

THE ATTITUDES AND PERCEPTIONS OF TRANSFER STUDENTS TOWARDS NON-NATIVE SPEAKERS ENGLISH LECTURERS

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ABSTRACT

In the field of English Language Teaching (ELT), a vast number of teachers are not native speakers of English. The majority of students worldwide learn English in foreign language (EFL) contexts and consequently, most English teachers work in similar contexts too. These non-native teachers have taught hand in hand with the native speakers for centennial however, research on the students' in the facets of attitudes and perceptions of their teachers have only been carried out recently. This paper reports on a study conducted which investigated the attitudes and perceptions of transfer students towards their non-native lecturers. The students were queried via a questionnaire and interviews. On the whole, the students had a favorable attitude although some shortcomings were indicated. The reasons for the students' attitudes and perceptions are discussed.

Keywords: Non-native, language teaching, perception, attitude, accent.

INTRODUCTION

(Trudgill, 1999) Stated that accent relates to pronunciation, and should be distinguished from a dialect, which not only encompasses pronunciation, but also the choice of words and grammar used. Based on the historical and geographical spread of English, English is currently spoken in a variety of accents. However, not all these accents are 'granted' the same status. Research has proven that spoken English associated with an ethnic minority is more negatively perceived, especially with regards to status (Giles, Howard, Angie Williams, Diane Mackie, & Francine Rosselli, 1995). Accents may aid in determining where a certain speaker is from as well as his/her social background, ethnicity, and their first language. For instance, in New Zealand, speakers classified as Maori have been categorized as less intelligent, less self-confident and lazier; thereby demoting them to a lower social class (Holmes, Murachver, & Bayard, 2001). As expected, standard forms of English such as Received Pronunciation (RP) also tend to be rated more positively (Garrett, Williams, & Evans, 2005b).

On the other hand, recent research has suggested that there is a shift away from viewing Received Pronunciation (RP) positively (Bayard, & Green, 2002). In this particular light, different accents are deemed to own their respective identities and are 'accepted' (Giles, Howard, Angie Williams, Diane Mackie, & Francine Rosselli, 1995) within various communities and countries.

Being an English lecturer at Sunway University, Malaysia, I have been confronted with a plethora of challenges when it comes to the expectation from students. They have queried my ability to teach English due to my ethnicity and ultimately, it triggers the notion of whether the students correlate the lecturers' ability to teach with the accents, which accent they find easier to understand and which accent do they wish to have and even emulate. This research paper encompasses a succinct review of the previous literature probing the issues on accents, the concept of variation in accents, the differing perceptions and attitudes towards accents and Malaysian English pronunciation. Consequently, classroom implications of recognizing these varieties will then be conferred.

BACKGROUND OF STUDY

The general surge of interest in accents can be attributed to the migration and integration of many different types of ethnic groups into a single community of a country. The relationship between accents and attitudes has raised certain issues within the academic community mainly because of the impact it has on important decision-making processes in life with relation to employment and relationships. The studies that have been carried out have focused on a myriad of aspects that are

affected by the dissimilarities in accents such as social status, employability, comprehension and other socio-economic factors. Whether from a quantitative, qualitative or interpretative perspective, the analysis of accents and their corresponding attitudinal responses have been gaining importance in recent times.

Most of the research on English accents focuses mainly on general attitudes towards English accents in one country such as Malaysia as done by (Crismore, Ngeow, & Soo, 2003). Other works demonstrate how attitudes towards accents are very similar across continents such as Asia, Europe and the like (Bayard, & Green, 2002). In the working community, accents play a huge part in work employment. As (Deprez-Sims, & Morris, 2010) when office spaces increase, organizations are more likely to hire foreigners whose accents clearly set them apart from the local workforce. In other words, accents are rather significant, the same way as how age, gender, ethnicity and skin color may influence the outcome of being employed. Most of the research on English accents stresses on the attitude towards English accents in a particular country such as Singapore or Malaysia (Crismore, Ngeow, & Soo, 2003). In this research paper, the scope is focused on transfer students, and their perception towards the accents employed by their lecturers.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

This research is a preliminary study attempting to gain an insight into perceptions towards various accents and the traits associated with different accents of English. Although, there has been abundance of researches upon accents; however most of the researches consist of attitudinal and affective response towards different varieties of English accents. This research will examine the perception of a group of transfer students towards Malaysian English, a non-native variety of English used primarily by Malaysians. In relation to the Malaysian variety of English, this research attempts to analyze the respondents' attitudes to different local accents and their preference for different pronunciation models as English evolves into the lingua franca of the world and the emergence of non-native varieties of English where it will focus on the perception of a group of transfer students on Malaysian English, which is a non-native variety of English used mainly by Malaysians. The main goal of this research is to gain an insight of what affects accent perception as well as the effects of accents of English towards an individual's view of another person. Even though there have been many research documents regarding English accents, the result may vary due to factors such as the locality of where the researches were carried out and the community living at the place of research. Moreover, most of the researches done are of various accents which do not involve students from Malaysia.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

In line with the intent of the study, the following are the research questions of this study:

- I. What are the attitudes that transfer students possess towards deviating accents of Malaysian English lecturers?
- II. What are the insights of the respondents towards their own accent?
- III. Why are certain accents preferred over others?

Significance of the Study

The findings or the results from this study will fill the research gap about attitudes and perceptions towards Malaysian accent among the transfer students in Sunway University. The findings will also provide insights into accents which these students identify with; local-accented English or a native sounding variety. Knowledge of the attitudes towards the different English accents also has pedagogical implications in relation to classroom models of pronunciation and by advocating the classroom teaching with the local English models would grant more realistic and useful goals for the students.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This section stipulates discussion of research on attitudes towards assorted category of English accents, arraying from native to non-native accents. The insinuation of perception towards intonation in society is also stressed in order to comprehend this particular aspect. The subsequently section

elaborates the perception of the diverse accents. An appraisal of the interrelated literature will investigate the approaches adopted by various researchers in their accent studies.

Accent

An accent is the “cumulative auditory effect of those features of pronunciation that identify where a person is from regionally or socially” (Crystal, 2003). One issue was raised that foreign accents have been the focus of study for numerous decades. Even though these methods have exposed insights relating to both social norms and instructive practice, the intricacy of the perception of accented vocalizations has not been fully explained. Researchers investigated social categorization by using accents which is also known as the auditory stimuli and looks. When ethnic cues of looks and accents were combined by creating cross categories, there was a clear predominance of accents as meaningful cues for categorization (Rakić, Steffens, & Mummendey, 2011). For example 100 immigrants to Canada were interviewed about own knowledge on their preferred accent where they are concerned about their own elocution intricacy which correlates with pronunciation and assimilation and many languages utilize some types of assimilation; a change in a certain sound based on the sounds that come before or after it (King, 2009)

Perception towards a Variety of Accents

The practice of English as an international medium of communication gains more importance these days and what was once known as obstacles in the form of language barriers are becoming less noticeable. Now English is being spoken in a kaleidoscope of accents, although as Trudgill states the question of what accents can be defined as “standard” when English is brought into the picture (Trudgill, 1999). Since there are a large variety of English accents, not all accents are perceived on equal terms, thus some are rated more positively than others. There are different types of accents for instance the American accent, British accent and Canadian accent and the perception of each accent always varies. American accent is acceptable to have a non-native accent, as long the as the listener is able to easily understand the speech with ease and the flow of the speech is smooth and fluent (Scales, 2006). In addition, there is the perception that a British accent equals a brain the size of a planet, a perception reinforced by the not-uncommon belief that for the British, English is a second language (Lane, 2007).

Revelation and Recognition

(Deterding, 2005) made a conclusion that having experience with varieties of English in society is really beneficial. Nonetheless, (Tan, 2005) in his study was able to completely identify the Malaysian speaker instead of British or American speaker in a matched-guise test. (Kubota, 1998) recommended the Japanese English teacher to be more exposed on the varieties of English other than the inner circle varieties (e.g. USA, UK accent) because it would help students recognize plenty of English accent and expand their knowledge about linguistic.

Perspective towards Certain Accent

A person’s identity is specified not only by characteristic but also by social identity (Scales, 2006). Accent is considered to be the most significant impact on a person’s social identity because accent is reflected on culture (Scales, 2006). Studies have examined that attitude towards particular accent have mainly impact on one’s status such as education, socioeconomic level and job. For instance, in a study by (Scales, 2006) the British speaker was categorized as the most knowledgeable people by several students while some of the students did not like them, stating that they sounded like school teachers.

Preference for Native Models

Although there are studies that show Received Pronunciation (RP) model as the preferred accent, there are others which expound the General American (GA) as the preference. These models differ based on numerous factors including the geographical location as well as the extent of exposure to the media (Scales, 2006); (Bayard, & Green, 2002). Many language learners, in particular second-language learners strive to shed the stereotypes linked to their accents by attempting to adopt a native-like accent so as to be better understood as well as to be highly regarded. Received Pronunciation or RP model is the choice of many learners of English language and carries with it a hallmark of unrivalled

prestige in most parts of the world, even with the booming of American culture in media worldwide. This phenomenon was observed in (Ladegaard, 1998) in his study of Danish students. He found that RP is the preferred accent and thus, although there are many different inner-circle models, (Ladegaard, 1998, p. 265) finds that the “Received Pronunciation appears to be the unsurpassed prestige variety” among Danish students.

On the other hand, (Bayard, & Green, 2002) discovered that students from Europe, Southeast Asia, the United States and Australasia prefer General American (GA). They attribute it to the constant presence and exposure of American media the students face on a daily basis. (Bayard, & Green, 2002) collected samples of accents from around the world in one of the most diverse language attitude studies conducted in recent times with samples from at least 15 countries. They investigated based on four dimensions of status, power, solitary and competence and concluded that the attitudes they project towards different accents vary in different cultures and communities. However, while native-like accents are revered, the opposite seems to hold true for one’s own non-native accent of English. (Dulten-Puffer, 1997) found that students display negative attitudes towards their own accent as they hold higher regard for native accents which they have had contact with and this was the conclusion from a study conducted with the Austrian English as Foreign Language (EFL) learners. In Austria, it was found again that the Received Pronunciation is also the accent of choice. The study was conducted among 132 university students of English using a modified version of the matched-guise technique to evaluate three native accents and two Austrian non-native accents of English. The study also reveals that students with English as a Foreign Language (EFL) experience reflect rather rigid choices whereas those who have spent time in English-speaking countries revealed attitudes, which are more, linked to their experiences in situations.

Attitudes towards Malaysian English Pronunciation

Malaysia is a multiracial country that consists of three main races; Malays, Chinese and Indians. English is uttered in different forms of pronunciation due to the variation of identities and cultural backgrounds and in this research, we angled at the transfer students perceptions and attitudes towards Malaysian lecturers’ accents in a Twinning program at Sunway University. There are two general tendencies among Malaysians with regards to attitudes towards accents according to a study by (Crismore, Ngeow, & Soo, 2003). First, the importance of gaining an interpretation from an international community and the need for positive look from foreigners when they interact and secondly, Malaysians are rather serious when it comes to the use of standard English language in public mediums of communications. Students from foreign countries are likely to face some variances such as language and cultural gaps when they pursue their education in Malaysia. However, it is interesting to note that Malaysian English is not seen in a negative light because respondents or foreigners do not regard speakers of English with a Malaysian accent as uneducated or inexperienced (Crismore, Ngeow, & Soo, 2003). Besides that, Malaysian English is not difficult to be learnt and understood even though it is quite distinct in certain aspects of lexicon, pronunciation and grammar (Crismore, Ngeow, & Soo, 2003).

Classroom Implications

The question on whether we should or should not recognize these new forms of English in the context of a classroom will then determine the decision of which variety should we use; American or British English materials or possibly classroom’s manuals that echo local varieties and desired teaching techniques. Students who enroll into the American Degree Transfer programs commonly have the perception that American Degree Transfer programs in Malaysia employ lecturers who are either Americans or at least must have attained their degrees in America; hence, they have the notion that American English equates the principle model in order to accomplish the level of being a “good” English speaker. Nonetheless, previous studies have disputed this notion. (Mckay, 2002) argues that Western model: British or American English as not only unsuitable, but at the same time can be daunting for students particularly for those who have zero knowledge in English. Nonnative speakers do not have to attain native-like competence (Mckay, 2002). Jenkin states that it is more realistic to use local teachers and models referring to *Lingua Franca Core* that focuses on phonological goals of international communication instead of the native speaker standards (2000). Looking at the myriad of

cultures and co-cultures in the context of the American Degree Program, this research will then aid in determining the “suitable” model to use within the classroom setting.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This section clarifies the research plan used for this study. First, a depiction will be given on how the speakers or the lecturers in this case were selected for this particular research paper, Second, an elucidation of how the speakers were elected based on a set of criteria is also obtainable in the research paper. Finally, the process of data collection and how the data was examined is also described.

Respondents

A total of 50 students consisting of 23 male students 18 female students and 9 respondents did not state their gender participated in the survey. The age ranges from 17 to 25 years old and with the majority of 45 respondents being the full time students and 5 of the respondents did not state their status. 38 students are pursuing their undergraduate programs and 11 did not state their status in the program. There were 21 Chinese, 5 Malays, 11 Indians and 13 from other races. For the first language section, 10 of them answered Mandarin, 1 for Tamil, 4 for Malay, 25 for English and 10 for other languages. The ratio of students to lecturers in Sunway University College is roughly 50:1, thus giving more or so an accurate result. Before answering the questionnaires the respondents were asked to listen to a recording of the speakers.

Selection of the Speakers

In this research, lecturers were used as the speaker’s samples. The lecturers were from different courses and there were four of them in total. In the questionnaire, there is no information about the speakers to avoid manipulation. The speakers are all from Malaysia and they represent the races in Malaysia; the Malay, Chinese and Indian. The first speaker is an Indian and she is from the School of Business Australian University Program. The second speaker is a Chinese and she is from the School of Computer Technology. The third speaker is Chinese and she is from the Australian University Program. The fourth speaker is Malay and she is from the Australian University Program. Each speaker was selected based on their accent which is distinguishable from the other. The four speakers have different accents due to their cultural background and the purpose of choosing speakers from Malaysia was to examine the perception on these varying accents of English among the different main races. The main purpose of choosing Malaysian speakers was basically to determine the respondent’s perception towards Malaysian accents and the four speakers have distinct accents and this could represent a diverse range of accents anticipated by a group of Malaysians which also confer the background of the lecturers in ADTP who are mostly Malaysian.

Procedure

The recording was comprised mainly of Sunway lecturers’ from different programs and not from American Degree Transfer Program students (ADTP). The reason for this was that the results would be biased since the students would be able to recognize the lecturers’ voice and it would lead to voice recognition and favoritism. Our subjects were chosen from two of these classes; Interpersonal Communication and Biology. The recording for the lecturers’ voice, of approximately 2-3 minutes with gaps of 10 seconds between each lecturer was played to the respondents and paused after each part so they can answer the questions accordingly without any confusion of voices. The respondents listened to the recording for the next four parts with same pattern. At the end, they had to answer open ended question based on their perception towards each lecturer. After that the questionnaires were collected at the end of each session and collected accordingly.

Data Analysis

The scores of each speaker on ten different characteristics were averaged out to achieve a collective number. The distinctiveness of the characteristics scored ranging from 1 to 6, 1 being most unfavorable and 6 being most favorable. The mean scores of the respondents towards certain proclamation made with observation to each individual speaker as well as general statements about enunciation were attained. These scores range from 1 to 4, with 1 displaying a strong disagreement and

4 indicating that the respondent sturdily agrees with the statements. For example, for the first statement, "The speaker is native speaker", a score of 2 would specify that the respondent disagrees with the statement. The total proportion for agreements (strongly agree and agree) and disagreements (strongly disagree or disagree) was attained to present a general depiction of the respondents' judgment. The qualitative facts focus on accurate issues regarding their conception of the lecturers was then scrutinized. And the questions posed to the respondents were both of an open and close-ended nature. Scrupulous contemplation was paid to the open-ended questions, which offers the analysis underlying the approach towards each lecturer's pronunciation. Data analysis was condensed into plain tables and graphs for simplicity of evaluation and the quantitative data stated was analyzed together with the qualitative data collected from the questions posed at the last part of each feedback form. Supplementary information provided by each respondent was also used to authenticate the accessible data to help out the researcher with observe to the outlook of transfer students towards the intonation of lecturer in Malaysia. In nutshell, this stage on research methodology proposes highlights the direction commenced to embark on this research. The technique mainly encompassed the following phases: the mixture of lecturers, dialogue samples, and the design of the questionnaire, the assortment of respondents, data gathering and data scrutinized.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

In this section, an explanation of the result and the discussion of the study will be discussed. All the 50 questionnaires were distributed to 50 respondents and have been tabulated for the results.

Characteristics Associated with Accents

The focus of the survey is attitudes towards the accent, where a 6-point Likert scale measuring 11 adjectives such as boring, interesting and serious is constructed. The scores are from 1 to 6, for example 1 indicates insincere and 6 indicate sincere. The scores carry the perception of the respondents towards the speakers. As the scores increases from 1 to 6, the perception of speaker increases. The scores consist of the average scores or the mean and the standard deviation on the 11 personality. Table 1 below shows the results of the four speakers. The average scores of the speakers were calculated by adding the scores of each personality and dividing it by the number of respondents who responded. The standard deviation was also calculated and the standard deviation of the scores did not deviate further from the mean calculated.

Table 1. Respondents' Rating of Speakers

Characteristics	Speaker 1	Speaker 2	Speaker 3	Speaker 4
Interesting	3.56	3.96	4.4	4
Very educated	4.6	3.88	4.8	4.68
Friendly	4.04	4.24	4.56	4.52
Confident	4.36	4.32	4.92	4.4
Hardworking	3.68	4.4	4.68	4.48
Sincere	3.88	4.2	4.68	4.6
Humorous	3.76	3.76	3.8	3.92
Intelligent	4.36	4.32	4.72	4.52
Fluent	4.32	4.2	4.88	4.44
Pleasant	3.96	3.52	4.6	4.48
Attractive	3.72	3.76	3.64	4.24

The table above shows that speaker 1 and 2 lagging in all the personalities if compared to the speaker 3 and 4. Speaker 3 has the highest score if compared to the other speakers. Respondents rated speaker 3 with the highest scores on being interesting, very educated, confident, hardworking, friendly, sincere and humorous. Respondents were able to relate with speaker 3 and thus rating with the highest score. Speaker 1 was rated as being not interesting and not hardworking. All the respondents rated all the speakers with different scores according to their perceptions of the speakers' accents.

Table 2. Summary of Responses to Close-Ended Questions

	Speaker 1		Speaker 2		Speaker 3		Speaker 4	
Most Preferred	4	8%	6	12%	26	52%	12	24%
Least Preferred	16	32%	21	42%	5	10%	6	12%
Easiest to understand	8	16%	3	6%	28	56%	8	16%
Most difficult to understand	14	28%	25	50%	5	10%	4	8%

Table 3. Respondents' Reasons for Given Responses

	Yes		No	
Would you like to sound like the preferred speaker?	15	30%	35	70%
Would you want to change your accent?	14	28%	36	72%

Reasons		
Most Preferred	Speaker 3	Fluent, slow, clear pronunciation
Least Preferred	Speaker 2	Fast, poor pronunciation
Easiest to understand	Speaker 3	Fluent, slow, clear pronunciation
Most difficult to understand	Speaker 2	Fast, poor pronunciation

It can be seen from Table 3 that Speaker 3 was voted the easiest to understand (56%) and Speaker 2 was rated the least preferred (42%). As stated earlier, the most preferred speaker was the third speaker (52%) and the most difficult to comprehend was Speaker 2 (50%). This shows that the speaker who was the easiest to understand was also the most preferred speaker. Speaker 3 was the most preferred speaker and was the easiest to understand as stated in Table 3.

Preferred Accents

When asked about which speaker was easiest to understand, the respondents chose the third speaker with 52% based on the degree of fluency and clear pronunciation of words (refer to Table 2 & 3). There were a number of answers suggesting "slow" as their reason for easier comprehension. This suggests that the slower the rate of speech, the easier it is to understand the speech. The speaker that was found hardest to understand was the second speaker with 42% of the majority of respondents stating that the speaker spoke too fast. This seems to correlate with the statement mentioned, indicating that the rate of speech has some influence over comprehension ability. These results are consistent a research such as (Scales, 2006) which concludes that the speaker that was easiest to understand was also the best liked.

CONCLUSION

The study was conducted to answer the research questions posted in the initial section and to have an insight on the understanding of attitudes and perceptions towards accents. In conclusion, transfer students in Malaysia have a preference for certain lecturers over others based on their speech and accents. Plus, the speaker that the most difficult to understand was unanimously the one the respondents disliked the most as well. This is identical to some of the previous studies done by (Tan, 2005). It is of utmost importance to see that the speaker who was easiest to understand was also the one which the respondents thought had a slow speech rate and vice-versa, the one with a faster rate of speech was the toughest to understand.

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