

The Role of Accent Familiarity on Students' Listening Comprehension: Phonetic Interference

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Abstract

The difference in pronunciation due to the background of the speaker's mother tongue has a major role in the listener's understanding when communicating in English. Since the scientific basis is the foundation of learning, students' exposure to hearing their mother tongue accent for long periods makes the subconscious mind absorb any information received by the learner in his mother tongue accent. This study aims to:

- 1- Investigate the role of accent familiarity on students' listening comprehension due to phonetic interference.
- 2- Investigate the role of mismatched accent familiarity on students' listening comprehension due to phonetic interference.
- 3- Investigate the role of unfamiliar accent familiarity on students' listening comprehension due to phonetic interference.

In order to achieve the objectives of the study, a diagnostic test based on pronunciation was used to detect the effect of three accents spoken in English by an Iraqi speaker (accent familiarity), a British speaker (mismatched accent familiarity), and an Indian person (unfamiliar accent familiarity). The results of the study showed that students who listened to English spoken by a speaker of Iraqi origin (accent familiarity) had a higher understanding when they heard the speaker with a British accent (mismatched accent familiarity), which was much higher when they heard the speaker with a non-familiar accent (unfamiliar accent

familiarity). We conclude that the accent familiar to students is the most beneficial for them in learning English, understanding the language, distinguishing between word sounds, controlling the elements of phonology, and distinguishing between words with similar and almost identical sounds, and the distinction is in changing the place of stress.

Keywords:(Accent Familiarity, Listening Comprehension, Phonetic Interference).

دور معرفة اللهجة في فهم الاستماع لدى الطلبة: التداخل الصوتي

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المخلص

إنَّ اختلاف اللفظ نتيجة لخلفية لغة المتحدث الام لها دور كبير في فهم المستمع عند التواصل باللغة الانجليزية. وكون الركيزة العلمية هي الأساسية للتعلم، تعرض الطلاب لساعات ولكن لغتهم الامهات طويلة تجعل العقل الباطن يستوعب اي معلومة يستلمها المتعلم بلكنة لغته الام. تهدف هذه الدراسة الى:

- ١- التعرف على دور معرفة اللهجة في الاستيعاب السمعي لدى الطلاب بسبب التداخل الصوتي.
- ٢- التحقق من دور معرفة اللهجة غير المتطابقة في الفهم السمعي لدى الطلاب بسبب التداخل الصوتي.
- ٣- التعرف على دور معرفة اللهجة غير المألوفة في الاستيعاب السمعي لدى الطلاب بسبب التداخل الصوتي.

ولاجل تحقيق اهداف الدراسة تم استخدام تشخيصي قائم على اللفظ لكشف ثلاثة لکنات المحادثة باللغة الانجليزية من قبل الكبار عراقي (معرفة اللهجة) ومتحدث بريطاني (معرفة لهجة غير متطابقة) وشخص هندي (معرفة لهجة غير مألوفة). ظهرت نتائج الدراسة ان الطلاب الذين استمعوا للكلام باللغة الانجليزية من قبل الشرق من اصل العراقي (معرفة اللهجة) كان فهمهم اعلى عند سماعهم للمتحدثين بالكنة البريطانية (غير متطابقة في اللهجة) والتي بالتعالي كان فهمهم اعلى واضح من سمعهم للمتكلمين بالكنة الهندية (معرفة اللهجة غير المألوفة). لا تختلف ان الكنية المناسبة للتعليمية هي الانفعهم في تعلم اللغة الانجليزية وفهم اللغة والتميز بين اصوات الكلمات .

الكلمات المفتاحية: (معرفة اللهجة، وفهم الاستماع، والتداخل الصوتي).

The Background

The study attempts to reveal the effect of pronunciation differences due to non-native English speakers on English language learners' listening comprehension. The pronunciation differences include incorrect stress, vowel differences, consonant pronunciation, incorrect rhythm patterns pronouncing the "r", "t", "d", ... etc, , incorrect intonation, and homophones.

Statement of the Problem

For the purpose of learning a foreign language, listening is the first skill to which learners are exposed in order to understand the linguistic system of the language they are learning, including their mother tongue (Jameel, 2022). The ultimate goal of all English learners is to communicate with others, comprehend them, and express their ideas and feelings (Jameel, 2023). Students in Iraqi schools and universities frequently listen to English words pronounced by their professors. With the advancement of English language learning applications and electronic educational platforms (Anber & Jameel, 2020), and as students enter a new era characterized by artificial intelligence (Baidoo-Anu & Ansah, 2023), online and digital English language educational programmes have become increasingly diverse across multiple countries (Sappaile et al., 2024). Consequently, studying the effect of accent on students' comprehension of content has gained considerable significance in evaluating all aspects of English language learning programmes and applications (Fitria, 2021).

To comprehend this academic issue, the researcher reviewed literature and previous studies that examined the impact and role of the speaker's accent and native language background on students' comprehension of English content. Most studies (White et al., 2016; Cheng, 2018;

Büyükahıska & Uyar, 2019; Kang et al., 2019; Kurtuldu & Ozkan, 2022; Miao, 2023; Shawaqfeh et al., 2024; and Suzuki & Yamane, 2024) have explored the influence of different accents on students' understanding of English content. This issue is closely related to Jameson (2001), who found that students' level of English comprehension necessitates mastery of the fundamental phonetic distinctions of the language and familiarity with listening to various accents. To assess the effect of educational programmes, applications, and digital materials supplementing textbooks in Iraqi schools and universities, this study aims to investigate the role of different English-speaking accents in listening comprehension among Iraqi students learning English as a foreign language, as well as the impact of phonetic interference on their ability to understand spoken English from various accents.

Aims

This study aims to:

1. Investigate the role of accent familiarity in students' listening comprehension due to phonetic interference.
2. Examine the effect of mismatched accent familiarity on students' listening comprehension due to phonetic interference.
3. Explore the impact of unfamiliar accent familiarity on students' listening comprehension due to phonetic interference.

Hypothesis

To achieve these aims, the following hypothesis is proposed:

“There is a statistically significant difference at ($\alpha= 0.05$) between the mean scores of students' listening comprehension based on accent familiarity, mismatched accent familiarity, and unfamiliar accent familiarity.”

The Significance

The findings of this study serve as an important indicator for educators who teach English using audio programmes, emphasizing the necessity of selecting accents that are close and familiar to students. One of the primary difficulties students face in listening comprehension arises from encountering accents different from those they are accustomed to. For instance, students may find it easier to understand an Iraqi or Arab speaker speaking English compared to a British, Indian, or other non-native English speaker due to variations in accents and the influence of the mother tongue on pronunciation. The study outcomes aim to raise teachers' awareness of the importance of training students to listen to multiple English accents to enhance their familiarity. Consequently, any foreign-origin resource characterized by high reliability and consistency in students' learning can be effectively utilized.

Limits

The generalization of the results is restricted to the following parameters:

1. **Participants:** The study participants were second-year students from the Department of English.
2. **Location:** The study was conducted at the Department of English, College of Arts, University of Anbar, in Anbar Province.
3. **Duration:** The study was carried out during the first semester of the academic year 2024-2025.

Defibition of Basic Terms

Accent Familiarity: The extent to which English learners are able to distinguish and understand the accent of an English speaker and understand the content depends on several factors: whether they have been exposed to the accent before, or have been exposed to a familiar accent, or have been exposed to an unfamiliar accent before, and the

extent to which they understand the content (Suzuki & Yamane, 2024).

Listening Comprehension: it is the students' ability to recognize a sound of a word in spite of the pronunciation differences due to non-native English speakers (Habeb & Jameel, 2023).

Mismatched Accent Familiarity :It is the extent of the learner's familiarity with the accent and the period of exposure to it. The more he knows the accent called classical Arabic, such as the British, American, Canadian or Australian accent, the greater his understanding. The more he is exposed to an accent that is difficult to understand, the less his understanding (Miao, 2023).

Unfamiliar Accent Familiarity: It is the listener's inability to understand the accent of the English speaker due to the listener's lack of familiarity with the accent. It is difficult to understand the English language and is considered an unfamiliar accent (Cheng, 2019).

Literature Review

Investigating the effect, role, and influence of accent on learners' understanding, it is important to define what an accent is in the context of learning a foreign language. The most precise definition of accent compatible with this study is provided by BalaKrishna et al. (2014), who define accent as follows: "Accents arise from distinctive variations in pronunciation patterns across speakers from particular locations. They denote a person's language and country of origin as well as their social status and identity" (p.1273). The study of accent is based on the communicative language teaching approach, the core of which is to enable learners to communicate effectively, express their ideas, and understand and be understood in communication (Ibraheem, 2023).

With the widespread adoption of the communicative approach, the role of the speaker's accent in the listener's understanding has gained

attention. Since this approach emphasizes interaction between speakers, cultural diversity and societal differences that expose learners to unfamiliar accents become prominent (Harte et al., 2016). Listening to familiar and unfamiliar accents was not initially a key variable in many studies, as researchers such as Chang & Read (2006) and Kimura (2008) did not find a significant effect of listening strategies on listeners' comprehension. However, the role of accent differences in understanding has since emerged as an area of interest, prompting further investigation into students' comprehension of English as a foreign language (Büyükahıska & Uyar, 2019).

The primary reason researchers focus on the impact of accent differences is the communication challenges that arise between the sender and the receiver—two key components of the communicative approach (Lunenborg, 2010). The communication process is influenced by various factors, including the code transmitted by the sender, which the receiver must decode to understand the intended message. Here, the sender's accent and its familiarity to the receiver play a crucial role in the comprehension process (Keyton, 2011).

Accent differences are linked to segmental differences. Wells (1982, as cited in Harte et al., 2016) identified four segmental differences related to accents: “phonetic realisation (i.e. the way in which phonemes are produced), phonotactic distribution (i.e. the environment in which particular phonemes occur), phoneme system (i.e. the number and identity of phonemes used), and lexical distribution (i.e. the selection of different phonemes for the same word by speakers of different accents)” (p. 6).

White et al. (2016) found that dialect variations affect students' test scores and recommended that standardized test dialects should be familiar to students. They also suggested that speakers with dialects most familiar to students should be selected when designing

assessments for English language proficiency. Moreover, they concluded that British accents are preferable, as they are considered the native reference for English language learners.

Ockey et al. (2016) highlighted the growing need to study accent differences, as teaching students with different accents can slow learning due to extraneous variables that negatively impact comprehension. Consequently, accent variation has become an important factor in language teaching, particularly for students using technology-based learning tools, which feature multiple English accents depending on their origin.

In the same year, Kang et al. (2016) investigated the impact of Vietnamese-accented English on EFL students' comprehension. Their results showed that the Vietnamese accent was difficult to understand due to its strong phonological characteristics. In contrast, Kagitci-Yildiz (2017) found that students demonstrated no significant difference in comprehension between native and non-native accents. Furthermore, Sriwang et al. (2020) concluded that familiar accents significantly improved students' listening comprehension skills compared to unfamiliar or unknown accents.

The diversity of accents and their impact on listener comprehension play a major role in foreign language learning. This applies not only to accents within a single language, such as Arabic dialects (Iraqi, Moroccan, Gulf, etc.), but also to English dialects (British, American, Canadian, Australian, Irish, etc.), which affect English learners' comprehension (Kleshnina & Andreeva, 2021). With millions of English speakers worldwide, both native and non-native (Demuro & Gurney, 2021), understanding multiple accents is essential for English learners (Verbeke & Simon, 2023). Learning English outside the classroom often involves exposure to various language programs, movies, series, cartoons, and songs, which significantly influence

language acquisition and align with sociolinguistic theory (Abdellatif et al., 2024). According to Canagarajah, Yuwita, and Ambarwati (2023), learners should be exposed to multiple English accents to enhance listening and comprehension skills, especially given the rapid advancements in artificial intelligence tools in language education (Fitria, 2023; Abdellatif et al., 2024).

A review of the literature indicates that investigating the impact of different English accents is crucial. This study examines the influence of three different English accents on students' listening comprehension. The differences among these accents arise due to phonetic interference, which affects pronunciation and may lead to misunderstandings, such as in the pronunciation of "cot" and "caught." Accent differences can significantly alter meaning and comprehension.

Previous Studies

Büyükahıska & Uyar (2019) evaluated students' listening comprehension of different English accents. The participants were 22 secondary school students learning English as a foreign language. A listening comprehension test was used to collect data. The results revealed that students understood the familiar accent best, followed by the mismatched accent, while those exposed to an unfamiliar accent exhibited the lowest comprehension levels.

Kurtuldu and Ozkan (2022) investigated the influence of different British accents on the listening comprehension of pre-service English language teachers. The participants were 38 pre-service teachers. A listening achievement test featuring different accent speakers was administered. The results demonstrated that familiarity with non-native English accents significantly improved listening comprehension.

Verbeke and Simon (2023) investigated EFL students' comprehension and intelligibility of native and non-native English accents. The participants were 33 Dutch EFL students exposed to eight different

accent speakers. An orthographic transcription test was used for data collection. The results indicated that students comprehended familiar (local) accents better than unfamiliar (outer) accents.

Methodology

The Population and the Participants

The population is all EFL students at fourth grade at the departments of English at the College of Arts, College of Education for Humanities, and College of Education for Women at University of Anbar. The participants were from the 4th grade from the College of Arts, University of Anbar. The participants were 10 male and 13 female students. The researcher used random sample method to select the participants, the student number with sequence 1 was chosen, then sequence 3, so the participants were from sequence 1, 3, 5, 7, 9, 11, 13, 15, 17, 19, 21, 23, 25, 27, 29, 31, and 33 and the total number of participants was 17. Table 1 shows the distribution of the participants.

Table 1: Distribution of the Participants

| Gender | Number |
|---------|--------|
| Males | 5 |
| Females | 12 |
| Total | 17 |

The Instrument

A diagnostic test was designed to collect the data for the study. The test measures the effect of phonetic interference, specifically pronunciation differences due to non-native English speakers, on English language learners' listening comprehension. These pronunciation differences include students' comprehension of incorrect stress, vowel differences, consonant pronunciation, incorrect rhythm patterns (such as pronouncing the "r," "t," and "d" sounds), incorrect intonation, and

homophones. Three different speakers from Iraq, England, and India deliver a narrative speech lasting approximately 10 minutes, and the students listen and answer three test questions, which are phonetic in nature and assess listening comprehension (MCQs, fill-in-the-blanks for homophones, dictation, and matching questions).

The participants listen to each speaker sequentially, following the accent familiarity levels suggested by Bent and Bradlow (2003):

1. First, the Arabic speaker (matched accent).
2. Next, the native English speaker (mismatched accent).
3. Finally, the Indian speaker (unfamiliar accent).

Validity and Reliability

To determine the validity of the diagnostic test and the audio materials, the instruments were distributed to jury members specializing in teaching English as a foreign language, applied linguistics, and phonetics. Among the suggestions and recommendations regarding the test were the deletion of the question that asked students to summarize what they heard, amending the multiple-choice questions to include four alternative answers instead of three, modifying the homophones question from writing separate words to filling in the blanks, and adding a dictation question. Regarding the reading material, it was recommended that all speakers' materials should be equal in length, difficulty, and meaning (i.e., content or topic) and should have an equal vocal pattern. The members' recommendations and suggestions were taken into consideration.

The reliability of the instruments was determined using the test-retest method and Cronbach's alpha equation. A pilot sample (excluded from the main participants) consisting of nine students participated in the pilot test. The reliability coefficient was 0.88, which is considered high.

The Results

To verify the hypothesis, “There is a statistically significant difference at ($\alpha= 0.05$) between the mean scores of students’ listening comprehension due to accent familiarity, mismatched accent familiarity, and unfamiliar accent familiarity,” ANOVA and Post-Hoc Test (Scheffé’s test) were used. Tables 2, 3, and 4 present the results.

Table 2: ANOVA Results

| Source | Sum of Squares | df | F | p-value |
|----------|----------------|----|-------|----------|
| Accent | 2089.21 | 2 | 27.11 | 7.54e-07 |
| Residual | 1229.74 | 33 | - | - |

Table 2 shows that the F-value is 27.11 which is large, and the p-value < 0.001 which is highly significant. This result indicates that there is a statistically significant difference in students’ scores listening comprehension among the three different accents (accent familiarity, mismatched accent familiarity, and unfamiliar accent familiarity).

To reveal which accent that the students familiar with and understand the spoken language, students’ mean scores in the diagnostic test was used. Table 3 shows the results.

Table 2: Mean Scores

| Accent | Mean Score |
|------------|------------|
| Matched | 38.56 |
| Mismatched | 31.98 |
| Unfamiliar | 21.924 |

Table 3 revealed that the highest score is for the matched accent (Iraqi Speaker) with mean score 38.56, while the mismatched accent mean score is 31.98, and the lowest mean score is 21.94 for the unfamiliar accent. These results indicate that the students understand when they listen to familiar accent. To reveal the comparison among the three

accent and to verify the hypothesis, Scheffé's test was used. Table 4 shows the results.

Table 4: Scheffé's test: Post-hoc Test

| Group 1 | Group 2 | Mean Difference | p-value | Lower Bound | Upper Bound | Significant Difference |
|------------|------------|-----------------|---------|-------------|-------------|------------------------|
| Matched | Mismatched | -8.64 | 0.0030 | -13.77 | - 2.55 | Sig. |
| Matched | Unfamiliar | -17.62 | 0.0010 | -25.12 | - 13.56 | Sig. |
| Mismatched | Unfamiliar | -11.00 | 0.0008 | -15.11 | - 3.86 | Sig. |

Table 4 shows that the students' scores when listening to matched accent are better than when they listen to mismatched accent with p-value 0.0030. in addition, the students' scores when listening to matched accent are better than when they listen to unfamiliar accent with $p < 0.0001$, and finally, the students' scores when listening to mismatched accent are better than when they listen to mismatched accent compared to unfamiliar accent with p-value $p = 0.00080$. This indicates that the hypothesis is accepted.

Discussion of the Results

The results revealed statistically significant differences in the three comparisons, indicating that the effect of phonetic interference is less for the familiar accent—the Iraqi speaker who speaks in English. The students understood the spoken information and achieved high scores, highlighting the significant role of accent familiarity in students' listening comprehension of English sounds. This result aligns with the findings of White et al. (2016), Büyükahıska & Uyar (2019), Sriwang et al. (2020), and Kurtuldu and Ozkan (2022), who found that familiar accents enhanced students' listening comprehension skills more than unfamiliar and unknown accents.

Additionally, students comprehended the matched accent, the British accent. Their experience in listening to fluent English speech from a British speaker, who spoke naturally at a pace they perceived as fast, made it difficult for them to follow the information easily. As a result,

they became confused about the information and sounds, particularly since the test required understanding sounds and answering questions based on pronunciation. This result is consistent with the findings of Büyükahıska & Uyar (2019), who ranked students' comprehension of the British accent second, and Miao (2023), who found that the British accent posed some difficulty for foreign listeners due to the speed of pronunciation. However, this finding contrasts with Kagitci-Yildiz (2017), who reported no significant difference in students' comprehension between familiar and mismatched accents.

The students' test scores were notably low when listening to the speaker with an unfamiliar Indian accent compared to their high scores when listening to the English speaker with an Iraqi accent (familiar) and a British accent. The low scores were attributed to the unfamiliarity of the Indian speaker's pronunciation, which was influenced by his native accent, thereby affecting students' comprehension. This result aligns with the findings of Harte et al. (2016) and Kang et al. (2016), who found that an unfamiliar accent was challenging to comprehend due to its strong phonological features derived from the speaker's native language. However, this result contradicts the study of Büyükahıska & Uyar (2019), who found that students exposed to an unfamiliar accent still achieved a low level of comprehension.

Discussion of the Results

The study results indicate that students who listened to speech with a familiar accent demonstrated better comprehension than when listening to speech with a British accent. However, their comprehension significantly decreased when listening to speech with an Indian accent. These findings suggest that listeners' habituation to a particular accent plays a crucial role in their comprehension, leading to higher test performance. This result supports Chomsky's theory, which asserts that

learners acquire a foreign language by unconsciously storing information. Children become accustomed to the accents they are exposed to while learning their mother tongue or the most common foreign language. The process of hearing and pronouncing words in either the mother tongue or a foreign language occurs automatically. This was confirmed by the study's results, as students performed better in the test, which relied heavily on word pronunciation, when listening to speech spoken by an Iraqi native speaker using English.

Furthermore, Brown (2000) emphasized that adolescent foreign language learning is significantly influenced by sociolinguistics. The auditory system and brain adapt to hearing native accent patterns, regardless of the language being learned. This scientific concept reinforces the current study's findings, as students' performance was highest when listening to speech spoken by an individual with an Iraqi accent.

Conclusion

The study concludes that Iraqi students primarily acquire and understand English through Iraqi teachers. Their comprehension and achievement levels range from average to good when listening to a British native speaker, whereas their understanding is low when hearing English spoken by an Indian speaker (unfamiliar accent). These findings suggest that educational programs of British origin or those prepared by Arab educators are more effective for learners than unfamiliar-origin programs, which some educational institutions may adopt due to cost-effectiveness or availability. The study highlights the necessity of implementing and utilizing audio laboratories in English language departments. It also emphasizes the importance of increasing students' exposure to the British accent, which, in turn, enhances their pronunciation of English vocabulary.

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