

The Effects of Accents on English Listening Comprehension

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### Abstract

This study investigated whether the use of nonnative accents would affect L2 listeners' comprehension when the speaker did not share their native language. The attitudes of L2 listeners towards the use of accents in listening tests were also explored. Fifty-one L2 listeners including 17 ESL Arabic from an intensive English program at an American university and 34 EFL Thai listeners from a Thai university were recruited. Participants listened to a lecture delivered by an Arabic L1 professor and a Thai L1 professor and answered multiple-choice questions based on the lecture. The order of the listening input was reversed for each group as the topic of the lecture was the same. The interval between the first and the second test administrations was about two weeks. The results showed that there was no significant effect of the speakers, the listeners, or the interaction effect between the speakers and the listeners. Responses from an attitude questionnaire revealed that native accents were preferable in listening tests. The findings if replicated could help test developers and ESL/EFL teachers make an informed decision whether to include nonnative accents in listening materials.

*Keywords:* listening comprehension tests, accents, attitudes, ESL/EFL assessment

## The Effects of Accents on English Listening Comprehension

### **Background**

Calls have been made to incorporate a variety of English accents in academic listening tests. This would allow tests to better reflect real target use domains where English is not only spoken by native English speakers but also by nonnative English speakers (Abeywickrama, 2013; Harding, 2012). In English as a Second Language (ESL) academic contexts, a variety of English accents by professors, teaching assistants, and students has been increasing (Taylor & Geranpayeh, 2011). This phenomenon can also be found across continents in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) settings. For example, in Thailand between 2006 and 2014, the number of expatriate workers of various nationalities (e.g., Filipino, Chinese, American, British) employed by Thai educational institutions has increased by approximately 68.7 % (Office of Foreign Workers Administration, 2015). In reality, both ESL students in inner circle English speaking countries and EFL students in outer or expanding circle English speaking countries such as Thailand are likely to be exposed to more than one variety of English in academic settings (Kachru, 1992).

In this regard, it seems justifiable to develop listening tests that correspond to target language use (TLU) domains in which students are expected to make use of the language skills learnt in ESL/EFL classrooms (Bachman & Palmer, 2010). It has been argued, however, that the inclusion of English varieties in listening tests might pose a threat to tests' validity if it is found that listening tests are more lenient for a particular group of test takers. In other words, having accented speech could create test bias for particular test takers who are more familiar or share the same first language (L1) background with the speakers. Evidence from previous research studies

has produced conflicting results in answering this question (e.g., Abeywickrama, 2013; Harding, 2012; Major, Fitzmaurice, Bunta, & Balasubramanian, 2002; Munro, Derwing, & Morton, 2006).

Attitudes of test takers towards the use of nonnative accents in listening tests also come into play as most ESL/EFL students prefer native accents (e.g., Abeywickrama, 2013; Dalton-Puffer, Kaltenboeck, & Smit, 1997). Abeywickrama (2013) and Harding (2008) reported that nonnative accents were more difficult to understand and seemed to distract ESL test takers even when the speakers shared the same L1. Similarly, EFL test takers were more familiar with native rather than nonnative accents (Suppatkul, 2009), possibly due to the fact that native accents had typically been used as their role models in classroom listening activities. Overall, native accents, e.g., British and American accents, were rated as more preferable because they were perceived as easier to understand.

From second language (L2) assessment perspectives, TLU tasks should reflect TLU domains (Bachman & Palmer, 2010). However, if the tests result in a lack of fairness to L2 test takers, the validity of the tests would suffer (Miller, Linn, & Gronlund, 2013). Several questions have arisen when we apply these concepts to the issues of the inclusion of nonnative accents in listening tests and L2 test takers' attitudes. The aim of the present study is to investigate the effects of accents on academic L2 listening comprehension as well as L2 listeners' attitudes towards the use of native and nonnative varieties of English in listening tests. To this end, the study attempts to shed light on the issues of the validity of listening tests.

### **Research Questions**

The purposes of this study were to investigate whether L2 listeners understood English with more facility spoken by speakers of their own L1 and explore L2 listeners' attitudes towards accents in listening tests. The following research questions were investigated:

Research Question 1. Are L2 listeners disadvantaged when the speaker does not share their L1s?

Research Question 2. What are the L2 listeners' attitudes towards the use of nonnative varieties in listening comprehension tests?

### **Methods**

Participants in this study (N=51) were two groups of L2 listeners. One group included 17 Arabic L1 ESL listeners enrolled in an Intensive English Program at an American university. Another consisted of 34 Thai EFL university listeners studying in Social Science and Engineering at a university in Thailand. Two speakers (Arabic and Thai) were recruited to deliver a lecture. An outline of the lecture on Economics was provided to the two speakers instead of an exact transcript in order to ensure the authenticity of the lecture in real time. They gave the same lecture to control for the topic. The speaking rate was measured following Kang, Rubin, and Pickering (2010). The length of the Arabic lecture was 3.03 minutes and had 3.94 syllables per second while the Thai lecture was longer (3.39 minutes) and had fewer syllables per second (3.22).

The study employed two main measures: an academic listening comprehension test and an attitude questionnaire adapted from Abeywickrama (2013). A listening comprehension test on the topic of Economics consisted of six four-option-multiple-choice items. The listening topic and question items were taken from an authentic past TOEFL test (Educational Testing Service, 2013). The question types included a main idea, details, an inference, and a speaker's opinion. Each correct answer was worth 1 point. An adapted version of an attitude questionnaire (Abeywickrama, 2013) consisting of two parts was administered after the second provision of the listening test. Part one consisted of five multiple-choice questions which required participants to

choose the best answer to best describe their attitudes towards native and non-native accents in listening tests. Part two was designed to collect general information about participants.

### Results

The first research question asked whether the listeners were disadvantaged when the speakers did not share the same L1. When listening to an Arabic speaker, the Arabic listeners had higher scores ( $M = 2.00$ ,  $SD = 1.00$ ) than the Thai listeners ( $M = 1.56$ ,  $SD = 1.13$ ). For the Thai speaker, however, the Thai listeners had higher scores ( $M = 2.21$ ,  $SD = 1.17$ ) than the Arabic listeners ( $M = 2.06$ ,  $SD = 0.83$ ). The Arabic listeners scored about two points out of six possible points regardless of the speakers. However, the Thai listeners scored relatively lower when listening to an Arabic speaker. This seemed to suggest that the speakers' L1s may have an effect. On average, the mean scores of the L2 listeners were higher when they listened to the Thai speaker ( $M = 2.16$ ,  $SD = 1.07$ ) than the Arabic speaker ( $M = 1.71$ ,  $SD = 1.10$ ). A paired *t*-test was further conducted to examine the mean score difference. This difference, 0.45, BCa 95% CI [0.00, -0.95], was significant  $t(50) = 2.07$ ,  $p = .043$  with a relatively medium-sized effect,  $d = 0.42$  (see Plonsky & Oswald, 2014 for Cohen's *d* interpretation).

To examine the effects of shared-L1s on listening comprehension, the mean score differences between the two groups were examined using a mixed model ANOVA. A preliminary analysis as suggested by Laerd Statistics (2013) revealed that the assumption of homogeneity of variance was not violated and a preponderance of evidence suggested that the normality assumption was also met. The results revealed that there was no significant main effect of the speakers' L1,  $F(1, 49) = 2.37$ ,  $p = .130$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .05$ , nor the listeners' L1,  $F(1, 49) = .43$ ,  $p = .518$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .01$ , on the listening scores. Although there was an interaction effect

between the speakers and the listeners' L1s, the interaction was not statistically significant,  $F(1, 49) = 1.65, p = .205$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .03$ .

Regarding the second question, the questionnaire responses also confirmed the hypothesis stating that most L2 listeners still preferred native over nonnative accents in listening test input. Although a great majority of Thai listeners thought that listening tests should use nonnative accents as it reflects real life situations, they believed that native accents were standard. They also thought that their performance would be better with native accents even though nonnative accents may be easy to understand. For Arabic listeners, they clearly showed strong preferences towards native accents as they believed that only standard accents should be used in listening tests and native accents were easier to understand.

### **Relevance to the PIE and Second Language Learning**

The findings suggested that the inclusion of nonnative English accents, namely Arabic and Thai, did not disadvantage L2 listeners who did not share the same L1 with the speaker. The L2 listeners' attitude questionnaire revealed that native accents were still preferred in listening tests. The implications of the study could be useful in designing L2 teaching listening materials and/or listening tests. According to Buck (2001), we should consider the purpose of the test as our priority since it reflects the listening construct we want to measure. As suggested by Harding (2012), if the listening construct includes an ability to understand academic lectures in ESL/EFL contexts, the use of accented varieties in listening tests is preferable as it is more beneficial to ESL/EFL listeners to become familiar with nonnative accents in real world contexts. Taylor and Geranpayeh (2011) also suggested that for a higher proficiency level, we could possibly include a variety of English accents in listening tests because, as regarding real academic settings, it is likely that L2 listeners may encounter a variety of English accents. However, they add that a

variety of accents should be limited at the lower levels “because it deprives listeners of a major set of phonetic cues” (p. 98).

In turn, a washback effect from testing could be found in L2 teaching. Perhaps, we could start with a small inclusion of a variety of accents at the lower level as a complement to the mainstream accents and increase more variety of accent input as L2 listeners progress to a higher level. This way, their attitudes towards nonnative accents could be changed and they might become more aware that hearing both native and nonnative accents is their reality and that comprehending different varieties of accents is necessary. In addition, this approach would train L2 listeners to become more familiar with and more flexible in their nonnative speech perceptions through including a variety of accents in teaching materials. Bradlow and Bent’s (2008) study experimented with native speakers and found that speech perceptions could become more adaptive when being exposed to multiple nonnative speakers. Ultimately, L2 listeners would gain more understanding when listening to accented speech and be equipped with listening skills essential in real academic contexts.



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