

An Investigation of Algerian University EFL Students' Accent Awareness and Perceptions of Native-English Accents

استقصاء آراء طلاب اللغة الإنجليزية الجامعيين حول أهمية اللمنة واتجاهاتهم نحو لهجات اللغة الإنجليزية

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Abstract

Promoting EFL learners' awareness about their own accent and variation in English-native accents is an important aspect of their communicative competence, yet it is often neglected in Algerian universities. Considering the fact that variation in accent can affect comprehension and intelligibility of English, this paper aimed to investigate students of English at Batna university views about this issue. A sample of (115) students participated in the study, and the findings revealed that (96%) of the participants recognized the significance of improving their English pronunciation, with (62.6%) of them aiming for a native-like accent. Additionally, (66.1%) preferred to learn the American accent, and (67.8%) perceived the British accent as more difficult to understand. The paper suggests a need for more thorough consideration of pronunciation and accent in Algerian EFL programs.

Keywords: accent, communicative competence, English as a foreign language, native English accents, teaching pronunciation

المخلص: تعزيز الوعي لدى متعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية بشأن لهجتهم الخاصة واختلاف اللهجات الأصلية الإنجليزية هو جانب مهم من كفاءتهم التواصلية، ولكنه غالباً ما يتم تجاهله في الجامعات الجزائرية. بالنظر إلى حقيقة أن اختلاف اللهجة يمكن أن يؤثر على فهم ووضوح اللغة الإنجليزية، هدفت هذه الدراسة إلى استكشاف آراء طلاب اللغة الإنجليزية في جامعة باتنة حول هذه المسألة. شاركت عينة من (115) طالباً في الدراسة. وكشفت النتائج أن (96%) من المشاركين يعترفون بأهمية تحسين نطقهم في اللغة الإنجليزية، حيث يهدف (62.6%) منهم للحصول على لهجة شبيهة باللغة الأصلية. بالإضافة إلى ذلك، يفضل (66.1%) تعلم اللهجة الأمريكية، و (67.8%) يرون أن اللهجة البريطانية أكثر صعوبة في الفهم. تشير الدراسة إلى الحاجة إلى مزيد من الاهتمام باللهجة في برامج اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية في الجزائر.

كلمات مفتاحية: اللمنة، الكفاءة التواصلية، الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية، لهجات اللغة الإنجليزية، تعليم النطق.

1. INTRODUCTION

Effective and correct pronunciation is key to successful communication; in fact, (Jenkins, 2000, p. 19) maintains that 70% of all communication breakdown between learners could be directly attributed to pronunciation problems “pronunciation appears to play a very major role in problematic interlanguage talk” Notably, accent is one aspect of pronunciation that can have a significant role in communication for EFL learners; having a strong accent may lead to misunderstandings or even communication breakdown due to unintelligibility. Besides, speaking with a strong accent can be a source of negative judgement, stereotypes, and prejudice.

However, many university students of English are not fully aware about the importance of good pronunciation and the significant role that accents can play both in terms of production and perception while communicating in English. This puts more demands on both teachers and learners of English to achieve accurate and intelligible speech. Hence, the present research aimed to:

First, investigate the level of awareness among Algerian EFL learners about the importance of accent in communication both in terms of reception and production.

Second, to find out how Algerian EFL learners perceive native-English accents as far as the aspects of: preference and difficulty are concerned

Particularly, the study intended to answer the following research questions:

1. To what extent do Algerian EFL students believe that accent awareness is an important aspect of their language mastery both in terms of reception and production? What are their objectives for learning English pronunciation? Do they use any strategies to improve their pronunciation?
2. How do Algerian EFL students perceive native-English accents namely British and American accents in terms of: preference and difficulty?
3. What are the most effective strategies to improve EFL students' accent awareness

While this topic has been widely investigated on the worldwide level, example of these studies include (Modirghamene, 2015), (Norman, 2017) and (Skarnitzl, 2018), there are still limited studies that specifically focused on the Algerian context. One study conducted by Kada (2022) surveyed a sample of (56) Algerian EFL learners at Ain Temouchent University to find out their attitudes

towards English native accents namely General American (GA) and Received Pronunciation (RP). The findings showed that learners hold positive attitudes toward General American Accent; they favoured GA over RP. The findings also raised the complex nature of language attitudes towards English accents in the Algerian context(Kada, 2022). However, the study did not deal with learners' awareness of the importance of accent for effective communication.

Nonetheless, this topic deserves attention since investigating learners' awareness about the significance of accent in communication and their perceptions of English native accents would bring valuable information that will contribute in improving English language teaching instruction, promoting learners' effective communication, and encouraging intercultural understanding.

Accordingly, the current study investigated master students of English at Batna University enrolled for the academic year 2022-2023. The research drew on quantitative data, it was conducted using a survey questionnaire to elicit data about university EFL students' views on accent awareness and their perceptions of native-English accents.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Definition of accent

From a sociolinguistic perspective, an accent is defined as a pattern of pronunciation used by an English native speaker or by his community, it is something that every speaker has, and this would make it special to him or her as an individual (Wells, 1982, p. 1). Accents are usually regarded as a feature of people belonging to given geographical region or social class; however, they may well be typical of the speaker's gender, age group, or level of education.

Yule (2020) mentions that the terms 'accent' is technically restricted to the description of aspects of pronunciation that generally identify a speaker's region or social class, which is different from the term 'dialect' that also concerns features of grammar and vocabulary as well as aspects of pronunciation(Yule, 2020, p. 280).

According to Wells (1982) an accent is contrasted with a dialect in the sense that the latter concerns, not only differences of phonology, but also those of morphology, syntax, vocabulary, idiom and usage(Wells, 1982, p. 8).

Hence, an accent can be considered as the phonological component of a given variety, it correlates well with a speaker's geographical region, social and cultural background, and gender. Moreover, accents sometimes can even project a self-image.

2.2 Reference accents

Every language has a number of different accents; however, certain accents have a special position in that they are regarded, whether implicitly or explicitly, as standard or named as reference accents. In England, General British (abbreviated to GB) has this status. According to Carley, et.al. (2018), this accent has also been referred to as 'BBC English', 'Queen's English' and 'Oxford English' Until recently the term 'Received Pronunciation' (abbreviated to RP) was frequently used to refer to the prestige accent, 'received' meaning 'socially acceptable'; however, the authors consider the term not accurate. Therefore, the term "General British" seems more neutral and inclusive. Thus, GB can be taken as the common denominator of the speech of educated British people. It is the variety regularly used by the majority of British presenters on British radio and television programmes. Although, this accent is influenced by London and the south-east of England, it is known as non-localisable i.e., when speaking with this accent, it is hard to depict where a person comes from (Carley, 2018, p. 5)

Likewise, in the United States, General American (Gen.Am) is a convenient name for the range of United States accents that have neither an Eastern nor a Southern colouring; however, in the United States there is no accent whose status and role correspond to that of RP in England. 'General American' is a term that has been applied to the two thirds of the American population who do not have a recognizably local accent. This is the type of American English pronunciation taught to learners of English as a foreign language - 'the type of American English which may be heard, with slight variations, from Ohio through the Middle West and on to the Pacific (Wells, 1982, p. 10).

Overall, it is widely accepted that all languages have a standard variety and accent. These latter are commonly acknowledged as the correct way of speaking at a specific time and location. A standard accent is also considered as a model for how individuals should speak and is promoted in educational settings. It is also widely recognized as the most preferred accent for individuals in esteemed occupations.

2.3.The importance of pronunciation and accent awareness in English language learning

2.3.1. Englishpronunciation and accent awareness

Pronunciation is one aspect of language that has a significant role for intelligibility in communication; particularly, accents can affect the comprehensibility of a person especially in a foreign language context, yet it did not receive adequate attention in language teaching. In fact, (Kelly, 2000, p. 13) maintains that there are two key problems to pronunciation teaching: firstly, it tends to be neglected, and secondly when it is not neglected, it tends to be reactive to a particular problem that has arisen in the classroom rather than being strategically planned.

Similarly, (Jenkins, 2000, p. 19) points out that in research she carried, 70% of all communication breakdown between learners could be directedly attributed to pronunciation problems, she further stresses that learning the sounds of English is a crucial part of achieving good pronunciation and intelligibility.

On their perspective, (Carley, 2018)raised the significant role that accents play on how people may be perceived by others and how this may affect negatively the flow of communication. The authors indicated that even if being understandable, inaccurate pronunciation may still sound *comical, irritating* or *distracting* to listeners. For instance, if someone says English /r/ with a back articulation instead of a front articulation, it may sound funny to people who are not familiar with it. Besides, if listeners are distracted because of a false pronunciation, they may stop concentrating on what someone is trying to say. Or if they need to invest a lot of effort in deciphering what he is saying, they may lose track of his message. Furthermore, judgements of his overall ability in English are likely to be based on the impression his pronunciation makes: if someone sounds like a beginner, he may be treated like a beginner, even if his level is advanced in terms of grammar, vocabulary, reading and writing.

2.3.1. Teaching pronunciation in EFL contexts

Having said that, it is also worth noting that teaching English pronunciation in a foreign language context is usually more challenging for both teachers and learners. Regarding the complex nature of this particular aspect of language,

educators usually make distinction between the teaching objectives of the productive and the receptive sides of learners' performance.

Thus, (Gimsoni, 1989, p. 312) admits that it is rare for the foreign learner, usually acquiring English in an artificial environment, to approach the native's receptive and productive competence; indeed, he even questioned the necessity of having such an aim especially at the beginning. Instead, in terms of productive side, he suggests that learners model their productive performance on one 'careful' colloquial style, without any attempt to alter their pronunciation according to a native speaker's style. As learners gain confidence, productive precision and fluency in the single style, they can for the purposes of widening their receptive competence gradually be exposed to other important variations.

Nonetheless, the importance of the receptive aspect of language learning is recognised as separate from the productive one.

Therefore, it is maintained that although it is normally sufficient for the foreign learner to become proficient in his production of one type of English pronunciation, adequacy in the reception (i.e., comprehension) of more than one style of accent is essential if communication with native speakers is to be efficient. To ensure promoting learners' receptive ability, classroom activities should include not only exposure to broadcasts and recordings of natural speech (in a variety of styles including the most rapid and those which are accompanied by 'noise', but also use of dictation exercises of a more analytical kind (Gimsoni, 1989, p. 337). Accordingly, learners can benefit from phonetically transcribing various utterances with varying levels of formality and informality, while taking note of the stylistic cues, which can be a rewarding experience for them.

2.3.2. Two opposing views about the objective of teaching pronunciation

The importance of teaching pronunciation for EFL learners as well as developing their awareness about accent variation is undoubtedly admitted by all language educator. However, there has been a considerable debate over the productive performance of learners. This debate has been triggered by two opposing views holding two different principles; namely, the "nativeness principle" and the "intelligibility principle".

According to (Lewis, 2005), the 'nativeness' principle maintains that it is both possible and desirable to achieve native-like pronunciation in a foreign language. However, the influence of this perspective was rapidly diminished by research

showing that 'nativeness' in pronunciation appeared to be biologically conditioned to occur before adulthood leading to the logical conclusion that aiming for 'nativeness' was an unrealistic burden for both teacher and learner.

The second principle is the 'intelligibility principle' which sees that learners simply need to be understandable. The principle of intelligibility acknowledges that even when foreign accents are noticeable or strong, communication can still be possible, and that certain types of pronunciation errors do not play a great role in hindering the ability to comprehend.

Having covered the main theoretical aspects related to the topic of the current research, the coming section addresses the main elements involved in the empirical study.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Population and sampling technique

The current study investigated master students of English at Batna University enrolled for the academic year 2022-2023. Convenience sampling was used to choose the 115 students who participated in the study. Master students were chosen because they have been studying English for almost five years at university, therefore they are supposed to have developed familiarity and preference towards certain native English accents.

3.2 Data Gathering Tool

This research drew on quantitative data, and was conducted using the descriptive method. A questionnaire was designed as a tool to elicit data about university EFL students' views on accent awareness and their perceptions of native-English accents. The survey questions were formulated based on the literature review, previous studies, and in accordance with the research questions as well as the objectives of the study. The questionnaire mainly comprised closed-ended questions, which were organised into two main sections:

Section 1. In this section students were asked to indicate their gender and age, in addition, they were asked to choose which accent they are usually exposed to both inside/outside the classroom, and whether they have ever received any formal classroom instruction on different accents of English.

Section 2. This section included 11 items; items 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6 investigated learners' views on the importance of pronunciation, and accent

awareness in language learning. Meanwhile, statements 7, 8, and 9 investigated students' perceptions of native-English accents namely British and American accents in terms of preference and difficulty. Ultimately, items 10 and 11 explored learners' evaluation of classroom instruction in developing their pronunciation, and what resources they think are more helpful for them.

Learners were given a list of options and requested to select the answer that aligns with their viewpoint most effectively.

The questionnaire was administered by the researcher during ordinary class sessions; a brief introduction about the objectives of the study was provided prior administering the questionnaire.

3.3. Reliability and validity of the questionnaire

SPSS 22 was used to calculate the validity and reliability of the questionnaire. The obtained result of validity showed that the value of Pearson Correlation for the 11 items of the questionnaire ranged from ,854 to ,651, which indicates that the items are valid and related to the topic of the study. Meanwhile, the Cronbach alpha value was esteemed at .818 which implies that the questionnaire items are highly reliable, i.e., the participants' responses were stable and consistent.

3.4. Results of the study

Results of the study were analysed in terms of descriptive statistics using SPSS 22. This involved calculating the percentages corresponding to choices indicated by the participants for each item of the questionnaire. These are represented in the following tables:

Table N° 1: Background information

Variables		Frequency	%
Gender	Male	40	34,8%
	female	75	65,2%
Age	From 21-25 years	99	86,1%
	More than 25 years	16	13,9%
Accent usually exposed to inside the classroom	American	39	33,9%
	British	30	29,1%
	Don't know	46	40,0%
Accent usually exposed to outside	American	82	71,3%
	British	29	25,2%

An Investigation of Algerian University EFL Students' Accent Awareness and Perceptions of Native-English Accents

the classroom	Don't know	4	3.5%
Formal classroom instruction about accent variation	Yes	4	3.5%
	No	111	96.5%

Source: the author based on SPSS data

Table 1 shows that the majority of the participants are female students (65,2%) while male students represent 34,8% of the population. Their age ranges between 21 to 25 years old representing (86,1%). Only (15.83 %) are more than 25 years old.

In terms of their usual exposure to English accents, the results indicate that while (33.9%) and (29.1%) stated being exposed either to American accent or British accent, a considerable percentage (40%) reported 'not knowing' which accent they are usually exposed to inside the classroom.

On the other hand, (71.3%) of the students reported being exposed to American accent outside the classroom, (25.2%) indicated being exposed to British accent, and (3.5%) reported "not knowing" which accent they are usually exposed to outside the classroom.

Concerning formal classroom instruction about accent variation, the majority of respondents (96.5%) reported not receiving such instruction.

Table N° 2: students' perceptions of the importance of accent awareness and English native accents

Item	Choices	Frequency	%
ability to understand native speakers of English	- Confident	4	3.5%
	- Somewhat confident	90	78.3%
	- unconfident	21	18.3%
ability to accurately pronounce English sounds and use natural-sounding speech	- Confident	4	3.5%
	- Somewhat confident	87	75.7%
	- unconfident	21	20.9%
Importance of improving English pronunciation	- Important	111	96.5%
	- Neutral	4	03.5%
	- Unimportant	00	00.5%
use of any resources/activities to	- Always	5	4.3%

improve pronunciation in English outside the classroom	- Sometimes - Rarely - never	71 39 00	66.1% 33.9 00%
major objective for learning English pronunciation	- To have a native-like accent - To keep your own accent as far as being understood	72 43	62.6% 37.4%
speaking English with a foreign accent leads to negative judgements	- agree - Neutral - disagree	73 42 00	63.5% 36.5% 00%
Importance of understanding different accents of English	- Important - Neutral - Unimportant	71 44 00	61.7% 38.3% 00%
Preferred English accent to learn	- British accent - American accent - I don't know	12 76 27	10.4% 66.1% 23.5%
Difficult accent to understand	- British accent - American accent - I don't know	78 4 33	67.8% 3.5% 28.7%
classroom instruction helped you to improve your perception of different English accents?	- Very helpful - To certain extent - Not helpful	5 60 50	4.3% 52.2% 43.5%
Helpful resources to improve understanding different English accents?	- Watching movies and TV shows - Listening to podcasts or radio shows - More exposure to different English accents in the classroom - More opportunities to interact with native English speakers	00 2 45 68	00% 1.7% 39.1% 59.1%

Source: the author based on SPSS data

Table (2) reports data related to the following aspects of the study:

1. Students' perception of their ability to understand and produce correct English: Items 1 and 2 examined students' evaluation of their self-confidence to understand native speakers as well as producing correct and natural-sounding speech; the results indicate that the majority of students (78.3%) perceive themselves as being "somewhat confident" in their ability to understand native speakers of English, while (18.3%) see themselves as being unconfident. Only (3.5%) reported being confident.

Similarly, a large proportion of respondents (75.7%) revealed being "somewhat confident" in their ability to accurately pronounce English sounds and use natural-sounding speech, while (20.9%) regard themselves as being unconfident. Only (3.5%) reported being confident. This can be explained by the fact that in EFL context such as the Algerian one, it is rarely that students use the English for real-life communication, besides they lack contact with native speakers.

2. Students' perception of the importance of pronunciation and resources to improve it: Items 3 and 4 surveyed students' perception of the importance of pronunciation and whether they make any efforts outside the classroom improve their level. It is clearly indicated from the results that the vast majority of students (96.5%) recognised that improving their English pronunciation is important for them. However, only a minority of (4.3%) admitted that they "always" use extra resources/activities to improve their pronunciation outside the classroom. The majority of students (66.1%) and (33.9) reported "sometimes" or "rarely" using resources/activities to improve their English pronunciation outside the classroom.

3. Students' perception of the role of accent in communication: Items 5, 6, and 7 investigated students' level of awareness about the role of accent in communication. A considerable number of participants (62.6%) chose having a native-like accent as their main objective for learning English pronunciation, while 37.4% prefer to keep their own accent as far as being understood.

Interestingly, the participants had mixed views on whether speaking English with a foreign accent leads to negative judgments (63.5%) agreed with the statement, while (36.5%) were neutral. They also had mixed views on whether it is important to understand different accents of English (61.7%) believed it is important, while 38.3% were neutral.

4. Students' perception of native English accents: Items 8 and 9 looked at students' perceptions of native English accents, namely the British and the American accents in terms of preference and difficulty. Without any surprise, the majority of respondents (66.1%) preferred to learn the American accent, while only 10.4% preferred to learn the British accent. Accordingly (67.8%) find the British accent more challenging to understand. This was expected since results obtained from the first section indicated that the majority of students are usually exposed to American Accent i.e., they are more familiar with this accent.

5. Students' perception of the role of classroom instruction: Items 10 and 11 meant to elicit students' opinions on the effect of current classroom instruction on developing their perceptions of different English accents and what resources they find more useful. Almost half of the participants (52.2%) see that classroom instruction were helpful "to a certain extent" to improve their perception of different English accents. However, 43.5% see that they were not helpful. According to the participants, the most helpful resources to improve their accent are: More opportunities to interact with native English speakers (59.1%), followed by more exposure to different English accents in the classroom (39.1%).

3.5. Discussion of the findings

This research was conducted to find out university students of English at Batna university views about the importance of pronunciation and accent awareness in communication both in terms of perception and production. In addition, it surveyed their perception of English native accents. Referring to the research questions, the results of the survey provided information concerning the following aspects:

Learners' perceptions of the importance of pronunciation and accent in communication: the results of the study revealed that almost all the participants had not received any formal classroom instruction about accent variation. This suggests a need for more emphasis on this aspect of language learning. Classroom instructions should consider incorporating more exposure to different accents of English. Additionally, teachers could work to improve their own knowledge and awareness of accent variation to better support their students in this area.

It is also worth noting that as the results indicated that a significant percentage of students were unconfident in their ability to understand native speakers and accurately pronounce English sounds, this highlights a need for greater focus on these areas in language instruction. This could include more structured practice opportunities, such as pronunciation drills and activities that focus on listening comprehension.

Moreover, the fact that learners expressed mixed views on the importance of understanding different accents and the impact of speaking with a foreign accent on how people would perceive them implies a need for more emphasis on raising awareness about these aspects.

Perception of native English accents: the survey findings showed that most participants preferred the American accent to the British accent, and many participants found the British accent more challenging to understand. These results suggest that language programs should consider providing more support in this area, such as introducing students to informal British English accent.

Nonetheless, since the study involved only Master students of English at Batna University, the sample may not be representative of the whole population of students. Hence the findings may not be generalizable as the sample may not accurately reflect the actual awareness and attitudes towards English native accents by other students.

4. CONCLUSION

The findings of this survey provided insights into the experiences, and perceptions of Algerian EFL learners specifically, Master students at Batna university regarding the role of pronunciation and accent in language learning. The results revealed that many learners are not adequately prepared to understand and communicate with speakers of different English accents, yet they deemed the importance of promoting their pronunciation. Concerning pronunciation learning objectives, while some participants expressed a desire to attain a native-like accent as their major goal, others were more satisfied with keeping their accent as far as being intelligible. Additionally, different opinions were expressed regarding the importance of understanding different accents and the impact of speaking with a foreign accent on others' perception. Participants also considered the British accent as challenging and expressed their preference to the American

accent. Learners also expressed their need for providing them with more opportunities for interaction with native speakers as one effective way to promote their accent and communicative skills.

Considering these findings, some important implications for English language teaching and learning in Algeria can be highlighted. Accordingly, there is a need for more attention and resources to be dedicated towards teaching accent variation in the classroom. Designing syllabuses of, for instance, phonetics and oral expression courses can be improved by incorporating more exposure to different English accents both formal and informal. Teachers could offer explicit instruction and feedback on pronunciation skills.

Eventually, given the increasing importance of intercultural communication in today's globalised world, this study stresses the need for ongoing research in the area of accent variation for the sake of better preparing learners for real-world communication, and help them develop the skills and confidence needed to effectively communicate with speakers of different English accents.

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