



Prestige and Intelligibility: The Perceptions of British, American and Pakistani English Accents of ESL Learners

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Abstract

English being a global language comes in various accents which have varied social and educational implications. Accent attitudes have a strong impact on preferences, identity and classroom practices of learners in the ESL context. This paper examines the perceptions of undergraduate ESL learners of three major accents of the English language; the British, American and Pakistani accents in Government College Karak, Pakistan. A qualitative case study design was adopted where data were gathered in the form of semi-structured interviews with ten undergraduate students. Thematic analysis demonstrated that the British accent was identified by the learners with prestige, authority, and correctness, whereas the American accent was seen as less unknown and less difficult to obtain, in great part owing to media exposure. The Pakistani accent was not considered one of the prestigious ones in the world, but it was appreciated due to its pragmatism, local identity, and convenience in communication. These results illustrate that global prestige and local intelligibility interact in a complex manner to determine attitudinal aspects of accent in learners. The research also adds to discussions in the field of World Englishes and sociolinguistics, showing that ESL students have to compromise between the global norms and the local forms. It also indicates that language instructions in Pakistan must offer the exposure to various accents of the English language to equip learners with global and local communication.

Keywords: World Englishes; ESL learners; accent attitudes; pronunciation; intelligibility; linguistic perceptions



Introduction

English has found its place in various fields of culture, politics, and academia as *lingua franca* in the whole world (Crystal, 2012). This global spread has rendered English no longer a singular form as it is now in various forms that are influenced by regional, social and cultural factors (Kachru, 1992; Jenkins, 2015). Accents are the clearest examples of these varieties, as in addition to indicating geographical origin, they also bear a powerful sociolinguistic phenomenon, including prestige, intelligibility, and identity (Moyer, 2013). Studies about World Englishes have demonstrated that the perceptions of accents by learners affect their learning selections, their communicative self-assurance, as well as their sentiments toward speakers (Matsuda, 2019).

Historical, cultural, and media-related influences on the spread of the British and American accents prevail in most ESL settings, especially in Asia and the Middle East (Holliday, 2018; Timmis, 2002). British English is perceived as prestigious and correct but the American language is perceived as globalization, technology and familiarity in the media (Coupland and Bishop, 2007; Jenkins, 2009). Nevertheless, the local English accents are becoming a valid and practical form of communication (Mahboob, 2009; Kirkpatrick, 2020). In spite of this appreciation, learners tend to regard local accents as less status quo or non-standard and this brings a conflict between global and local language standards (Modiano, 1999).

In Pakistan, English has a special status as an official language and a status of the social mobility (Rahman, 2010). Even though Pakistan English is widely spoken, it is frequently compared to the perceived superiority of British and American ones (Mehboob, 2008). Not many studies have however, investigated how the undergraduates ESL negotiate their views of these accents in academic and social aspects. It is especially significant when it comes to the discussions on the ownership of language globally, its intelligibility, and the implication of accent attitudes in pedagogical terms (Seidlhofer, 2011; Jenkins, 2015). The research gap addressed in the current study is whether there is a significant difference in the perceptions of undergraduate ESL students in Government college Karak, Pakistan, with respect to British, American and Pakistani accents of English. The analysis of the attribution of prestige, intelligibility and identity to these varieties by learners helps in informing larger debates in the World Englishes and sociolinguistics. It also offers useful information to practice English language teaching in Pakistan and similar ESL settings where balancing the global and local identity is still a pedagogical dilemma.

The primary goal of the research is to find out the way undergraduate ESL students in Pakistan rate the prestige and intelligibility of British, American, and Pakistani accents of the English language. In order to do this, the research questions that the study will focus on are the following:

- What is the perceived prestige of British, American and Pakistani accents of the English language by learners?
- What do learners think of the intelligibility of these accents as to whether they can understand them and how easily they can understand them?

Literature Review

The issue of how the various accents of the English language are perceived by the learners has long been the focal point of the discussions in the area of World Englishes and applied linguistics. Accents are not only the signs of pronunciation; they carry with them social meanings of prestige, familiarity and identity (Moyer, 2013). Many studies have revealed



that the judgments of accents by learners influence their attitude toward speakers, their preferences in classes, and their linguistic identity (Coupland and Bishop, 2007; Jenkins, 2015).

British and American English continue to be the most popular accent models in ESL/EFL situations across the world. The extensive study of accent attitudes conducted by Coupland and Bishop (2007) in the United Kingdom showed that the "Received Pronunciation" (RP) accent is always linked to prestige and power, and regional accents had mixed results. The same trends can be observed in a global setting: British English is considered to be the correct and standard dialect, and the American one is associated with accessibility and modernity, in large part because the former occupies most of the media and popular culture spaces (Timmis, 2002; Matsuda, 2019). Jenkins (2009) goes on to state that American English has acquired symbolic capital due to its connection with technology and globalization especially among the young generations.

Meanwhile, with the emergence of World Englishes, native-speaker conventions have been shaken because of the greater emphasis on intelligibility and communication processes rather than on an imitative approach to native accents (Kirkpatrick, 2020; Seidlhofer, 2011). As it has been researched in the gulf region, learners are becoming more exposed to different kinds of accents because of transnational education and migration. Indicatively, Al-Issa (2020) established that Omani students considered the British English prestigious but just as at home using American English due to media exposure. In Qatar, other studies by Hashim and Mahboob (2019) pointed out that students were aware of the practicality of American English, but still, a significant number of them had British English as an indicator of academic power. Parallel to this, Saudi-based research has found that the standard variety of English is increasingly becoming popular in formal schooling, yet students have admitted that American English is becoming more popular in professional and online spheres (Alsulami, 2015). Such results highlight the world tension of prestige and access of accent attitudes.

Localized varieties add to the attitude levels of South Asian towards the English accents. The Pakistani English, the specific version of the world English is a language that has grown with its own phonology and lexicon influenced by the local languages and culture (Mehboob, 2008). Pakistani English is still not sufficiently appreciated in the educational and professional fields, although it is considered to be less standard or non-prestigious compared to other varieties (British and American) (Rahman, 2010). Much the same can be found in research in India and Bangladesh, where localized Englishes are perceived to be useful in everyday communication but inferior to native-speaker models in other, more academic and international, contexts (Kachru, 1992; Kirkpatrick, 2020).

This literature has identified a significant gap in the research. Although much is available on the attitudes of learners towards British and American accents, not much research has been done on local varieties of English like Pakistani English and how learners mediate between their perceptions in global and local models. The current study makes contributions to the international discourses on the ownership of languages, intelligible and sociolinguistic realities of the World Englishes by exploring the perceptions of undergraduate ESL learners towards British, American and Pakistani accents of the English language.



Methodology

In this study, the qualitative design was utilized to explore the views of undergraduate ESL students on the prestige and intelligibility of the British, American and Pakistani accents of English. Ten undergraduate students were purposely chosen in Government College Karak, Pakistan, as they were typical ESL learners who had an exposure to English in their academic and informal spheres. The research site was Government Postgraduate College Karak located in South Khyber Pakhtunkhwa since it is one of the typical ESL settings in Pakistan. In contrast to prestigious metropolitan institutions, GPGC Karak accepts students with different linguistic and socio-economic backgrounds, which can be ideal to understand the true student perceptions of the English accents. In this case, students typically attend Urdu/Pashto-medium schools, where formal instruction in the English language occurs at the secondary education levels, hence the level of exposure of most Pakistani ESL students. The choice of this location thus offers useful perspectives on perceptions at the grassroots that can be used to supplement the current literature that is mostly of an urban and elite-driven nature. The participants had learned English as a subject in school and beyond, and they indicated that they were exposed to the accents of English regularly in the classroom, TV, movies, and social media. In the college environment, English is a mandatory course and in certain instances, a media of instruction and Pakistani English is widely spoken among classmates and peers. This combination of formal and informal exposure was also crucial in that learners were conversant with both the global (British and American) and the local (Pakistani) varieties, which were thematically suitable to be used as informants in the study.

Data were collected using semi-structured interviews. The participants were selected to listen to brief audio samples that contained the three target accents and to answer open-ended questions regarding their opinion about each of them. The interviews that took about 25-30 minutes prompted the learners to contemplate which accents they believed were prestigious, which they felt easier to understand and which they preferred to use in their communication. All interviews were taped, transcribed and thematically analyzed in accordance with Braun and Clarke (2006) framework. Two key themes have been identified; prestige, which was commonly linked to the perceived authority of British English and the contemporary role of American English; and intelligibility, where American and Pakistani English were considered more convenient to understand and communicate locally.

Very keen attention was paid to ethical considerations. Informed consent was taken, pseudonyms were used to preserve anonymity and the participants could withdraw at any point.

Finding & Discussion

Interpretation of the interview data showed that there are two dominant themes in how learners perceive the accents of the English language, including prestige and intelligibility. Although the three accents were tested differently in these aspects, the results demonstrate how international and local issues interact in influencing the attitudes of ESL learners.

Prestige and Authority

The British accent was always mentioned by the participants as the most prestigious one. Some of the learners identified it with right English, educated speakers and official situations. As an example, one of the learners has remarked, British English is more professional and is more difficult to imitate. This is an indication of the centuries-long



colonial and educational tradition in Pakistan, where British English still exercises a symbolic power (Rahman, 2020). British pronunciation, which some learners claimed sounded more professional, also appeared to be the pronunciation that is respected at the intercultural level, which supports the notion that the British English language still has a prestigious position in most ESL settings.

Intriguingly enough, the American accent was not also seen as equally prestigious but was characterized as the one that is more modern, stylish, and closer to the media culture. One student said that it is natural to us because we listen to American English every other day in movies and YouTube. This is consistent with the literature on Saudi Arabia and the Gulf, where students tend to think of the American English as a symbol of popular culture, technology, and globalization instead of authority (Al-Qahtani, 2019; Mahboob and Elyas, 2014). In turn, the Pakistani accent was believed to be less prestigious at the global level, but many students admitted its validity at the local level. It was also referred to as comfortable by some students and theirs, one student said, "Pakistani English sounds closer to the manner in which we actually speak, so it is easier to us. This implicates that it does not have the prestige world-wide, but has identity value to local speakers. This observation echoes the fact that localized Englishes acquire symbolic value with respect to identity, despite the fact that they might not be regarded as normative on the global level (Modiano, 1999).

Intelligibility & Accessibility

Regarding intelligibility, the American and Pakistani accents of English were relatively easier to comprehend among learners than the British one. The American accent was said to be clear and familiar especially because of exposure in films, television and social media. This justifies the emphasis of Jenkins (2007) on exposure and frequency as important determinants of intelligibility in the use of global English.

The Pakistani accent is also considered low status, but it was appreciated as accessible. Students observed that it is easy to converse, simple to follow and communication flows easily. This is a sign of the contradiction between international recognition and local communicative needs, as shown by this duality: low prestige yet high intelligibility. The same tendencies are also documented in the Gulf setting, where students are aware of the significance of global accents in English, yet they use localized varieties in their daily comprehension (Elyas and Alharbi, 2017).

Although the British accent was considered prestigious, it was commonly characterized as hard to pick up or too rapid. This implies that prestige does not always translate into communicative ease, a point that reiterates what Kirkpatrick (2010) says that English teaching in multilinguals should not focus on teaching English according to native norms but according to the communicative ease.

Interplay of prestige and Intelligibility

Combined, the results demonstrate a complicated interrelation between prestige and intelligibility. Learners desire the status that comes with British English, are conditioned by the familiarity with American English culture, and depend on the communicability pragmatic nature of the Pakistani language. This tension is the reflection of the realities of English as the global language where different varieties exist, and where learners have to negotiate between symbolic capital and efficacy in communication (Seidlhofer, 2011). Despite the fact that the study was carried out in one institution in South Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, its findings echo other general trends recorded in other ESL environments



such as the Middle East. As an example, Al-Qahtani (2019) discovered that Saudi students were impressed by the status of British English but liked the affordability of the American one, whereas Elyas and Alharbi (2017) observed the increasing status of localized Gulf English. Therefore, the current results will add to the international discussions on the topic of World Englishes, ELF (English as a Lingua Franca), and language pedagogy by demonstrating how students strike a balance between global prestige and local intelligibility. The results are similar to the situation in the Gulf states, including Saudi Arabia and Qatar, where students also want to be associated with British prestige but can be intelligible only through American familiarity (Al-Qahtani, 2019; Hashim and Mahboob, 2019). This implies that the prestige-intelligibility crisis is not specific to Pakistan but instead it is a wider ESL reality in Asia and the Middle East.

Conclusion and Implications

This paper examined the perceptions of undergraduate ESL students regarding the prestige and intelligibility of British, American and Pakistani accents of English. The results showed that the British accent is generally considered prestigious and authoritative but is commonly considered to be less intelligible. Conversely, the American accent is familiar and accessible, which is in large part because of its international media presence, where the Pakistani accent is less prestigious, but it is an important indicator to students of local identity and communication ease. The insights show how complicated the use of English in multilingual settings can be, as learners have to compromise between global norms and local realities. The findings add to the current discussions on World Englishes and the English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) through their contribution to the intersection of prestige and intelligibility in language attitude development.

Pedagogical Implications

The research has a number of implications to the English language teaching and the curriculum development:

Multiple Varieties of Exposure

Multiple varieties of English accents should be introduced to the learners in the classrooms so as to prepare them to local and international communication.

Revise the Intelligibility Theoretical Approach

Teachers are encouraged to focus on communicative clarity, rather than on an imitation of the so-called standard accents, as they are in line with global ELF views.

Local Englishes

The Pakistani accent can be recognized as a valid accent and this can empower the learners and decrease linguistic insecurity.

Cross-Cultural Collaboration

Comparative analysis with students in the Middle East and other ESL settings may deepen the way to negotiate prestige and intelligibility all over the world.

Limitations and Future Research

The small sample size in South Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, but the study provides the insights that are applicable to the wider ESL setting. Further studies may be conducted to increase the sample size and cover learners in other regions across Pakistan and comparisons in the Gulf and South Asia, which would improve the generalizability of the results.



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