

PERCEPTION OF ACCENT BY L2 STUDENTS OF ENGLISH: SUBJECTIVE PREFERENCE VS. OBJECTIVE INTELLIGIBILITY

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ABSTRACT

This experimental study deals with the perception of regionally coloured accents of English in Ireland, Great Britain, and the United States. The 3 standards were chosen after a preliminary survey had taken place where students showed a higher knowledge of the culture of these 3 different groups over the Australasian variety [1]. 14 different recordings were selected from the International Dialects of English Archives and played to students of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) at the University level. In pursuit of this goal, a questionnaire was devised on-line so that a mixed groups of students could express their opinion on a three-layer approach towards the perception of the audio files: personality identification and preference, perceived linguistic divergence, and geographic identifiability. The study is done in the context of EFL in Spain.

Keywords: Perception of speech, accent, foreign language learning, EFL.

1. INTRODUCTION

This article presents the results of an experiment carried out among student learners of EFL. The study shows the results of a survey delivered to a group of students at a Spanish university. The experiment was carried out in two steps. In the first part, students were asked about their English accent preferences in terms of familiarity, meaning whether the accent input was easily understood and also whether there existed any kind of personal or cultural affinity for any accent in particular. In the second part, they were exposed to different versions of the same text, all spoken by native speakers of English with different dialects,

including North American, South African and British varieties. After hearing the input, participants in the experiment had to indicate, on a scale from 1 to 4, whether the accent sounded more or less pleasant (evaluation parameter 1), more or less correct (evaluation parameter 2).

2. ANTECEDENTS AND OBJECTIVES

The role of attitudes toward accent variety in the EFL classroom has received relatively little attention, perhaps because most pronunciation teaching has concentrated on the two standard models, British Received Pronunciation (RP) and General American (GA).

Some EFL pronunciation specialists reject the idea of a pronunciation model based on a standard accent. [5] advances the argument that most users of English employ it as a lingua franca, that is, to communicate among themselves, rather than with model-providing native speakers.

It also seems that the increasing spread of English into "World Englishes" [6] is a contributing factor in the resistance to adopt native accents as pronunciation models. English accent variety in education has been the focus of [7], for whom language subordination to class-related standard norms in the American educational system is a serious hindrance for advancement. [7] shows that ethnic accents are tacitly associated with negative and socially undesirable traits.

Researchers that have investigated the role of attitudes toward accent variety have concentrated on RP and GA. Thus, [8] found that Dutch learners of English seem to identify RP as the 'norm', while

* This research was supported by a grant from Ministerio de Educación y Ciencia (HUM2005-06775/FILO)

they considered GA as ‘attractive’ and ‘dynamic’, but, interestingly, nonstandard. [4] found that Nigerian students had a very pragmatic attitude toward RP, which is not very different from what [8] discovered for Dutch learners.

Accent preference has also received much attention by marketing specialists. Some authors maintain that adaptation is necessary [2], while others believe marketing strategies should attempt to break down barriers by means of a clear market globalization which overrides specific regional traits, language among them [3].

It is clear, then, that the listener’s preference for one accent variety is commonplace in our society; less clear is how that sociolinguistic preference can be transferred to EFL students, or whether the transfer should take place at all. In this study we want to find out if accent preference exists and how it can affect learners’ perception of the spoken language.

We conducted a series of surveys among a group of EFL students from different nationalities. We ran a preliminary test to detect which accents were recognizable; the results of this test led us to include the following varieties in succeeding tests: Southern English, Northern English, Scottish English, Irish English, Eastern American English, Southern American English, Central American English and South African English.

The objective of the study was to discover if there was a preference among EFL students for any specific accents, the origins for such a preference and the likely consequences this could have on the learning process.

3. EXPERIMENT 1: STUDENTS’ SUBJECTIVE PREFERENCE FOR ACCENTS

With the first experiment, we wanted to find out what English accent varieties were preferred by the participants according to their personal tastes.

3.1. Method

3.1.1. Participants

The participants in the experiment were recruited from students of EFL at the University of Seville

(Spain). They were Spanish native speakers from Spain. All of them lived in Spain.

3.1.2. Preliminary Survey: Cultural Affinity and Amount of Input

In order to choose the dialects to be used in the experiments, we followed [1] and conducted a preliminary survey in order to discover two reference parameters: cultural affinity with one accent and amount of input. All surveys were done online using a free version of Quask (<http://www.quask.com>). The results showed that the students had more cultural knowledge of the American accents and they also stated that they were more in contact with American forms of spoken English.

3.1.3. Procedure

To find out what student preferences were, we designed a survey where we included a series of questions divided into three different categories:

- Personality Identification and Preference (students had to indicate which accent of English they preferred considering different perspectives: a) accent sounds more pleasant; b) accent sounds more correct. They also had to answer whether they preferred to learn to speak English with their preferred accent(s)), after considering some parameters, namely: 1) Accent is more useful for personal/professional reasons. 2) They already spoke English with one accent. 3) They find one accent easier to imitate.
- Perceived Linguistic Divergence (students had to indicate whether they thought they were capable of easily distinguishing between native and non-native accents).
- Geographic identifiability (students had to indicate whether they could distinguish the different accents of English, and which one they believed to be able to discriminate easily).

3.2. Results and Discussion

3.3% of the data results were excluded for various reasons. The results of this first survey are shown in this section.

Personality Identification: 83% of students believe they speak English with some resemblance of an accent; 77% of the participants think they imitate a standard British accent. The rest believe their English is heavily influenced by an American accent with some traces of British English. It is interesting to see that 60% of students think BrE accents sound more correct than AmE accents. It is may seem clear, then, that cultural affinity and amount of input (see section 3.1.2) are not the reasons for their preference for an accent.

Linguistic Divergence: 100% (3% of error rate) of students indicated that they could easily distinguish between English native and non-native speeches.

Geographic identifiability: 100% (3% of error rate) of students indicated that they could identify and distinguish American from British English.

4. EXPERIMENT 2: STUDENTS' PERCEPTION OF ENGLISH SAMPLES WITH DIFFERENT ACCENTS

4.1. Method

4.1.1. Participants

The same participants as in Experiment 1.

4.1.2. Procedure

The participants had to take a survey on-line which included several recordings. These recordings were been selected from the *International Dialects of English Archives (IDEA)* (<http://web.ku.edu/idea/>). The recordings included samples from the following regional varieties: Northern Ireland (NIR), Ireland, Dublin (IR), GA, Texas (GATX), Southern American English, Georgia (GAGE), GA, Indiana (GAIN), GA, California (GACA), Eastern American English, Boston and New York (GAMA, GANY), South African English, Cape Town (SA), Scottish English (SCBRE), Northern British English, Newcastle (NBRE), Welsh English, Wales (WBRE), Southern British English, Bournemouth and London (BBRE, LBRE).

After hearing each file, they had to complete a series of questions in the three categories

mentioned in 3.1.3 (Personality Identification and Preference; Perceived Linguistic Divergence; Geographic Identifiability). After the completion of the questions, students were asked to listen to the files again so that they could transcribe a short paragraph of each audio recording.

4.2. Results and Discussion

3.3% of the data results were excluded from the analysis for various reasons. Results are presented along three parameters: Personality Identification and Preference; Perceived Linguistic Divergence; Geographic Identifiability.

4.2.1. Personality Identification and Preference

Student evaluation of each audio file was done on a 4-level rating system: 1 meaning less pleasant/correct; 4 meaning more pleasant/correct. The results are shown below:

	Less/More Pleasant	Less/More Correct
NIR	3	4
IR	4	4
GATX	3	3
GAGE	3	4
GAIN	4	4
GACA	4	4
GAMA	4	4
GANY	3	3
SA	2	1
SCBRE	3	3
NBRE	1	1
WBRE	3	4
BBRE	4	4
LBRE	4	4

The results slightly contradict students' pre-judgement of accents, as shown in 3.2, or, at least, they do not corroborate their opinion on parameter 1 "Personality Identification" (see section 3.1.3).

4.2.2. Perceived Linguistic Divergence

100% of the participants were able to group all American accents, although without any further specification. 97% (3% error rate) of the participants could identify Southern British English. 93% (2% error rate) of them included Irish English in the group of Southern British English. The rest of the accents were not identified by any student. It is interesting to see that the South African accent was labeled as belonging to a

non-native speaker (which was not true, as all speakers were native speakers) (89% of the participants).

4.2.3. Geographic Identifiability

It is interesting to note that 97% (3% error rate) of the students were able to identify Southern British English. 100% of the participants were able to identify the group of American accents.

4.2.4. Literal Transcription of the Audio Files

The results in this part of the experiment showed the following:

	Correct Transcription (percentage over words correctly transcribed)
NIR	80%
IR	85%
GATX	80%
GAGE	90%
GAIN	93%
GACA	95%
GAMA	85%
GANY	60%
SA	15%
SCBRE	40%
NBRE	10%
WBRE	65%
BBRE	90%
LBRE	93%

5. GENERAL DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Perhaps the most interesting conclusions can be drawn from the second part of Experiment 2. The highest percentage of correct word transcription appears with GA, Irish and Southern British accents. These results tally with the personal preferences of students over the three aforementioned accents. That is, the vast majority of students who claimed to imitate one of these accents (mainly American or British English) showed in fact a high degree of intelligibility in the transcription experiment. The results also show a complete lack of knowledge of some Northern English accents. These results are in consonance with those in [1] in which effective results of language understanding were directly related to the amount of language input students had received in the form of different cultural manifestations. In summary, students would have a more independent

communicative ability in an American setting than in a British setting, considering the number of speakers in Great Britain with a Southern British accent.

It is also worthwhile noticing how the Irish English accent is considered to be from the South of England and that the South African accent is considered to belong to a non-native speaker, the same applying to the Newcastle accent. This perception may indicate a complete lack of exposure to these accents.

Finally, there seems to exist some personal preference for the British accents of English, even though these results are clearly contradicted by the results in the perception tests. Should there be some *a priori* preference for BrE, it is not supported by cultural affinity, or amount of input of perceptive impressions. In future studies, we would like to analyse these experiments with more detail in order to complete a sociolinguistic study of accent preference in an EFL context.

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