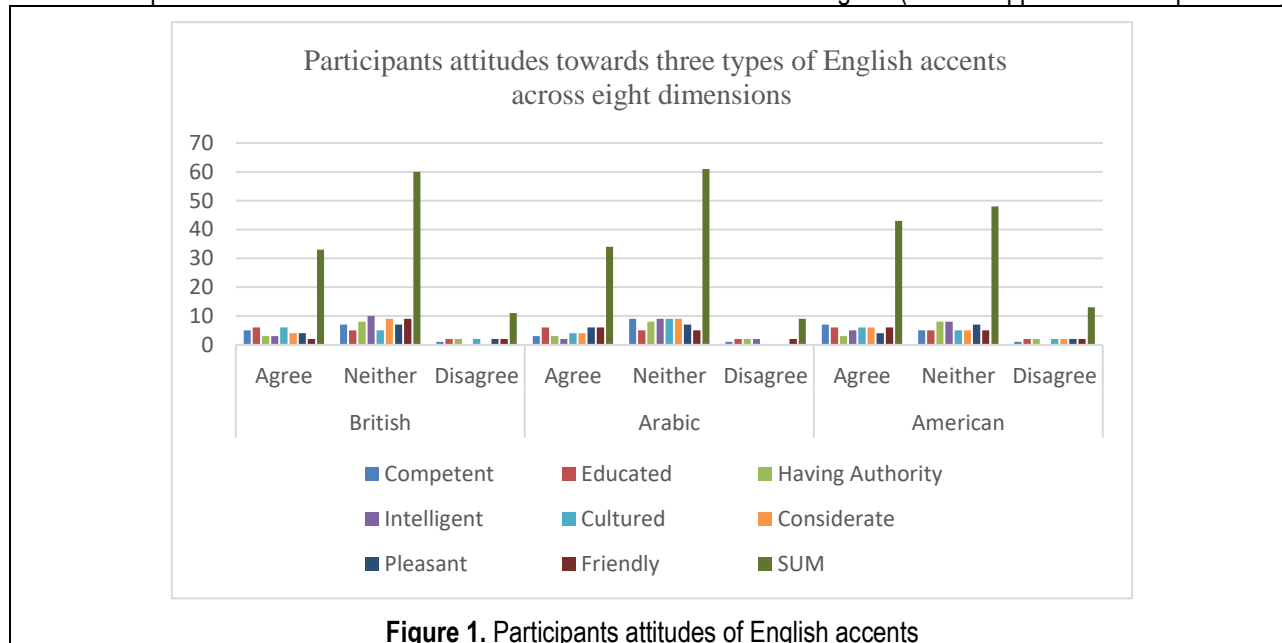


Figure 1. Participants attitudes of English accents

This study aimed to closely examine EFL Saudi students' attitudes. The purpose was to investigate the students' attitudes toward non-native English teachers. As was shown in the results section, the students seemed very comfortable learning from teachers with different accents. Also, the results revealed that EFL students at Imam University preferred the American accent more.

Although the followed analysis approach did not show that this preference for the American accented speech was significantly different, the American accent was the most liked. One possible explanation for this result is that a lot of EFL

students at Imam University are taught by teachers who have an Americanized accent. Indeed, it seemed that the examined students preferred the American dialect because it is friendly and close to their ears, given that they are surrounded by people who use the American accent and this point helped the American accent to rise.

Furthermore, there was an unexpected result. This study found that the Saudi and British accents were almost the same. It seems that Arabic accented English has its preference by some students. Actually, this result contradicts with the research hypothesis, as the research hypothesis seeks to prove that the students have a negative attitude toward the EFL teachers who have an Arabic-accented English.

In addition, our research result contracts in a way or another with the research result of Abdul Qadeer (2019). His research findings indicate that the students prefer their NNESTs who absolutely speak with American or British accents whereas our research findings point out that some students like or enjoy studying with a teacher who speaks with Arabic-accented English. However, the results of the present study may hint that having an accent as an EFL teacher might not be perceived negatively as long as the teacher has the ability to deliver information properly.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study investigated female students' attitudes towards three types of English accents: American, British and Arabic to explore the impact of native and non-native like accented English. The results of the study showed that EFL teachers with an American accent is the most favored by their students. Nevertheless, there was little support for this finding. Another important finding is that the examined EFL students had similar positive attitudes towards both British and Arabic accented English. This similarity might suggest that the accent of the teachers may not matter as long as he provides information in a good way. Having an accent is never a barrier but not having the talent of teaching is definitely a barrier.

However, the current study is limited in two ways. First, only few participants were recruited. The second limitation is that the study examined the perception of female EFL students and did not investigate their male counterpart.

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