

# Exploring the Effects of Teachers' Different English Accents within English Language Learning Classrooms: Students' and Teachers' Narratives

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Doi: 10.19044/llc.v5no3a5

[URL:http://dx.doi.org/10.19044/llc.v5no3a5](http://dx.doi.org/10.19044/llc.v5no3a5)

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## Abstract

The study explored the effects of different Englishes as a means of instruction in the English language learning classrooms at the English Language Center of the Salalah College of Technology. The methodology of the study was based mainly on the narratives and personal anecdotes of thirty students registered in the fourth academic level of the English Language Foundation Center. The narratives covered all possible interactions that the students who told them encountered, from the historical and spontaneous reactions, as well as associated motivation levels, to audially receiving the English language delivered from a wide array of English accented lecturers, spanning more than a dozen nationalities from all over the globe. A cohort of teachers was also interviewed and selected to further enrich and elaborate upon the data obtained from the students. The data obtained from the study revealed that the students expressed significant levels of positive attitudes and high levels of motivation towards the diversity of accents they encountered. In order to enable the students to communicate more effectively with other people, so as to reflect the global reality of English as a lingua franca, the pedagogical implications of this study recommended that teachers from various and different countries around the world, making use of different Englishes and different accents by which to enunciate them, be utilized and speakers of different Englishes from wider communication contexts be given preference for possible inclusion or exclusion.

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**Keywords:** English, Learning, Accents, Teaching, Attitudes.

## Introduction

The focus of this research was on the individual narratives of the students regarding the different English language teachers representing different countries and geographic regions. Salalah College of Technology

(henceforth SCT) is the only higher college of technology within the southwest corner of the Sultanate of Oman. SCT operates the English Language Center (henceforth ELC) Foundation, within which the first four levels of English instruction take place, as well as a Post Foundation, where students go on to study English together with a curriculum for one of several various specialties, including information technology, business and several different disciplines within the general field of engineering. In the ELC Foundation, there are a total of 85 teachers representing 15 different countries spanning the globe from as far away as the United Kingdom and North America to other Arabic countries, including the host country, Oman, and other geographical and cultural regions of the world such as the Arabian Gulf and northern Africa, which include the sovereign nations of Jordan, Sudan, Tunisia and Yemen. SCT has, at any given time, between 5-6,000 students attending each of its various individual schools and specialties. The ELC Foundation, acting in the role of introducing and taking students in, on the average, processes around 1,500 new students in each academic semester.

### **Literature Review**

There has developed, in the most recent past, a shared concept amongst many language researches, that there exists not simply one variety of English that is used to conduct business and global affairs around the world, but rather several different versions of English, which has given rise to the now familiar moniker of 'world Englishes'. Use and circulation of this terminology, in turn, has given rise to the associated concept that, within the amalgam of what most users and researchers of the English language are aware, there also exists something called 'language varieties' (Galloway, 2013). Applied linguists have revealed and exhibited an unprecedented level of interest in the study of the different native varieties of English as well as non-native varieties of English relative to other research endeavors they have undertaken.

The notion of having a wide variety of world Englishes may be viewed as having both a wider and narrower language application, within the broader fields of English language and learning. According to Bolton, Kachru, and Braj (2006), the wider application of the concept subsumes a multitudinous number of approaches, encompassing many that are diametrically different from each other. The narrower application of the term, however, refers simply to schools of thought closely connected to the Kachruvian approach. According to Kachru (1976, p.236):

The strength of the English language is in presenting the Americanness in its American variety, and the Englishness in its British variety. Let us therefore appreciate and encourage the Third World varieties of English too. The individuality of the Third World varieties, such as the Indianness of its

Indian variety, is contributing to the linguistic mosaic which the speakers of the English language have created in the English speaking world.

Today, English is used all over the world by different lingua-cultural groups of people. Even in countries where it has no official status, as described in Kachru's (1985, 1992) expanding circle, it is increasingly being spoken internally and spontaneously, without the presence of calculation or forethought, and English has therefore become ever more indelibly etched into people's lives. Kachru's (1994) classification of English speakers into the inner circle, where English is a 'native' language, the outer circle, where it is a second language (SL), and the expanding circle, where it is learnt as a foreign language (FL) with no official status, this taxonomy has been influential in raising our awareness of the existence of different Englishes, as well as the increasingly diverse and numerous fields and contexts that suggest not only its feasibility but also its necessity in conducting general business and in resolving spontaneous issues and conflicts that may come up within the course of a working day.

Curriculum designers and educators need to recognize the fixed position of importance, as well as prominence, that English has played, and continues to play, in our always changing world, in addition to the circumstance that the global spread of English has made English and other circumstantial issues which contribute to making its usage even more multifaceted. Previous research findings also raise questions with regard to how English learning and teaching (henceforth ELT) should be approached and subsequently analyzed for potential future suitability. Jenkins et al. (2011, pp. 304-5) noted that research results related to the concept of English as a lingua franca (ELF) "have major implications for a multitude of common beliefs and assumptions about what is sanctioned as good practice by the profession". They argued that there exists a high degree of necessity for L2 learners to be exposed to the different varieties of English to better prepare them to use English globally. The same contention has also been stated by Mckay (2002).

Research has been conducted on language learners' attitudes within different ELT contexts, which reveals a set of positive attitudes towards native English (Butler, 2007; Dalton-Puffer et al., 1997; Galloway, 2013; Rubin, 1992). Familiarity with native English and associated high degrees of personal experience were influential in Dalton-Puffer et al. (1997), where students were, once again, most critical of the English spoken in their own respective countries. The number of English courses students had taken with non-native English teachers was also found to be the best predictor of listening comprehension scores, highlighting the effect of familiarity with such non-native English accents on attitudes. Thus, it has been shown that attitudes are clearly complex structures whose very dimensions suggest that their various

intricacies may be influenced by a number of different factors. Studies have also looked at teachers' attitudes towards the role of world Englishes, but only a few of them have looked specifically at students' attitudes, which, once more, reveal some similar preferences for native English (cf. Erling, 2005; Grau, 2005; Kuo, 2006; Matsuda, 2002).

Matsuda (2002) concluded that more exposure to different English accents is needed to raise students' awareness levels of the diversity of English. As an example, the students in Grau's (2005) study, were open towards adopting the tendency of incorporating a perspective of world Englishes into learning, and they continued to demonstrate an unflinching preference towards the reception and production of native English. There has been little research on the examination of what an ELT course that incorporates a global Englishes perspective would look like, how effective it could ultimately be in persuading students to continue to study English, or the possible influence it may have on learners' attitudes towards any given target language. A limited number of studies have been conducted to attempt to resolve these issues (e.g. Derwing et al., 2002; Kubota, 2001; Shim, 2002). Derwing et al.'s (2002) research involved native English speakers, as well as Shim's (2002) study, which investigated the influence of world Englishes 'instruction' on non-native English speakers' attitudes, however, neither of them provided a detailed overview of how to incorporate a world Englishes' perspective into the classroom.

Research, which has investigated attitudes towards English language teachers, has also been conducted regarding their respective individual capacities, as well as associated attitudes towards them. For instance, Mahboob (2004) conducted a study that involved teachers with different mother tongues, but most studies have involved non-native English teachers that share the same mother tongue as the students and all reveal positive attitudes towards native English speakers (e.g. Cook, 2005; Lasagabaster & Sierra, 2005). Although students think both types of teachers have different capabilities, native English teachers are favoured for speaking and pronunciation skills (Barratt and Kontra, 2000; Cook, 2005; Lasagabaster & Sierra, 2005). However, the possible influence of students' proficiency on attitudes was raised in Lasagabaster and Sierra (2005). Thus, previous research suggests that most English language learners highly value native English and prefer to follow a native English speaker model. It must be noted that these studies utilized verbal and matched guise techniques, questionnaires, interviews, classroom observations, personal experiences and narratives. While verbal and matched guise techniques, at an overall level, elicit useful data, they reveal little about what influences individual and group-based attitudes within a given classroom. Therefore, there exists a need to conduct further investigations about the factors that may influence language learners'

attitudes, particularly in relation to the influence awareness-raising of world Englishes instruction may have on English learners' attitudes and motivation towards learning the English language.

### **Methodology:**

This study replicates the study of Sung (2014) on students from the University of Lingnan in Hong Kong. Although the inspiration for this study came from the related study in Hong Kong, our research made use of an entirely different research tool. Whereas Sung's study employed semi-structured interviews and a questionnaire survey, our research made use of personal narratives of a combined total of 30 students and 6 teachers, including one teacher from the United States, the United Kingdom, Oman, India, the Philippines, and one other Arabic country, respectively. The main purpose of the study was to explore the effects of different English accents and the attitudes of the students towards them. All of the selected students came from the fourth academic level, out of a total population of approximately 300 students in the second semester of the academic year 2017-18.

### **Participants of the Study:**

The sample of the study is mainly thirty students purposefully selected to participate. The sampling technique used to choose the participants was the purposive sampling technique. Thirty students were so selected based upon a set of metrics or parameters which included eloquence, ability to express themselves in more than one given received accent, and their scores on class oral interviews or individual spoken English presentations. Fifteen boys and fifteen girls were selected equally to represent any potential gender differences, as well as to obtain a more holistic picture of how motivation, attitudes and general tendencies can affect given populations. Additionally, the students were selected because they had theoretically been exposed to a minimum of 8 different English accents from the time they entered the ELC Foundation Program until they reached the fourth academic level of instruction. The six participating teachers were selected based upon the different Englishes they speak, and the respective accents that are used to pronounce these Englishes. The teachers were chosen based upon the prevalence of their particular accent as it relates to the English as a lingua franca, as well as their exposure to having taught in all four levels of the ELC Foundation Program.

### **Research Procedures:**

The study was conducted in the second semester of the academic year of 2017-2018. After the final exams, and during the break between the second and third semesters, a schedule was given to the 30 selected students for the

interviews. The included students were purposefully chosen and placed within the interview process with the intention to gather an optimal level of information from them. All of the participants were interviewed over the course of three consecutive days, with approximately 10 students being interviewed to narrate their stories over that time. Classroom 29 in the English Language Foundation building was used to host the students on the three consecutive days. The researchers were both in attendance, equipped with a tape recorder. A formal consent had been previously obtained by the administration of Salalah College of Technology and the English Language Center, as well as for the individual participants selected.

### **Interview Procedures:**

The interviews that were conducted and recorded began at 8:00AM in the morning. Each interviewee was provided 20-30 minutes to narrate their comprehensive learning experiences from the first to fourth academic levels, as well as the entire range of the different accents they were exposed to over that same cumulative time period. The interviewers were, to some extent, guided by the notion that having more than one accent within an English classroom or language learning experience would provide tangible benefits regarding the affected students' levels of motivation, proficiency, eloquence, and the ability and initiative to set goals for themselves. All of the students were recorded on tape, and pseudonyms for all of the participants were established to ensure professional levels of confidentiality. The qualitative data was then analyzed based upon various themes that help to provide answers to the main question posed by the study. That question was, specifically.

Is there an effect of different English accents used by teachers from different countries that exists within English language learning classrooms?

### **Findings and Discussion:**

This section will discuss the findings of the study. To achieve this outcome, this section is divided into two subsections. The first subsection deals with the student's narratives regarding being exposed to different Englishes, specifically the influence of being exposed to different types of English on their general levels of achievement and improved attitudes about continuing to study the language. The other subsection will shed some light on the perceptions of the six teachers who were selected and interviewed to investigate their observations of the classes, composed of the previously described students, that they have been teaching.

### **Student Narratives:**

As mentioned earlier, the interviews consisted of a total of thirty students narrating their experiences. These students were in the fourth level

of instruction in the ELC Foundation Program. In these collective interviews, the opinions of the students will be reported collectively, as major trends and attitudes have emerged as predominant viewpoints.

Regarding the influence of world Englishes and English accents on the learning outcomes for students, 28 students have confidently stated that by being exposed to various aural stimuli and influences throughout their four semesters of foundation instruction, wherein they were being taught by different teachers who speak different Englishes, ranging from native to non-native speakers, they have gained a positive outlook on their perceived ability to understand the different varieties of English they have heard. These outlooks, in turn, help to spur their own virtuous cycle of personal development. In the first place, students in these situations have been able to successfully employ two-way communication with each of the individual teachers who all potentially hailed from different countries, and brought their own English language conventions and accents with them. Furthermore, students have gained new or additional exposure to several different varieties of English spelling, vocabulary and usage conventions which will inspire their curiosity and ability to understand and thrive in future communicative situations and endeavors. These findings have proven to be consistent with the previous results of Shim (2002), Mahboob (2004), Lasagabaster and Sierra (2005), and Sung (2014). Moving from the inside of the classroom to the outside, these same 28 students will also be able to make use of their newly found receptive and productive English skills when they choose to read and understand books, as well as go to movies, or even communicate with people in their individually chosen social and creative milieus. As with the first stated benefit, these findings have also been reported in previously conducted researches, as reported in the literature review. Examples include Kubota (2001), Derwing et al. (2002), Shim (2002), and Sung (2014).

Interestingly enough, there also emerged a small collection of thought (the other 2 students out of the selected 30) who demonstrated a clear and unmistakable preference for the individual English accents that are the most conventional, and emanate from the United States and United Kingdom. Although this preference was not absolute, the two students recommended giving these two Englishes a distinct level of priority over the other received pronunciations and usages they were exposed to. It should be noted that the other Englishes these students received were not regarded as inferior, rather, they simply perceived that the two predominant varieties would be of more assistance to them at their immediate levels of learning. The two students have admitted that non-native speakers who had taught them throughout the levels they have passed through were equally competent, able to teach given material in front of them, and effectively disseminate the knowledge they had transmitted through the prism of their own individual accents.

### **Teaching Narratives:**

The six participating teachers have generally stated, based on their observations throughout their teaching experiences, that the majority of the students they have taught across all the foundation levels have exhibited a considerable level of positive attitudes towards the different English accents. It was also mentioned that students attempted to speak, and actively engage, in English, making use of the very same accents that they had previously been exposed to. These teachers, hailing from the United States, the United Kingdom, Oman, India, the Philippines, and another Arabic country, submitted narratives based upon all of their extensive years of experience, including previous time spent as teachers in the ELC Foundation Program. Although they were interviewed individually, similar findings and reactions were recorded. As reported by the teachers, the students were found to exhibit increasingly positive attitudes towards the different English accents of the teachers, and their motivations to learn English remained the same, in spite of the differing nature of the individual Englishes they have been exposed to. Another intriguing finding that was recorded by the majority of the six teachers was that the individual marks achievements of individual students, from the first level of foundation instruction to the fourth level, was consistent throughout all of the levels, suggesting that the different accents and personal vocabulary sets of the different English teachers had no adverse effect upon the students' ability to improve their capabilities and comprehension, creating a metanoic atmosphere.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations:**

From the findings of this research project, it can be concluded, that the exposure to different English accents is an enormous asset that carries with it many potentially beneficiary educational and vocational outcomes at the individual level, as well as at an institutional level. For the students, and as reported previously, the exposure to different accents and language conventions have developed their general level of English, as well as their attitudes towards studying it for future purposes. A common misconception, still held on the part of many individuals and stakeholders in the institutionalized process of education delivery, is that such exposure can only hinder students' language development. However, as reported by the results of this study, this has been proven to be a falsely held premise.

It is therefore recommended that those stakeholders and policy makers responsible for hiring and procuring well qualified English teachers make a concerted effort to include a diverse linguistic background and potentially different originating accents of English amongst the teachers who will be ultimately selected to cater to the students' needs, as well as the needs of the individual institutions.

Another recommendation that can be made in this regard is the incorporation of these different Englishes as distinct and important parts of present and future college English curriculums and delivery plans.

### **Limitations of the Study:**

There are several limitations to this study which make any conclusions drawn or results to be generalized very difficult, only with another study in similar contexts and participants that were found and selected in this study. In the first place, the research method employed, which was the personal narrative, is one that may be regarded in its own right to be a shortcoming, but due to prevailing time constraints, as well as the controlled nature of the study environment, was adopted out of basic necessity. Other more conventional research tools, such as in-depth interviews, questionnaires and observations, could certainly be used for future research endeavours. Other constraints include the total period of time, the number of participants expected to submit comprehensive narrative accounts within that time, as well as a wider number of participants, including both the number of students and teachers included, and the potential of including other stakeholders from administrative and supervisory divisions. In order to obtain more insightful and accurate information, it is highly recommended that the total number of participants, and by extension a longer period of time, be employed for future research endeavors on this general topic.

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