The Analysis of Iranian EFL Learners' Acquisition of the American, British and Australian Accents

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ABSTRACT

Farsi and English are both Indo-European languages with similarities in their roots. As such, this experiment was conducted to understand which English accent (i.e. American, British or Australian accents) would be easier for Iranians to adapt. To answer this question, 30 medical students performed three different activities of (I) listening to audio texts in three accents, (II) taking part in an oral interview and (III) completing an attitude questionnaire. The activities examined comprehensibility of the accents the participants were subjected to, type of accent they themselves produced and their attitude toward the accents under study. As for the audio texts, the order of presenting the three accents to the subjects was counterbalanced in order to control the order effect. The data on audio materials were analyzed for comprehensibility, accentedness, intelligibility and acceptability. Regarding comprehensibility, American accent was the most comprehensible (85%). Considering accentedness, intelligibility and acceptability, the participants found American accent the least accented (70%), the most intelligible 80% and the most acceptable (95%). In the interviews, students' accents were closer to the American accent. 85 percent of the participants used American accent in their conversational exchanges. Those with British and Australian accents formed 10% and 5% respectively. Regarding attitude, also, the participants mostly (90%) preferred American accent over the British or Australian accents. Students' tendency to adapt American accent more openly is mainly rooted in a mentality that American accent is easiest for the brain to digest.

Keywords: English Language Accents; Foreign Language Learners

INTRODUCTION

Teaching a foreign language pronunciation and accent are of special significance. It takes time and effort for EFL learners to develop a suitable accent. Added to these is the attitude of the learners toward the acquisition of a particular accent. Positive attitude can significantly facilitate the acquisition of a specific native accent. Meanwhile, the accent that the EFL learners acquire, to Pilus (p. 143), can serve as a model for pronunciation. As such, learners are expected to be "… provided with the opportunities to attain a native-like accent if they have the ability to do so while at the same time given the freedom to approximate accordingly"[1]. More detailed reviews of previous scientific research on accent have been shown by many other researchers[2-5].

The acquisition of a suitable accent is of special importance for EFL learners. Many students prefer to learn English with a suitable accent, but the question is, among numerous native accents such as the British, American or Australian accents, which one is more appealing for learners. As such, this experiment was conducted to understand

which English accent (i.e. American, British or Australian accents) would be more appealing, and hence easier for Farsi speakers to adapt. To investigate this question, serving as the main objective of the study, three steps were performed by the participants which contained three types of activities as follows: (I) accent comprehension (i.e., listening to and identifying the correct accent broadcast from audio-texts); (II) accent production (i.e., taking part in an oral interview to produce their own accents); and (III) accent preference (i.e., expressing their attitudes toward the accent which was easier to adapt).

Research Hypothesis

Among numerous native accents in English language, Iranian EFL learners would do better in imitating American English.

METHODS

Subjects

30 medical students, all female, took part in the study. They were freshmen, medical students at Shahid Beheshti University of Medical Sciences in Tehran. Their age group ranged from 19 to 22. They spoke Farsi, as their native language. Some of them, as bilingual speakers, used Turkish language at home as well. They had developed their English at primary or high school, while some of them had attended private institutions as well.

Tasks

The participants implemented three different activities: (a) listened to audio texts in three accents, and then completed the related questions known as "background questions". (b) took part in an oral interview with the researchers and (c) completed an attitude questionnaire. The audio listening, with the audio texts broadcast in three different accents, examined the participants' comprehension of the accents that they listened to. The oral interview examined the type of accent that the participants themselves produced. The questionnaire investigated the participants' attitude toward the accents under study.

Background Questions

The background questions were taken from Ballard's [6] article, which was available on internet. They used Likert scale, ranging from 1 to 9. The questions targeted students' recognition of a set of audio materials spoken by an English native speaker in three different accents. They were to identify the participants' preferred and more understood accent when listened to the audio materials. There were a total of four questions targeting EFL learners' recognition of the audio materials in terms of (I) comprehensibility, (II) accentedness, (III) intelligibility, and (IIII) acceptability.

The Audio Materials

The audio materials called "Arthur the Rat" and "The Rainbow Passage" were taken from the internet[7], in which their sound samples were available in MP3 and WAV format in seven different accents. However, considering the study's requirements, just three accents for the stories (the British, American and Australian accents) were downloaded. In terms of difficulty, they were of suitable level and the students did not have serious problems listening to them. The order of presenting the three accents to the subjects was counterbalanced to avoid the order effect. It took an average of six minutes for each story to broadcast. The participants listened to the story just once and then answered the background questions that followed.

The Interview

The interview was a verbal exchange between the researchers and each individual student who took part in the study. The questions raised by the interviewer, in a structured way, dealt with different everyday issues (very basic topics). The interviews were recorded and then transcribed in normal orthography for data analysis. The interviews lasted 5-10 minutes. The experiment was carried out in a casual and psychologically relaxed atmosphere. Therefore students in a relaxed environment had more self-confidence and were not shy or embarrassed to talk in a foreign language, since many of them said they get anxious talking in front of their friends.

The Attitude Questionnaire

The attitude questionnaire (taken from Tokumoto and Shibata) was composed of 12

questions developed to measure student's attitude toward English accents and pronunciation[8]. The students were asked to identify the level of their accents by circling the most appropriate response, based on a six point Likert scale. The questionnaire was intended to measure student's impression on their own accents.

Procedure

The participants met in a spacious class in their Medical School to complete the study. They collectively answered the "attitude questionnaire" in a single session. The questionnaire was administered quite routinely.

As for the oral "interview", the researcher had already arranged with the students to take part individually at their convenience. The participants were already informed about the nature and aim of each interview. The students participated in the interview with their own consent. The interviews lasted the average of eight minutes. They were carried out in private sessions with just the interviewee and the interviewer taking part, in which non-native English speakers were comfortable talking in English, even those who

were not professional in public speaking. The interviews were composed of a number of verbal exchanges which took place between the researchers and the participant. They started with greetings and warm-up questions, followed by topics of everyday encounters. All the interviews were recorded for the upcoming transcriptions and analyses. The recording device was a small, high quality digital voice recorder device (Sony UX543 with Built-in USB) positioned somewhere away from the interviewee to avoid attention distraction.

Regarding the "audio materials", the participants listened to the stories (Arthur the Rat and The Rainbow Passage) just once and then answered the background questions which were distributed among them before the audio broadcasting. The order of taking part and answering the audio materials was balanced by adopting there levels of administration and with 10 participants per level. Table 1 is the administration order for subjecting the participants to audio-materials in three different accents.

Table1. Order of administering the audio materials in three different accents

Order Participants	First	Second	Third
Group 1	British	Australian	American
Group 2	American	British	Australian
Group 3	Australian	American	British

As table 1 indicates, the participants had to be subjected to three different accents. The ordinal position of administration of these three accents, however, might cause concern about carry-over effects. The participants might get tired when responding to the last audio materials. So to account for this problem, the researchers randomly divided the participants into three groups, each with 10 subjects. Each group was then randomly assigned to one of the three orders of accents. This way each accent had an equal chance of appearing at the beginning, in the middle or in the final position, in terms of their order of administration.

Data Analysis and Results

The scores were standardized by converting them to new figures, i.e., of 100. Then a number of statistical computations were carried out to analyze the data. The data on audio materials were computed for comprehensibility, accentedness, intelligibility, and acceptability. Regarding comprehensibility, American accent was the most comprehensible (85%). Considering accentedness, intelligibility and acceptability, the participants found American accent the least accented (70%), the most intelligible 80% and the most understandable (95%) (Figure 1, below).
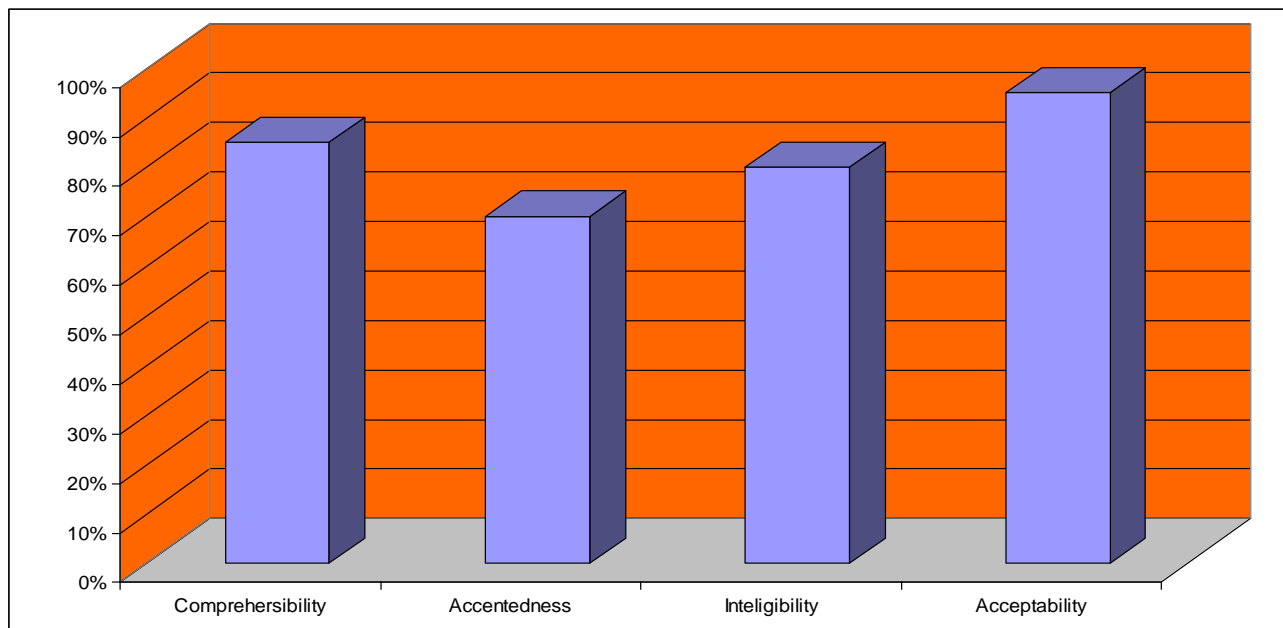
Figure 1. The audio analysis toward American accent

In the interviews, also, students' accents were closer to the American accent. 85% of the participants used American accent in their conversational exchanges. Those with British and Australian accents formed 10% and 5% respectively (Figure 2, below).
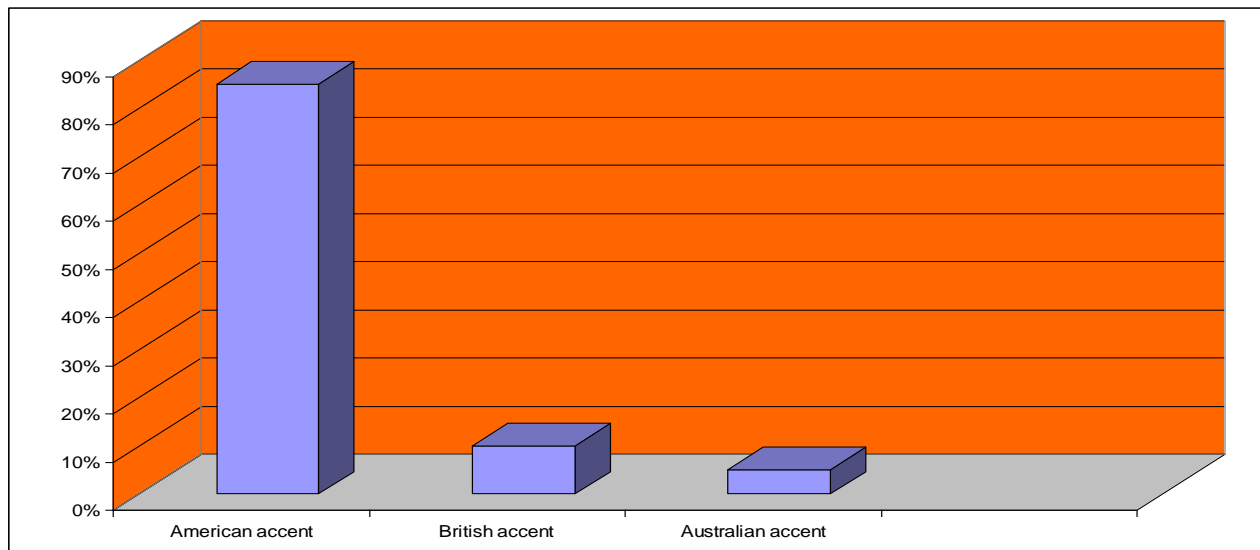

Figure 2. Iranian conversational accent

Regarding attitude, also, the participants mostly (90%) were more comfortable with American accent than the British or Australian accents (Figure 3, below).
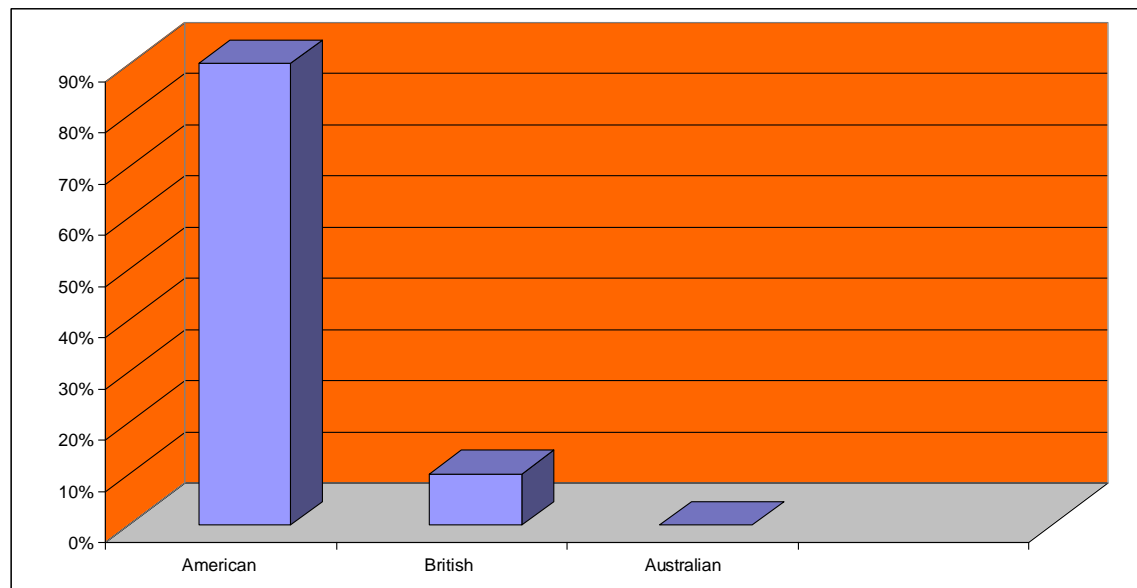
Figure 3. The Attitude Questionnaire for students' accent

DISCUSSION

The English language, like any other languages, benefits from numerous native speaker accents. With the help of new technologies, EFL learners have easy access to nearly all such accents, but the question is which particular accent they can perform better and why. According to the result of this study, we indicated, choice of a particular accent, like the language itself, is not accidental; rather, it is determined by numerous factors among which learners' attitude plays the most significant role. Positive attitude will provide the right motive for the learners to choose that accent for oral communication. There are many studies in the literature with results similar to ours. Korean adult EFL learners, for example, considered American English as their preferred accent. They had easy access to different accents of English but preferred to learn the American accent[9, 10]. To Chang, English fluency means American English for many Koreans[11]. To Gibb, there was a strong preference for American English which was rooted in EFL/ESL learners' greater job opportunity in English speaking

countries[12]. It is quite reasonable, since if a person speaks English with a strong accent, people would have a hard time to realize the words he/she says. It is similar for any other language as well. In Scales et al. [13], most of the learners preferred a native-like American accent, although just 29% were able to identify the accent. In Dalton-Puffer et al., there was a strong tendency for North American English, which could have been shaped by students' familiarity with American English[14].

In another research, 54% of the Brazilian participants viewed the American English more desirable[15]. Also, they mostly (80%) considered the American English the most suitable variety in fulfilling their needs, because they thought they were more likely to be exposed to English accent in their upcoming encounters.

In our study, the participants noted that American accent was easier to speak than the two other accents. Practically, they manifested the best performance in American accent. Indeed, this positive attitude could have been rooted in numerous socio-economic status of the preferred accent.

Students' tendency to adapt American accent more openly could additionally be due to the fact that this accent is mostly listened to in movies and news; therefore, it is easiest for the brain to digest.

As we travel abroad, there is a need to communicate with people to get around. As a matter of fact, the majority of people communicate in English, because it is the language most people know at least some. The important issue in our experiment was to recognize which accent would be easier for non-native speakers to talk. This way they would be able to speak English in a correct and understandable way. When those with suitable command of English travel abroad, they would be able to communicate without any problem with foreigners and get their works done with no need of translator.

There are many people who are fluent in English and they know correct grammar. On the other hand, they would never be able to get their desirable jobs. The reason is that, other people would have hard time to understand what they say, even if they have the knowledge of English. Therefore, the correct accent for people makes them more desirable, because the listeners, instead of spending time to understand the person, focus on their works.

There are many conferences which are held for scientists, engineers, medical doctors etc., where they can take part, benefit from and give oral presentations, if they talk with the right accent. Therefore, it is quite important to mention the accent topic is entirely different from, grammar, pronunciation, and word use.

CONCLUSION

Mastering an accent is an inevitable reality for EFL learners, as they have to pick up one particular accent to communicate. As such, if language learners are exposed to the accent of their choice, they are expected to pick it up more successfully. The reason is that their preferred choice is more likely to be with their personal interest which is immensely important in uplifting their motivation. Enthusiasm, in turn, is the main requirement for success in any academic endeavor, particularly in learning a certain language and accent. An accent, at the same time, forms one of the main subcategories of affective variables which have proved to be the most important factors in learning a second or foreign language. By paying attention to the students' favorite accent, we are indeed enhancing their motivation, serving as the main ingredient of affective variables. The proof for such claims is that in our study, the participants were more comfortable and positive about the acquisition of the American accent; this, in turn, helped them to acquire it more successfully than either the British or Australian accent.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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