The Effects of Accents on English Listening Comprehension

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Abstract

This study investigated whether second language (L2) listeners understood better when they listened to an academic lecture spoken by a speaker who shared their native language. The attitudes of L2 listeners towards the use of accents in listening tests were also explored. Twenty-two L2 listeners including 19 Arabic and 3 Chinese listeners were recruited from an intensive English program (IEP) at an American university. Participants first listened to an audio lecture delivered by an Arabic professor and answered multiple-choice questions based on the lecture. After one and a half week, the audio lecture was delivered again, but by a Chinese-accented professor. The mean scores between two independent samples from each test were compared. The results showed that accents did not have an effect on listening comprehension; however, the questionnaire revealed that native accents were more desirable. The findings would help test developers and teachers make an informed decision whether to include non-native accents into listening materials.

Keywords: pronunciation, attitude, second language, listening comprehension, ESL assessment/test

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Background

There have been calls to incorporate a variety of English accents in the listening tests in order for the tests to better reflect a real target use domain. Specifically, international students who come to study in North America are likely to be exposed to more than one variety of English; therefore, it seems justifiable to develop a listening test that corresponds to the real academic setting. However, the inclusion of a variety of English in the listening test might be a threat to the test's validity if it was found out that the listening test was more lenient for a particular group of test takers. Having accented speech could create test bias for particular test takers who share the same first language (L1) background with the speakers, whereas it was found that there was no bias when test takers listened to a speaker who shared the same native language (Abeywickrama, 2013; Harding, 2012; Major, Fitzmaurice, Bunta, & Balasubramanian, 2002; Major, Fitzmaurice, Bunta, & Balasubramanian, 2005; Munro, Derwing, & Morton, 2006). It was also found that the attitudes towards the use of non-native accents in listening tests also came into play (Abeywickrama, 2013; Dalton-Puffer, Kaltenboeck, & Smit, 1997; Harding, 2008). However, evidence from research has produced conflicting results. The study comparing the effects of accents on listening comprehension and exploring the attitudes towards including a variety of accents as listening input would shed some light on the issues of the test usefulness and authenticity. The implications of the findings would be useful for listening test material developers and English as a second (ESL) teachers.

Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to investigate whether L2 listeners understood English spoken by speakers from their own native language better than speakers of other languages and whether they preferred native accents in listening input. The following research questions were proposed:

Research Question 1. Does an Arabic accent have an effect on academic listening comprehension of Arabic and Chinese L2 listeners?

Research Question 2. Does a Chinese accent have an effect on academic listening comprehension of Arabic and Chinese L2 listeners?

Research Question 3. What are the Arabic and Chinese L2 listeners' attitudes towards using non-native varieties in listening comprehension tests?

Methods

Participants in this study were ESL students enrolled in three sections of Listening and Speaking classes in an intensive English program (IEP) at an American university. Since most international students at the IEP were speakers of Arabic and Chinese, 19 Arabic and 4 Chinese listeners (N = 23) were recruited to participate in the study. However, one Chinese participant did not attend throughout the study (N = 22). All participants could be classified as high-intermediate level, at one of the highest levels according to the IEP curricular. Their age ranged from 18 to 26 years old and there were 5 female and 17 male participants.

This study employed two main measures: an academic listening comprehension test and an attitude questionnaire. A listening comprehension test on the topic of Economics consisted of 6 multiple-choice items taken from the real past TOEFL test (Educational Testing Service, 2013). Regarding the listening input, two speakers each representing Arabic and Chinese accent

were recruited from the university's faculty to deliver a lecture. An outline of the lecture was provided to the two speakers instead of an exact transcript in order to ensure the authenticity of the lecture at real time. They gave the same lecture to control for the topic.

An adapted version of an attitude questionnaire (Abeywickrama, 2013) consisting of two parts was administered after the second time of giving the listening test. Part one consisting of 5 multiple-choice questions required participants to choose the best answer which best described their attitudes towards native and non-native accents in listening tests. Part two was designed to collect general information about participants including age, gender, nationality, first language, other language spoken fluently, length of stay in the United States, and experience of living aboard.

Results

Participants in the first listening test included 23 participants (19 Arabic students and 4 Chinese students). However, one Chinese participant did not participate in the second test (N = 22). When listening to an Arabic speaker, the mean scores for both Arabic and Chinese participants were higher (Arabic M = 1.95; SD = 1.22 and Chinese M = 1.25; SD = 0.96) than when listening to a Chinese speaker (Arabic M = 1.21; SD = 1.32 and Chinese M = 1.00; SD = 0.00).

To answer research questions 1 and 2 asking whether there were effects of non-native accents on L2 listening comprehension, the hypotheses were supported as the findings revealed that the use of non-native accents as listening input did not have any effect on L2 listening comprehension. In the first listening test, the t-test indicated that an Arabic accent did not have any effects on listening comprehension (t = 1.07; p > .05). Similarly, there was no effect of a Chinese accent on listening comprehension (t = 0.70; p > .05). As can be seen, both Arabic and

Chinese participants did not do better when they listened to speakers who shared the same L1 backgrounds as their L2 listening comprehension scores showed no statistically difference. With regards to research question 3 exploring the attitudes towards the use of native and non-native accents in listening tests, the researcher's hypothesis was also confirmed. Despite the fact that L2 listeners hear non-native varieties in everyday life, the attitude questionnaire revealed that most participants still preferred native accents as they believed they are standard English. This was also supported by the results suggesting that accents would make a difference in their listening comprehension.

Relevance to the PIE and Second Language Learning

The findings suggested that the inclusion of non-native English accents did not have an effect on L2 academic listening comprehension; however, native English accents were still preferred in listening tests. Due to the limitations of the study, it is still unclear whether non-native accents should be included in listening tests and if they should, to what extent that they would create no bias. Taylor and Geranpayeh (2011) suggested that we should balance a range of English varieties and test bias that could occur due to the amount of exposure to those varieties. Therefore, we should consider the purpose of the test since it reflects the listening construct we want to measure (Buck, 2001). If the listening construct includes an ability to understand an academic lecture in ESL contexts, the use of accented varieties in listening tests is preferable. If it does not, but it is more beneficial to understand non-native accents in the TLU domain, then ESL teachers could provide a certain amount of English varieties in listening material input for classroom practice in order to prepare students for the real world contexts.

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