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Recognising English accents in the community: Omani students' accent preferences and perceptions of nativeness

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Previous research has revealed that although EFL students may claim to prefer British/US accents they often have difficulty identifying them, especially when such accents may differ from 'standard' accents presented in ELT materials. In the Gulf, English is widely used as a lingua franca or as a second language by the large expatriate workforce. Particular accents in English characteristic for L1 speakers of Arabic or South Asian languages are commonly heard in the education and service sectors. This study investigates whether Omani university students are able to distinguish between native English speaker (NES) and non-native English speaker NNES EFL teachers' accents commonly heard in their educational context and their evaluations of these accents as pedagogical models. Specifically, the study seeks to ascertain whether a relationship exists between students' assumptions regarding the NES status of an EFL teacher and their evaluations of the teacher's accent as a suitable model for pronunciation. Results show that, in most cases, a moderate to strong correlation exists between these two variables, particularly among students who claim that having a NES teacher is desirable for the purpose of improving pronunciation.

Keywords: English accents; English pronunciation; language attitudes; Gulf countries; lingua franca

Introduction

This study examines Omani students' ability to recognise accents commonly heard in their educational context. It seeks to uncover whether a relationship exists between assumptions regarding a speaker's native English speaker (NES) status and students' judgement of the speaker's accent. Oman offers a particularly rich sociolinguistic environment in which to study language attitudes. After four decades of unprecedented socioeconomic development, Oman possesses a sizeable, ethnically and linguistically diverse expatriate population (currently estimated to be over 40%, EIU 2013). Young Omanis are raised in a society permeated by foreign workers, from the household maid, street retailers and construction workers, to health and education sector employees. The strong presence of languages other than Arabic, especially English and South Asian languages, in large urban centres in particular, has led to assertions that Arabic is 'losing ground', a phenomenon also observed in other Gulf states (Abdul-Jawad and Radwan 2011; Al-Issa and Dahan 2011; Badry 2011; Holes 2011; Kapiszewski 2007). With a preference in recent decades for South Asian workers, the population of South Asian migrant workers in Oman (and other Gulf states) is larger now than at any time in history

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(Jain 2003; Kapiszewski 2007). While the vast majority of expatriate workers occupy lower social and professional strata, educated, English-speaking South Asians, particularly Indians, constitute a sizable presence in certain sectors such as education, hospitality, business and health (Jain 2003). The recruitment of Filipino workers, while more recent, has become a growing alternative source of labour in the service sectors (Willoughby 2006).

Since the first university opened in 1986, the use of English as the medium of instruction has prevailed in Oman's tertiary education sector (Abdul-Jawad and Radwan 2011). Most departments in the country's public and private universities and colleges are staffed predominantly by foreign teaching staff, a significant percentage of which hail from countries in the neighbouring region: the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), South Asia, South-east Asia and Africa. As a result, accents typical for English speakers from countries in these regions are likely to be the most common varieties students are exposed to during their studies. Teachers from MENA countries have also traditionally had a strong presence in the Omani school system, and the current generation of students enrolled in tertiary studies is highly likely to have been taught English by schoolteachers from other Arabic-speaking countries (Al-Issa and Al-Bulushi 2012; Al Shmeli 2009).

The extent to which the country's tertiary institutions are reliant on English-speaking instructors from the surrounding region is not commonly acknowledged in the literature. Ali (2009, 36), for instance, incorrectly asserts that 'English teachers from the Outer and Expanding Circles have never filled teaching positions in well-established private schools, colleges and universities in the GCC [Gulf Cooperation Council]'. In Oman, however, instructors from traditional Anglophone countries frequently constitute a minority in university English Departments. Further, unlike Gulf countries such as the United Arab Emirates where, according to Syed (2003), the midlevel administration of educational institutions is largely in the hands of expatriates and tertiary-level English teaching is undertaken predominantly by 'inner circle' NESTs, in Oman, the administrative and management positions are predominantly filled by Omanis (Al Shmeli 2009) in reflection of the country's Omanisation policy¹ (Al-Hamadi, Budhwar, and Shipton 2007).

Throughout the Gulf Region, however, the NES and non-native English speaker (NNES) binary retains strong currency (Ali 2009; Karmani 2005) and qualified English language teachers are routinely assigned a label on the basis of nationality, although from a sociolinguistic perspective such terms have been demonstrated to be subjective and to lack explanatory power (Brutt-Griffler and Samimy 2001; Davies 1991, 2003; Medgyes 1992). When hiring foreign language instructors (for English but also German or French), many institutions advertise specifically for 'native speakers'. In addition to explicit signposting in job advertisements, assumptions regarding the superiority of the native English speaker teacher (NEST) is often implicit in decisions made by institutional gatekeepers regarding work allocation, the extension of contracts and remuneration levels and may adversely impact the career prospects of those categorised as non-native English speaker teachers (NNESTs). Educational institutions competing for student enrolment claim that hiring practices favouring NESTs are partly reflective of 'market demand' (i.e. students' expectation that they will be taught by NESs from traditional Anglophone countries).

Numerous empirical studies have highlighted the unequal standing of qualified NESTs and NNESTs in the labour market in particular regions of the world (Jeon and Lee 2006; Watson-Todd and Pojanapunya 2009; Kubota 1998) and the importance of accent during the teaching careers of NNESTs (Callahan 2006; Clark and Paran 2007; Hertel and Sunderman 2009; Lasagabaster and Sierra 2002, 2005; Mahboob et al. 2004). In the

context of Gulf countries such as Oman, both during the recruitment process and once hired, having or cultivating a native-sounding accent (i.e. one approximating a perceived British or US 'standard') is perceived by NNESTs as constituting a valuable professional asset (Buckingham [under review](#)). This is not unusual; NNESTs in European contexts have also acknowledged the importance of approximating a NES accent (Jenkins [2005](#); Sifakis and Sougari [2005](#)). As many tertiary institutions in the Gulf are private establishments reliant on fee-paying students, attempts to recruit NESTs are likely to reflect to a certain extent the administrations' perceptions of student preferences.

EFL students in other cultural contexts have been found to profess preferences for NES teachers particularly for speaking practice or pronunciation-focused classroom activities in the belief that these teachers are better able to model oral fluency and 'correct' pronunciation (Árva and Medgyes [2000](#); Callahan [2006](#); Lasagabaster and Sierra [2002](#); Ma [2012](#); Medgyes [1992](#)). Beyond surveying students' declared preferences, few studies have inquired into students' ability to distinguish between NES and NNEST pronunciation or have attempted to identify whether students who claim to prefer NES pronunciation, actually display such preferences in practice. In the Gulf context, despite frequent assumptions that students favour NESTs from traditional Anglophone countries (Ali [2009](#); Al-Issa and Dahan [2011](#)), no systematic survey of students' preferences has been undertaken.

This study enquires into the extent to which Omani students can distinguish between NES and NNEST accents common to their immediate educational environment from audio cues, and the importance they place on acquiring a particular accent as a learning goal. It further seeks to ascertain whether students who claim to prefer a NEST as a pronunciation model actually rate teachers perceived to be NESTs more highly in practice.

This study addresses the following research questions:

- (1) How successful are students at identifying NES (British or US) accents from audio cues?
- (2) Will students rate more positively the pronunciation of teachers they believe to be NESs if they believe it is desirable to have a NEST to improve pronunciation?

Additional questions concerning students' beliefs and learning goals with respect to pronunciation teaching and accents were also included in the data collection instrument to provide greater contextual information relating to university students in this Gulf Arab context.

Perceptions of accent

An extensive body of research dating from early studies using the matched guise technique (e.g. Cargile et al. [1994](#); Lambert, Anisfeld, and Yeni-Kosmshian [1965](#)) has consistently shown that listener's perceptions of accents are influenced by extralinguistic information. Factors such as the speaker's nationality or L1 background may mediate listeners' perception of certain phonemes and influence their judgement of the speaker's accent; this has been shown to be true even when the speaker and listener share the same language or dialect (Hay, Nolan, and Drager [2006](#); Hu and Lindemann [2009](#); Niedzielski [1999](#)).

The relative familiarity of an accent may affect how it is judged. Listeners may reveal a preference for their own accent and give lower ratings to 'foreign-sounding' accents (Gill [1994](#)). Speaking test raters may also be influenced by the test taker's L1 and may

assign more positive ratings if they shared the test taker's L1 as a second or heritage language (Winke, Gass, and Myford 2012; Winke and Gass 2012).

Social biases clearly intervene in the perception of accents (Lindemann and Subtirelu 2013). Listeners may assign lower ratings to their own accent vis-à-vis other accents considered to hold greater social prestige (Bayard et al. 2001). Standard British or US accents are often perceived to be more 'correct' or more prestigious in EFL contexts, due in part to their prevalence in many commercial teaching materials and the media (Butler 2007; Dalton-Puffer, Kaltenboeck, and Smit 1997; Luk 1998). Listeners may also rate their own NNES accent more highly than other NNES, however, particularly in terms of solidarity (Chiba, Matsuura, and Yamamoto 1995; McKenzie 2008; Sasayama 2013). The perceived attractiveness of a given speaker's accent may depend on information available to the listener regarding nationality, however. Despite declaring a particular accent to be desirable, listeners may not necessarily assign higher ratings to speakers with this accent unless previously informed of the speaker's nationality (Buckingham 2014; Yook and Lindemann 2013).

In countries such as Malaysia, India or Pakistan where English has a strong institutionalised status and may be a native language to some sectors of the population, confidence in and acceptance of localised pronunciation norms may be strong (Timmis 2002; Tokumoto and Shibata 2011). In many countries, however, NNESs and EFL learners often cite a NES accent (with an idealised model of British or US English used as the benchmark) as being a desirable learning goal (Li 2009; Timmis 2002) and both learners and teachers may consider NES accents to be clearer and more correct (Evans and Imai 2011; Jenkins 2005; Li 2009; Sifakis and Sougari 2005; Tang 1997; Tokumoto and Shibata 2011).

While English language learners may claim to prefer (or even aspire to) NES English accents, they are frequently unable to distinguish these from NNES accents (Kelch and Santana-Williamson 2002; Scales et al. 2006; Timmis 2002). The natural 'messiness' and dynamism of spontaneous speech contrasts with the often norm-oriented style of written language with which learners may be more familiar, and traces of regional or non-standard accent may not correspond to listeners' idealisation of NS speech as 'perfect' or 'correct' (Yook and Lindeman 2013). Aside from issues concerning the relative appropriateness of exocentric pronunciation models, evidence from second-language acquisition research (Abrahamsson and Hyldenstam 2009; Flege, Munro, and MacKay 1995; Piske, MacKay, and Flege 2001) has pointed to maturational constraints which render NES-like pronunciation (i.e. using an exocentric norm such as a British or US accent) an unrealistic goal for most adult second-language learners.

Due to the extensive use of English as a lingua franca in Oman (and the wider region), Omani students are likely to have had relatively frequent exposure to English spoken by expatriates from certain Asian countries and the MENA region and, owing to familiarity, may rate favourably speakers of, for instance, South Asian origin if presented only with an auditory cue. As Asian expatriate workers (South Asians, in particular) often occupy low-skilled positions (Jain 2003; Kapiszewski 2007), social stigma might influence students' ratings if auditory input were accompanied by information concerning the speaker's nationality and physiognomy (Lippi-Green 2012; Niedzielski 1999; Rubin 1992); that is, teachers who look South Asian may be perceived to be speaking with a strong 'Indian' accent, while teachers who fulfil student expectations regarding the typical appearance of an English NES (as influenced by mainstream media and imported EFL course books) may be rated more favourably.

As previously discussed, a teacher's nationality plays an important role in hiring decisions for certain EFL teaching positions at tertiary institutions in Oman. This appears to be particularly so at foundation institutes (a university centre at which students complete an intensive English language training programme before beginning their studies), where preference is often given to 'inner circle'² nationalities on the assumption that they represent better models of the spoken language and possess greater 'market value', that is, students prefer teachers from these countries. It is unclear, however, whether students are able to identify 'inner circle' English accents (based on audio cues), and whether these accents are indeed preferred if students are not previously informed of the speaker's nationality. This study thus contributes to the debate on pronunciation models in a context where extensive use of made of English as a lingua franca.

Methods

The context of this study

This study took place within the Department of Foreign Languages at one of the country's largest private universities. The department is tasked with providing three undergraduate English language courses mandatory for students from all majors. For this study, I administered a questionnaire and listening exercise to students in the course English 2, a general English course aimed at improving students' ability across the four skills that students may take at any time during their degree programme from their second to their fourth year of study. In the semester in which the study was undertaken, the course had nine sections (with between 20 and 48 students in each), with a total enrolment of 387 students. Mirroring approximately the array of nationalities in the department, the teachers of this course in this particular semester were from the following countries: the Bangladesh (1), Britain (1), India (2), Iraq (1), Jordan (1), Sudan (1) and USA (2).

The students who completed the questionnaire were all native speakers of Omani Arabic, aged between 20 and 26 years (see Table 1). Approximately one-third of the students were English language majors (that is, they were undertaking a Bachelor's in English Education or Arabic/English Translation). This group of students had higher TOEFL scores³ (55% had a score of 450 or above, compared with 38% of non-English language majors). The stark gender imbalance is reflective of the gender distribution at this university (females comprise over 85% of student enrolment⁴); as gender differences were not a focus of this study, this imbalance is not relevant. An initial exploratory listening activity had been undertaken with this group of students a month prior to this. While the procedure was similar, the range of speakers comprised eight different nationalities and the listening text and task differed. This initial exposure to this activity type facilitated the implementation of this exercise.

Table 1. Students' profile ($N = 349$).

Gender			
Female	309 (88.5%)		
Male	40 (11.5%)		
English major			
Yes	117 (33.5%)		
No	232 (66.5%)		
'In-house'	400–449	450–479	Above 480
TOEFL score	198 (56.7%)	126 (36.1%)	25 (7.2%)

Procedures

With the help of a recording technician, I prepared recordings of 10 different speakers reading a text taken from a recently published intermediate-level course book for English language teaching; a text similar to what students are likely to have heard while attending courses in the foundation institute and during English 1 and 2. The recordings were made using professional equipment in a sound-treated room designed for such purposes; each recording lasted between 114 and 136 seconds.

The selection of speakers was undertaken in two stages. The final study required a maximum of eight speakers (more would have risked listener fatigue), but a higher number was initially recorded in order to eliminate recordings if the accent was judged difficult to identify or if voices were judged as ‘less suitable’ for the EFL classroom. The 10 speakers were recorded, all employed by the university were of the following nationalities: Bangladesh, Britain, India, Oman, Pakistan, the Philippines, and the USA. All were qualified EFL teachers, excepting two who were qualified teachers in the computer science and nursing departments. These were included as additional examples of Indian and Filipino speakers.

The suitability of the selection of voices and the quality of the recordings were verified by asking seven members of the Department of Foreign Languages (all of whom possessed postgraduate qualifications in English language and linguistics) to complete a questionnaire requesting them to identify each speaker’s origin (region or country) and strength of accent (relative to the respective country of origin), and their views regarding the suitability of each speaker’s voice and accent for the Omani EFL classroom. These faculty members had all taught English in the Gulf for between three and 16 years and were thus very familiar with the multinational and multilingual nature of the teaching community in this region. On the basis of their answers, two recordings were eliminated from the study: the voice quality of one speaker was perceived to be quite different and the clarity of one recording was less satisfactory. According to these results, a final selection of eight speakers (four males and four females) was made. These were identifiable as coming from a particular region or country and possessed voices that were not judged as having an unusual quality and were considered ‘suitable for an EFL classroom’. Two of the eight teachers selected self-identified as NESTs and six self-identified as NNESTs; for these, English was their second or third language (see [Table 2](#)). While the initial goal was to obtain ‘paired’ male and female speakers from each country represented, a suitable ‘pair’ was not always available for all nationalities, resulting in a ‘South Asian’ and a ‘British/US NES’ pair.

While this initial ‘peer review’ of recordings was intended to ensure a degree of comparability among the speakers selected (i.e. all speakers exhibited features which revealed their L1 origin, although these same features were not judged to be a ‘strong’ feature of their pronunciation), some speakers were inevitably judged as having a

Table 2. Speakers’ origin and L1.

Females	Males
USA (California), English	Britain (Cornwall), English
Oman (Al-Dakhliya), Arabic	Pakistan (Lahore), Urdu
Philippines (Luzon), Ilocano/Tagalog	Philippines (Luzon), Ilocano/Tagalog
India (Madras), Tamil	Oman (Al-Dakhliya), Arabic

somewhat more perceptible accent than others. For instance, the British speaker had a regional accent from south-west England; this was evidenced by his mild rhotic pronunciation and his tendency to pronounce /aʊ/ in contexts such as 'about' as /əʊ/. The Indian female speaker tended to pronounce /əʊ/ in contexts such as 'moment' as /o/, avoided pronouncing /w/ in 'wolf' and tended to stress unstressed syllables in multisyllabic words, such as 'experi'menting'. The Omani female produced a trilled /r/ in post-consonantal contexts such as 'countries', an unrounded close-mid central vowel /ɘ:/ in 'university' instead of /e/, and a close mid-front vowel /e/ in 'manage' instead of /æ/. Little reduction of unstressed vowels was also noted.

Data collection from the students consisted of a questionnaire designed to elicit biographical information, their opinions regarding the importance of pronunciation and NESTs. Students were required to circle the appropriate response to these questions. The listening exercise task consisted of two prompts: (1) 'Is this teacher a native speaker?' (2) 'This teacher would be a good model for English pronunciation'. Students were required to circle their response on a five-item Likert scale. For question (1), the items were 5 = 'yes' 4 = 'probably', 3 = 'probably not' and 2 = 'no'; 1 = 'don't know' was placed on the left to counter the tendency to select this as the middle option. For question (2), the responses were 5 = 'strongly agree', 4 = 'mostly agree', 3 = 'mostly disagree', 2 = 'strongly disagree' and 1 = 'don't know'.

An Arabic NS within the department translated the questionnaire into Arabic, and this text was checked by a second NS of Arabic in the department for accuracy. I administered the questionnaire and listening exercise in usual class time over a three-week period in December 2012, adhering to the same procedure for each class. Before the data collection began, an Arabic NS informed the students in Arabic about the general goals of the study and the voluntary and anonymous nature of their participation. Students first completed the sheet requesting biographical data and general views on English pronunciation. They subsequently read the text used for the recording, which was provided in both English and Arabic (a translation). I then asked students to read the questions comprising the listening test and informed them they would answer these same questions for each of the eight speakers they heard. After playing each recording, I paused the CD to allow all students to complete the corresponding section. Upon reaching the end, the first minute of each recording was repeated to enable students to review their answers. In each class, the sequence of the four speakers for each gender and the order of the gender groups were varied to counter order effects. A total of 368 questionnaires were collected; 19 were incomplete and were discarded, leaving a total of 349.

Results

In this section, I will first present students' views on the importance of improving their pronunciation before addressing the two principal research questions. As can be seen from [Table 3](#), a clear majority of students aspires to NES pronunciation with a British or US accent (68%), and a larger majority believes that a NEST is desirable in order to improve their accent (83%). A crosstab analysis revealed that English language majors placed a slightly higher importance in having a NEST (89%) than non-English language majors (81%). Analogously, a slightly larger majority of English language majors (74%) considered 'native-speaker' pronunciation as constituting their learning goal than students from other majors (65%).

Students in this study strongly believe in the desirability of a NEST as a pronunciation model regardless of their personal pronunciation learning goals. A crosstab analysis

Table 3. Students' views on pronunciation.

<i>Pronunciation learning goal</i>	
(1) Good pronunciation is not very important for me	1 (0.3%)
(2) I will be satisfied if I have good, clear pronunciation of English with an Arab accent	110 (31.5%)
(3) I want to sound like a native speaker with a British or US accent	238 (68.2%)
<i>If students want to improve their pronunciation, they should have a native speaker teacher</i>	
Yes	291 (83.4%)
No	38 (10.9%)
Do not know	20 (5.7%)

revealed that 89% of students who aspired to NES pronunciation believed that a NEST was desirable to improve their pronunciation, while 73% of students who considered that speaking English clearly with an Arab accent to be their learning goal also considered a NEST desirable (compared with 21% who did not agree that a NES teacher was necessary).

The first research question enquired into students' ability to identify NES British or US accents. The overall results are shown in Table 4. In the left-hand column, 'NES status' and 'pronunciation' refer to the two prompts provided on the questionnaire (as explained in the previous section). While mean scores are often not calculated in the case of ordinal data from Likert scales, they are used in such cases in some disciplines due to

Table 4. Perceptions of speaker's NES status and accent.

Speaker	Mean	SD
<i>USA (f)</i>		
NES status	4.44	1.19
Pronunciation	4.16	1.48
<i>Oman (f)</i>		
NES status	2.12	0.50
Pronunciation	2.03	0.74
<i>Philippines (f)</i>		
NES status	3.66	1.39
Pronunciation	3.14	1.42
<i>India (f)</i>		
NES status	3.21	1.27
Pronunciation	3.00	1.46
<i>Britain (m)</i>		
NES status	3.74	1.34
Pronunciation	3.33	1.40
<i>Pakistan (m)</i>		
NES status	3.46	1.23
Pronunciation	3.26	1.25
<i>Philippines (m)</i>		
NES status	3.82	1.33
Pronunciation	3.08	1.39
<i>Oman (m)</i>		
NES status	3.40	1.42
Pronunciation	3.11	1.43

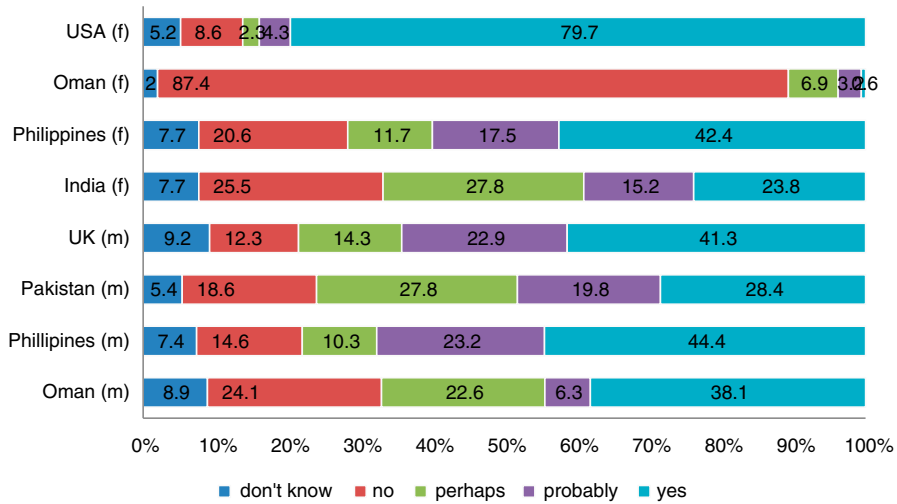


Figure 1. NES status: 'Is this teacher a native speaker?'

the ease with which tendencies may be illustrated (Dawes 2008). Figures 1 and 2 display the proportion of responses for each Likert item for each question.

Students in this study expressed greatest confidence in identifying the NES status of the US speaker and also assigned this speaker the strongest ratings over all as a model for pronunciation. Considerably less confidence was expressed with regard to the British speaker's NES status and appropriateness as a model for pronunciation in the classroom. This speaker's ratings appear similar to those of the two Filipino teachers. The greatest difference in evaluations of the paired speakers appears in the case of the Omani speakers. While most students correctly identified the NNES status of the female speaker, the Omani male speaker, previously judged during the speaker selection as possessing a less-salient Arabic accent in English, was less easily recognisable as a NNES. Evaluations

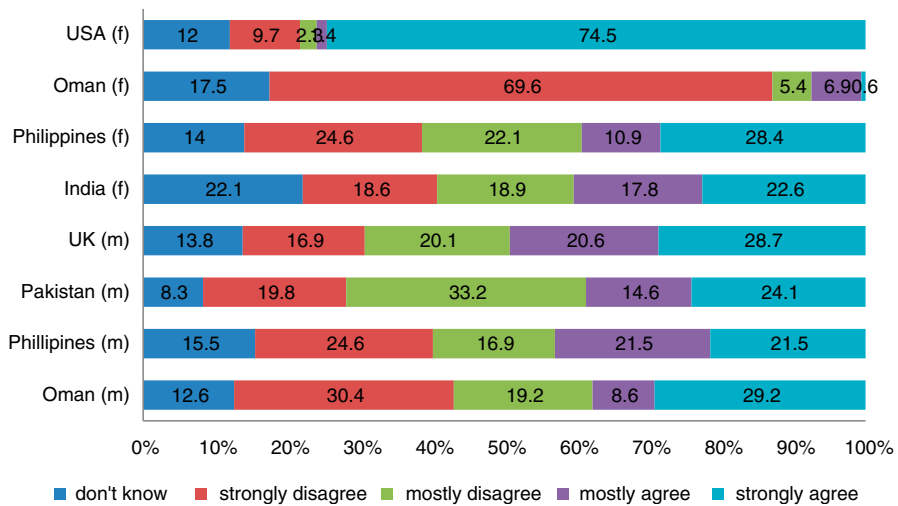


Figure 2. 'This teacher would be a good model for English pronunciation'.

of these speakers' pronunciation revealed that students were less accepting of the female speaker's more-accented speech. Students appeared undecided on the NES status of the South Asian speakers and, despite some ambivalence, were mostly accepting of their accents as suitable pronunciation models.

The second research question sought to identify whether students who consider a NES teacher desirable for the purposes of improving pronunciation assign higher ratings to the pronunciation of teachers they believe to be NESs. That is, it addressed whether a relationship exists between students' levels of confidence in the speaker's NES status and their ratings of the speaker's pronunciation as a good model. For this analysis, the data were divided into two groups; Group 1 consisted of students who responded positively to the statement 'if students want to improve their pronunciation, they should have a native speaker teacher', while Group 2 consisted of students whose response to this statement was negative or 'don't know'. A Spearman's rho data analysis of each group revealed, in most cases, a moderate correlation between students' rating of the speakers' NES status and confidence in the speaker as a model of pronunciation in both groups, with an overall stronger correlation for group 1 (see Table 5). That is, it appears that students in this study tended to rate a speakers pronunciation more favourably if they believed the speaker to be a NES. Within this data-set, the correlation was strongest for the male Omani ($r_s[291] = .81, p < .001$) and Pakistani ($r_s[291] = .74, p < .001$) speakers. In the case of these two speakers, squaring the correlation coefficients indicated that 66% and 55% of the variance in the ratings of pronunciation can be explained by students' perception of these speakers as NESs. The findings were not consistent, however. The strength of the correlation was overall weaker in the case of the four female speakers and no significant relationship was found between these variables for the female Omani speaker ($r_s[291] = .01, p > .05$). That is, students' evaluation of her pronunciation was unrelated to their perceptions of her NES status.

For the students in Group 2, the correlation between these two variables was, in most cases, weaker. This was particularly so for the female US and Omani speakers, that is, the relationship between the students' evaluation of the speakers as models for pronunciation and their estimation of their NES status was only weakly correlated. While the two variables were again most strongly correlated in the case of the male Omani speaker ($r_s[58] = .69, p < .001$), the relationship was again weaker than in the case of Group 1. Nevertheless, just under 50% of the cases of variance in the ratings of pronunciation can be explained by students' perception of this speaker as NES. The correlation between the two variables was slightly stronger, however, in the case of the male British speaker; that is, students in Group 2 appeared slightly more likely to assign him higher ratings as a model for pronunciation if they believed him to be a NES.

Table 5. Correlation between evaluation of NES status and pronunciation.

	USA (f)	Oman (f)	Phil. (f)	India (f)	Brit. (m)	Pak. (m)	Phil. (m)	Oman (m)
<i>Group 1 (N = 291)</i>								
rho	.47	.01	.47	.51	.49	.74	.57	.81
Sig.	.00	.89	.00	.00	.00	.00	.00	.00
R	22%	0%	22%	26%	24%	55%	32%	66%
<i>Group 2 (N = 58)</i>								
rho	.31	.31	.46	.36	.56	.49	.49	.69
Sig.	.02	.02	.00	.01	.00	.00	.00	.00
R	10%	10%	21%	13%	31%	24%	24%	48%

Discussion

Omani students are generally able to distinguish a NES accent when it reflects the standard they are likely to be familiar with from imported ELT materials; this was the case for the standard US-accented speaker who received highest overall ratings. Further, a crosstab analysis shows that this accent tends to be perceived as an attractive model even when students were unsure of the speaker's origin. The lower rating of the British speaker, however, suggests students appear less accepting of NES accents displaying regional variation, expecting perhaps NESs to conform to a 'neutral' standard to which they are accustomed from commercial ELT materials.

According to the results from this study, NNES accents commonly heard in students' educational context (Arab, South Asian and Filipino) may often be perceived as NES accents and may be judged as positively as a regional NES accent. The strength of the accent appears to be an important factor, however; speakers with stronger accents typical for their L1 background, in this case the Omani female, may receive lower ratings when judged as a potential model for English pronunciation. Whether gender contributed to the disparity in the ratings of the male and female Omani speakers is difficult to deduce, although the apparent disapproval of the more strongly accented female speaker echoes findings in other cultural contexts (Kraut and Wulff 2013; Loureiro-Rodriguez, Boggess, and Goldsmith 2013). From these contrasting findings, one might cautiously conclude that despite their declared preference for NES teachers, students are generally positively disposed to accents commonly found within their own educational context, provided the teacher is not perceived to have a 'strong' accent. As a corollary, while most students claim to place importance on having a NEST to improve their pronunciation, they are likely to be accepting of such NNESTs as classroom models for pronunciation in practice.

To a certain extent, assumptions regarding a speaker's NES-status appear to mediate students' evaluation of the speaker's accent. Students tended to consider NNES accents in this study to be good pedagogical models when they (incorrectly) judged the speakers to be NESs. This is comparable to results obtained by Kelch and Santana-Williamson (2002), who found that ESL students in Canada rated a teacher's competence more highly when the teacher was judged to be a NES. In this study, the correlation was generally stronger among students who stated that a NES teacher was desirable to improve one's pronunciation. The relation between these two variables was not consistent, however, and clearly factors other than NES status may also influence students' evaluation of a teacher's pronunciation.

Although almost 70% of students professed to aspiring to a recognisable NES accent (results which are comparable to those in Li [2009] and Timmis [2002]), a majority of students had no more than an intermediate-level of English (judging from their proficiency test scores in Table 1). This suggests many students possessed unrealistic learning goals, considering the effects of maturational constraints (Abrahamsson and Hyltenstam 2009), their learning circumstances, and their relatively modest level of English ability after three to four years of intensive English use in a semi-immersion academic environment. Aspiring a more realistic learning goal, that is, an accent which retains vestiges of their L1, would likely raise students' confidence in their competence. Successive studies have underscored the importance of self-confidence, one's perceived ability to communicate (to which acceptance of one's own accent is a contributing factor), in L2 speakers' willingness to participate in oral exchanges in an L2 (MacIntyre 2007; MacIntyre, Burns, and Jessome 2011).

Conclusion

This study has shown that Omani university students do, in general, perceive pronunciation as important and are usually able to recognise a US or a British accent, particularly if the speaker's accent conforms to notions of standardness as represented in EFL materials. The relatively high number that allegedly prefers a British/US NES accent reveals a rather conservative view of English. Their high evaluation of these accents as a model for 'correct' pronunciation is possible due in part to their long exposure to such accents in imported ELT materials and their association of accents from these countries with social prestige.

The obligatory secondary school text uses NESs for listening texts (Al-Issa 2005) and in the one year of intensive English study in the foundation institute of their current institution, *Headway* is the most frequent course book in use. Students have thus had years of exposure to formal English instruction with British or US-accented English being presented as the 'correct' model. While locally produced materials are currently being designed to partially replace imported texts, the accompanying listening texts also feature British or US-accented NESs. The accents of their immediate environment, specifically English spoken with an Asian (whether Indian, Pakistani or Filipino) or Arab accent are not acknowledged implicitly or explicitly in classroom materials as a socially legitimated pronunciation model and are thus 'silenced'. For students to become more accepting of the variety of accents used in the English-speaking world and to value the accents commonly found in their own geographical surroundings, didactic materials need to reflect this diversity (Decke-Cornill 2002; Jenkins 2005; Kirkpatrick 2007; Kubota 1998). Proficient English users with accents reflecting different L1 origins commonly encountered in Gulf contexts need to be presented in coursebooks as models of successful learners. Oman is undergoing rapid development with an ever-increasing number of nationals attaining higher educational qualifications (Al-Shmeli 2009). It is possible that, as more well-qualified Omanis occupy statusful ELT positions in secondary and tertiary institutions (in accordance with the Omanisation policy), students' acceptance of Arab-accented English may become more widespread. Though few in number, studies suggest that EFL students in some contexts may rate more highly, particularly in terms of solidarity, NNEs speakers with their own accent over other NNEs accents (Mckenzie 2008; Sasayama 2013; Buckingham 2014).

Similarly, English language and literature degree programmes should have a stronger orientation towards acknowledging and valuing the diversity in the English-speaking world. In many EFL contexts such as the Gulf, British/US cultural production continues to dominate curricula, with, at most, token references to English language film and literature produced in African or Asian contexts. Accordingly, it is unremarkable that students primarily associate British/US standard dialects with prestige and authenticity.

This is an exploratory study into Omani students' reception of accents in English from their community; despite evidence indicating that students who judge a teacher to be a NES are more likely to evaluate positively the teacher's pronunciation, the findings should be interpreted with caution. It was not feasible to verify the extent to which students responded truthfully, and it is not known whether greater gender parity among the respondents might lead to different results. A further limitation lies in the 'snapshot' nature of a study such as this: a longitudinal perspective on EFL students' attitudes may reveal a dynamic, context-dependent nature of students' learning goals and attitudes with respect to pronunciation, responsive to formative experiences and self-reflection (Subtirelu 2012).

A future area of inquiry which has emerged from this study involves the values that students attach to particular accents and the importance of a NES (British or US) accent in particular. It is not clear from the data in this study, why over twice as many students aspire to such an accent rather than retain vestiges of their L1 accent. Within the richly multiethnic and multilingual society of Oman (Peterson 2004; Valeri 2007), most Omani students are unlikely to interact extensively with NES from traditional Anglophone countries; the influence of cable television, however, might contribute to the formulation of attitudes towards accents as this, according to Al-Bulushi and Al-Issa (2012), appears to be a popular medium for contact with English amongst urban youth. While a NES accent may not necessarily offer communicative advantages within a Gulf context (Jenkins 1998, 2006), considerations of social prestige conceivably explain to some extent students' attitudes.

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Notes

1. This policy is designed to increase the employment of Omanis in the public and private sectors through training programmes, incentives and legal restrictions on the employment of expatriates for certain positions.
2. In an Omani context, teachers from 'inner circle' countries typically come from Britain, North America and Australasia; teachers from South Africa are also well represented, particularly in the foundation institutes of many tertiary institutions, and within this context would also fall into this category.
3. Students in this institution are required to sit for the TOEFL exam before commencing and completing their degree programme; they also take it during their studies, as the score is used to determine a student's maximum credit load.
4. Female students outnumber males in most Omani tertiary institutions (Al-Barwani and Albeely 2007, 127; Al-Shmeli 2009, 5).

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