

The Effects of Accent on English Listening Comprehension in Freshman Students Studying Business English at Phetchabun Rajabhat University

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Abstract—Listening has been recognized as one of the most difficult skills in language acquisition and has been the least researched of all four language skills. This has meant listening skills haven't been targeted by teachers and are viewed as a "somewhat neglected and poorly taught aspect of English". This study investigates the English listening ability and the effect of accent on freshman student's ability to comprehend spoken English. The sample group used for this study comprised of 33 students from the Business English Major at Phetchabun Rajabhat University. The results of this study showed that the freshman students studying Business English had a listening ability below the originally expected threshold as well as revealing that students received higher percentages of correct answers when tested using Australian and British accents and lower results when tested using American accents. The results were then analyzed according to the student's backgrounds and exposure to various accents. Correspondingly the results from this study can be used to develop awareness and improve the techniques used to ensure students acquire better English listening abilities and improve the precision and effectiveness of both teaching and learning.

Index Terms—English listening; second language learning; English learning; accents effect on English listening ability, English accent, American accent, Australian accent

I. INTRODUCTION

The acquisition of a second language (L2) has become something widely desired all around the world. This desire is especially felt with regard to, what is now known as the global language, English. Many schools in Thailand have made English mandatory for all students. Students begin learning English from kindergarten age, memorizing vocabulary and the alphabet from A-Z. However, even with this remarkable start, the level of English communication achieved amongst Thai students is still considered below average. Compounding the issue is the fact that listening skills are not developed properly as little interest is given to utilizing targeted listening

activities. As Mendelshon remarks in Ref. [1] when listening activities are used they are unrealistic, boring and irrelevant. Listening activities are unpopular in the classroom and teachers are not confident enough to teach them. Opportunities to practice listening in real life situations are scarce contributing to the reasoning behind why targeted listening development is not considered crucial. Ref. [2] emphasizes the role of listening in language acquisition stating that "listening is the primary skill for language acquisition and prerequisite for the development of other language skills."

This study investigates not only the level of listening ability of freshmen, studying Business English Major at Phetchabun Rajabhat University, but also the effect accent has on the student's ability to comprehend. Being a global language means there are numerous variances in the way English is produced and formed.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Listening Comprehension

Ref. [3], [4] defined listening comprehension as an interactive process in which listeners are involved in constructing meaning. The difficulty of listening comprehension is evident when compared to skills like reading where learners can refer back to the text to clarify understanding. Listening comprehension however, requires the learner to be able to perceive and deconstruct the incoming stream of speech in order to make sense of it. In Ref. [5] Nadig remarks that listeners comprehend the oral input through sound discrimination, previous knowledge, grammatical structures, stress and intonation, and other linguistic or non-linguistic clues. Ref. [6] adds that student's level of exposure to native speakers also effects learner's comprehension. For learners who have never had, or have had little, exposure to native speakers in real-life situations comprehending a native speakers' speech is challenging.

B. Effect of Accent on Listening Comprehension

Within every language there are distinct ways in which that language is produced. Globally there are numerous

English dialects. Ref. [7] The differences in pronunciation, including variation in vowels and consonant sounds at the segmental level, and stress and intonation at the suprasegmental level, combine to shape an accent. Ref. [8] Linguistically, accents are socially significant bundles of phonetic characteristics. They have features as diverse as the length of word-final stop consonants, vowel length, pausing behaviour, and the degree of diphthongization as examples of elements that can characterize native accent differences. Their variances can create confusion for English language learners. Ref. [9] 66% of learners indicate these variances as one of the most significant factors effecting L2 listening comprehension. Accents which are unfamiliar to L2 learners cause serious challenges in listening comprehension. On the other hand, familiarity with an accent aids in a L2 learners' listening comprehension. Ref. [10] suggests that a familiar accent or one that is similar to a familiar accent can be well understood and require little to no additional effort from the listener.

C. Contrastive Analysis

Ref. [11] Contrastive analysis is the systematic study of the structural similarities and differences of languages in order to identify their impact, positively or negatively, on the learning of the target language. The difficulty for language learners often comes when understanding certain structures in the L2 that are different from the learners' mother language. Ref. [12] When forming the theoretical foundations for what became known as the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis, that "those elements which are similar to the learner's native language will be simple for him, and those elements that are different will be difficult".

D. Historical Background of British, Australian and American English

America and Australia were both countries colonized by the British, hence the use of English for communication in the present day. While Australian English has maintained a lot of its English heritage American English has diverged from its old roots. American peoples need for independence from the British vastly contributed to the work of Noah Webster, a lexicographer who during the 18th century reformed the spelling of American English. While linguists now see the reforms made as impractical and unworkable the movement to detach America from Britain meant that Webster's desire to "seize the present moment, and establish a national language, as well as a national government" left a lasting effect on American spelling. This feeling of independence also meant that the pronunciation and vocabulary itself is presently significantly different from British English. Present day Australian English also differs from British English however not to the extent of American English. Due to the fact that Australia was first colonized by British convicts the level of education was low this contributed to the way Australian English shortens spoken words); breakfast becomes breakie, afternoon become arvo etc.

E. Contrastive Analysis between British English, Australian English, American English and Thai language.

This study uses 3 of the main English accents British (BrE), American (AmE) and Australian (AuE). There are many structural differences in the way these accents are spoken some of which, according to the principle of Language Transfer will positively affect the listening comprehension of Thai L2 learners while the affect is negative for others.

For example, the pronunciation of the letter 'r' at the end of words in AmE will have a strong sound while in AuE and BrE the 'r' sound is not pronounced. For example, British and Australian English IPA for the word car is /kɑː/ whereas the American IPA /kɑr/. Thai language, like British and Australian English, doesn't use 'r' as a final sound. Aside from pronunciation the three accents also vary when it comes to intonation, grammar, vocabulary and methods of linking words and sounds when speaking. However, when comparing Thai to these three languages the variations are vast. Thai language is a tonal language so the use of intonation is difficult to understand for a Thai L2 learner. Grammatically there are many differences between the syntax of the two languages. Simply seen in the way Thai language places an adjective after a noun while in English the adjective is placed before the noun i.e. red shirt. English depending on the accent uses a lot of linking when a speaker joins the last sound of one word with the first sound of the next word. Ref. [13] In Thai, linking is rarely done and causes confusion when students listen to the linking sounds in listening tests.

F. Relevant Study

Ref. [14] investigated "The Effects of Accent Familiarity on English as a Foreign Language Students' Word Recognition and Comprehension of the English Language". His study revealed that greater familiarity with an English accent affects overall listening comprehension for L2 learners. The results clearly showed that English spoken with a Thai accent had the highest level of comprehension.

III. METHODOLOGY

A. Objectives

Given the confusion accents cause in English comprehension the objective of this study was to investigate the effect of accent on English listening comprehension for freshman students studying Business English at Phetchabun Rajabhat University

B. Sample Group

The sample group used for this study comprised of freshman students from the Business English Major at Phetchabun Rajabhat University (N=33). The sample group was considered appropriate for this study as they were all from the same major all displaying interest in learning English as a second language. Despite this the sample group unavoidably had varying levels of previous

study and English ability. Some of the students had studied with a foreigner or been a part of English programs in high school, while others had not. This made it essential that a detailed background check of the sample group was conducted to ensure that the results could be analyzed, and were unbiased and conclusive.

C. Instruments

The instruments used in this study were (1) a questionnaire pertaining to the sample groups personal information (2) six tests conducted using listening exercises from the www.englishlistening.com and www.learnenglishteens.britishcouncil.org website which follow the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR), with the levels as follows Beginner (A1), Elementary (A2), Intermediate (B1), Upper Intermediate (B2) and Advanced (C1). Proficient (C2) was excluded due to its difficulty. (3) audio files utilizing three accents using transcripts following the previously mentioned CEFR levels. British accents were taken from www.learnenglishteens.britishcouncil.org, Australian accents were recorded using samples from Sunshine Coast, Queensland and American accents were both recorded using samples from Los Angeles, California and Long Island, New York as well as taken from www.englishlistening.com.

D. Data Collection

Quantitative data were collected for this study. Six tests were completed weekly separating the three accents, beginning first with British, then Australian and finally American. This order was then repeated so that each accent was tested twice. The audio files were played twice while the sample group completed the multiple choice listening comprehension exercises. The data were then collected and analyzed by the researchers.

E. Data Analysis

The researchers first used the questionnaire to separate the sample group into the various groups which might show evidence of the various factors which effect listening comprehension. The results from the tests were then inputted into Microsoft Excel in order to find the percentage of correct answers for each accent. Graphs were used to visually compare the results between British, Australian and American accents.

IV. RESULTS

The results from this study show that the British accent was most comprehensible (44%), followed closely by the Australian accent (40%) and the lowest level of comprehensibility for the sample group was the American accent (31%) (See Fig. 1).

The results also showed that students who had experienced studying with a foreign teacher prior to University Education achieved an overall higher percentage of correct answers. This is seen in the British accent tests which showed that previous study with a foreign teacher improved listening comprehension by 8% (See Fig. 2).

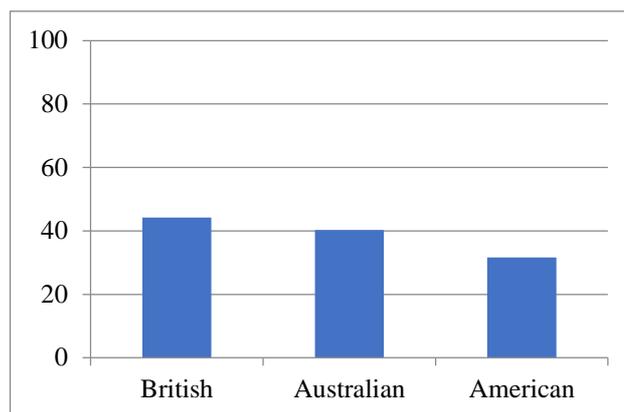


Figure 1. Graph showing the average percentage test results according to accent

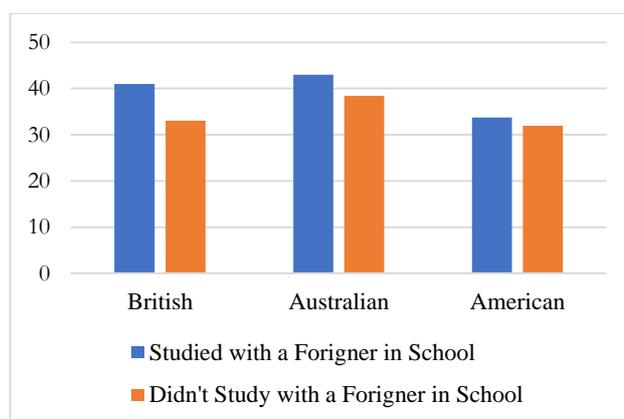


Figure 2. Graph showing the average percentage test results according to previous experience studying with a foreigner

V. DISCUSSION

The results of this study firstly show a necessity of ensuring there is a focus placed on improving listening comprehension. The lack of instruction is reflected in the low level of listening comprehension displayed by the sample group.

Evident in the study is also a strong correlation between the sample group's percentage of correct answers and their exposure to foreign teachers. The sample group that participated in this study was exposed to both British and Australian accents through the foreign teachers employed at Phetchabun Rajabhat University; the population at the time consisted of two British teachers and one Australian. Hence their ability to achieve higher results in both the British and Australian tests. Moreover, during the course of the study the sample group was involved with an extracurricular tutoring program where they were taught predominantly by Australians. The ability for the sample group to achieve higher results on a familiar accent reveals the importance of exposing students to different accents during the process of learning English. Ref. [15] Previous research suggests that that exposure to unfamiliar accent aids comprehensibility. By doing this students can to become aware of the differences in pronunciation and language structures. On top of this students will become aware of the differences and be

encouraged by teachers to expose themselves to various English accents which can be sourced outside of a classroom setting.

An added advantage of this research is that it increases teacher awareness of the influence of accent familiarity on English language comprehension. As stated the sample group's familiarity with both British and Australian accents meant they achieved a higher levels of comprehension. When new teachers are introduced to the students it may take time for them to become accustomed to the new teacher's accent, especially when their accent is unfamiliar.

Further research could be conducted into how to design a listening curriculum which creates familiarity with a variety of accents. It may be beneficial to consider including accents that students will be most exposed to and not just those of British, Australian and American speakers. Research could then extend to investigate student's ability to develop their listening comprehension while following the tailored program.

VI. LIMITATIONS

The study was limited by the small size of the sample group. Limitations were produced by the students' differing levels of interest in the topics chosen, as well as their motivation to achieve high results. As the sample group was made up of students studying for their bachelors they all had varying levels of English ability.

VII. CONCLUSION

In conclusion this study reveals the effect accent and familiarity has on listening comprehension. The percentage of correct answers achieved by the sample group were positively affected when exposed to a familiar accent. Ref. [16], [17] The results align with previous studies which also place accent familiarity as a key factor effecting listening comprehension. Ref. [18] Instructors should work to develop curriculums which focus on improving listening comprehension and exposing their students to different accents, especially those they are likely to come in contact with.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Both authors contributed greatly to compiling this research. Jeerapan Phomprasert conducted the research with the sample groups; Ma'ayan S. M. Grace analyzed the data and they were both involved with the writing up of the final paper. Accordingly both authors approved the final version of this paper.

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