

# Perception of English Accents by Saudi University Students

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This research is part of the Evaluating English Accents WorldWide (EEAWW) project. The project investigates the perception of standard varieties of English accents: Northern American English (NAE), British English (BE), New Zealand English (NZE), and Australian English (AusE). This paper will examine the perception of Saudi English learners towards different varieties of English. The researcher attempts to analyze the informants' attitudes to the four varieties of the English language. The findings will add to the multinational project's results of the attitudes of Saudi English learners and how they perceive the different accents of English. The results can help in directing the debate of what accent is more accessible to the Saudi educational context.

Lopez-Soto and Barrera-Pardo (2007) set out to do a study on how accent was perceived by University level EFL (English as a Foreign Language) students in Spain. The study's aim was to measure subjective preference of English accents vis-à-vis objective intelligibility. That is, they not only wanted to find out which English accent was the easiest for these EFL students to comprehend but also which accent they preferred. The participants in this survey, all of whom indicated that they were able to distinguish between Received Pronunciation and General American accent, were subjected to 14 different recordings (sourced from International Dialects of English Archives). The participants were asked to identify the accents and group them according to their perceived geographical origin of the speaker. To test the level of their perception of each accent, the respondents were also asked to transcribe what they could hear from the recordings.

The results of this study were such that 97% of the respondents were able to identify Southern British accents while 100% correctly identified the group of American accents. This is in line with the results of a preliminary study where these same respondents had indicated that, compared to all other native English accents; they had had a greater exposure to "American forms of spoken English." None of the participants was able to correctly identify the South African

accent. In fact, though the recording was that of a native English speaker, 89% labelled this South African accent as a non-native accent. Transcription results, in terms of correctly transcribed words, were as follows: GATX 80%, GAGE 90%, GAIN 93%, GACA 95%, GAMA 85%, GANY 60%, SCBRE 40%, NBRE 10%, WBRE 65%, BBRE 90%, LBRE 93%, and SA 15%. It is clear from these results that North American accent was the most intelligible among these EFL students followed by Southern British accent (RP).

Mardijono (2003) did a study on the perception of Indonesian EFL learners of English accents. She surveyed the attitudes of one hundred and six English learners. From that survey, it was well noted that the students were more familiar with the American than the other three native English accents: it is the North American accent that was correctly identified by most participants in the survey. On the other hand, New Zealand and Australian accents were the hardest for the participants to identify.

Donn Bayard and James A. Green (2002), under the multinational project, Evaluation of English Accents Worldwide (EEAWW) did a study to determine how different native English accents are perceived by people from various geographical locations worldwide. The participants in this study were drawn from 19 countries— five continents— with over 20 academic participants in every country, ranging from age 30 to 60. The sample sizes from each country ranged from eight (Scotland, which was not reported due to its small sample size) to 257 in New Zealand, for a total of over 1700 participants. The study employed standardized recordings of Australian (AuSE), New Zealand (NZE), North American (GA), and English English (RP) accents.

This survey involved not only non-native respondents but also native users of English. Over all, GA and RP were the easiest for the participants, native and non-native alike, to identify. Outside New Zealand and Australia, only participants from Fiji could distinguish NZE from the rest. Among the non-native users (in Asia, South America, and Fiji), the survey results were such that North American accent was not only popular and most easily-identifiable but also easier to perceive than the rest of the native English accents.

(Humphries 1995) conducted a research to determine the attitudes of Japanese EFL students towards various English accents. Among the accents featured in his study were some non-native accents such as West African accent and Indian accent. The participants listened to the same tape containing different accents after which they gave their feedback based on a questionnaire. The students found North American accent to be clearer than Received Pronunciation which was, in turn, clearer than Australian accent.

In a survey of 400 ESL learners from 14 countries on matching the accent of native speakers, Timmis (2013) asked if the students preferred to master a native-speaker or native-like accent. It was found that 67% of the respondents preferred a native-speaker accent and a 32% preferred a native-like accent.

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

### **Methodology**

#### **Participants**

Ninety-one Saudi college students (60 females and 31 males) participated in this study. They were all in the third or fourth year studying English at the Department of English at King Saud University, who have Arabic as their native language. The average age for the percipients was 21-24.

#### **Procedures and Materials**

To find out what Variety of English accent Saudi students prefer, 91 students (males and females) listened to a series of nine recording. The attempted voices were a male and female from each of the four accents under the study; American, British, Australian, New Zealand. Participants listened to the recordings twice in the same order. As stated by the designers of questionnaire “the selected speakers were to have an average or general accent representative of the country. Thus the AusE and NZE accents were ‘general’, that is, neither excessively broad nor cultivated. The Nam were similar to the Inland Northern dialect, a type frequently used by broadcasters, and less distinctive accent as compared to strongly regional accents found in New York or the Midwest, for example. The EE accents were middle to innovate RP.” (Bayard and Green, 2005 p.22). First, participants were asked to pay attention to the way the person sounds rather the content. After students hear each speaker, they were asked to think about the speaker, and then fill in the first part of the questionnaire. Once they have heard all 9 speakers, the clips were played a second time so participants can answer the questions in the second part of the questionnaire.

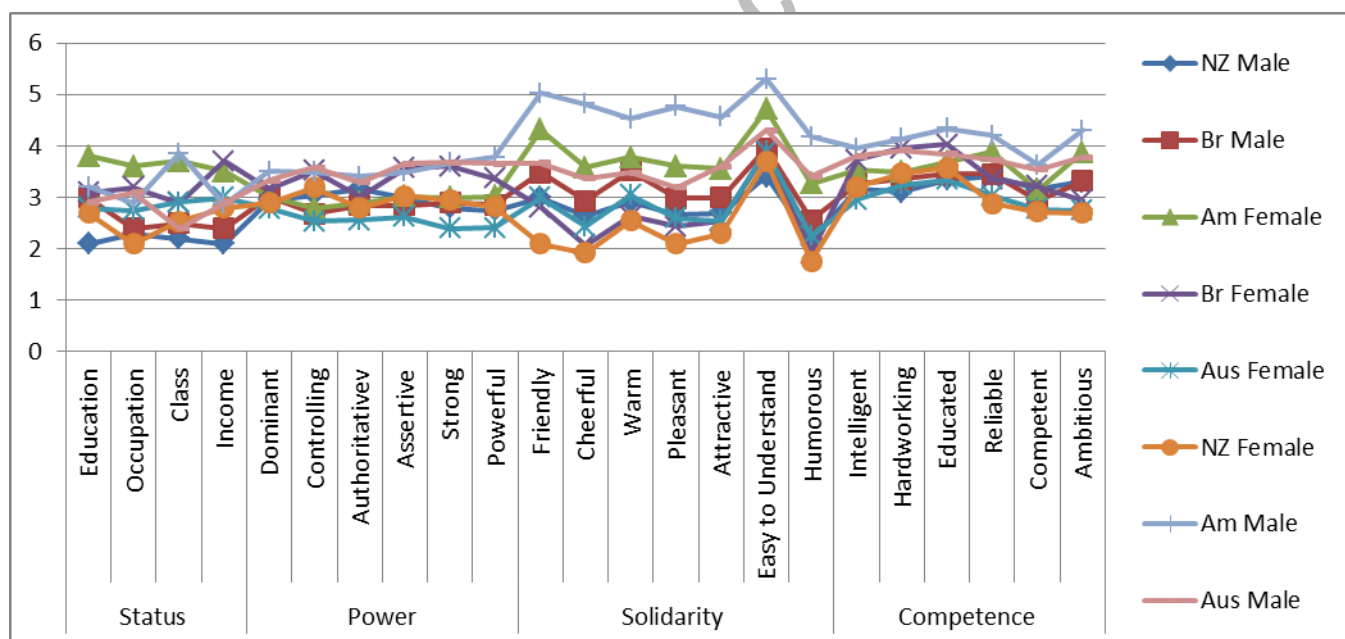
The questionnaire was developed by (Bayard, 1990) to elicit information about ESL learners’ attitudes towards native English accents. “Participants heard the nine voices twice in the same order. On the first listening, participants rated each accent on a series of Likert scales anchored at 1 (Not at all) to 6 (Very) for the following traits: reliable, ambitious, humorous, authoritative, competent, cheerful, friendly, dominant, intelligent, assertive, controlling, warm, hardworking, pleasant, attractive, powerful, strong, and educated. Participants then heard the voices a second time round, and indicated their perceptions of the speaker’s age, ethnicity, education level, occupation group, salary bracket, and social class, on a series of multiple choice

questions. With the exception of ethnicity perception, the remaining questions generally cluster into four groups: power, status, competence, and solidarity (friendliness, warmth etc.), and the results presented here are described in these general groups rather than as individual indicators.” (Bayard and Green, 2002).

## RESULTS and Discussion

The results show (See Table 1) that American voices, male and female, are the winners among the listeners in all traits except in status. The Am Male rated the highest in *easiness of understand* (5.3) and immediately followed by the Am female (4.71). Interestingly, the Aus Male voice is in third place as an easy to understand person.

As stated by Bayard and Green (2002), “The consistent theme emerging from participants’ English-language television experience is the overwhelming North American origin of the content (and that some confess to watching rather a lot)”, p.25. The results confirm similar results found in other studies done in English-speaking countries, Europe, Asia, and South American.



One observation was about the low rating for the NZ voices in almost all traits. A follow-up question to the male participants on, why they rated American accent high on so many traits? They attributed that to the presence of American media, economy, and politics. They all reported watching American movies and TV shows. Another observation is rating male voices higher than

female voices in most traits, especially in controlling, dominant, authoritative, assertive, strong, powerful, pleasant, educated, competent, and ambitious.

Students were successfully able to identify American accent. The identification of American speakers has to do with exposure and contrast with other accents. It was reported in a study by Rosenthal , 1974 (cited in Humpries, 1995) “that British children, as young as three years old, were able to distinguish between American accents and to make substantial correct assumptions as to those accent’s relative status” (p.91). Humpries, (1995) noted that the perception and judgments of people could be not logical or fair. Ideally, there is no language, or accent that would be considered as “intrinsically better than another”(p.91).

The students clearly identified American and British speakers, (80%) and (92%) respectively by all participants. Only (5%) identified the New Zealand male speaker and (7%) for the New Zealand female speaker. Australian male voice recognized by only (5%) by participants and (6%) for Australian female voice. It is worth noting that the female Australian voice was sometimes confused for the American female voice by (23%) of the students. British voices were sometimes confused to be Australian but clearly identified from American voices.

The study shows that the most visited country is United States, then United Kingdom. This may explain the tendency to clearly identify the American and British voices. Australia and New Zealand, as reported by participants, never been visited, between (5%-7%) is the correct identification of the voices from these countries. It was found that American male voice was clearly identified by almost all those who visited the United States.

This study has set out to explore the attitudes of Saudi college students towards English accents. The findings indicate that Saudi students significantly favor American English. The Saudi students focused on different traits to pick their more favorable accents, such as .... It is also important to note that both male and female think that American accent is more appealing than other accents. As noted by Pawakapan, “as is usual in this set of evaluations, the two Nam voices are clear leaders in most traits, with the exception of stats” cited in Bayard and Green (2002). The study shows that exposure, either by visiting the country or by watching TV shows, can have a significant effect on the identification or the preference of the accent, as the case of American accent.

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