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Title

To Teach or Not to Teach: On the Didactic Aspect of Accent Training in the EFL Classroom

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Abstract

This study addresses the pedagogical issues on the integration of accent training into the EFL classroom. Investigations into the area of teaching pronunciation have downplayed the role of accent training in favor of functional intelligibility. Attempts to teach native-like accents to EFL learners have been abandoned mainly due to the perceived impossibility of such feats and also the occasionally-reported advantage of local-accent comprehensibility (Wilcox, 1978; Ekong, 1982). This shift in focus has also

been fueled by the emergence of 'English as an International Language'. The present study aims at discovering the Iranian EFL learners' attitudes towards various English accents. To this end, 112 participants from three proficiency levels participated in this study. An attitudinal survey using bipolar adjectives was used for eliciting the data. The test of Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was used to analyze the data. By showing that learners' beliefs and attitudes may run contrary to those of policy makers, the present study argues that in deciding on what accent to teach in the classroom, apart from learners' needs, we should also take their wants into account. This implies that instead of imposing our views upon our learners, maybe we ought to rethink our approach towards accent training in the English classroom, and opt for a more liberal stance.

Key words: Accent training, Needs analysis, English as an international language, learner attitude.

Introduction

Owing to the fact that accent is one of the first noticeable features of oral communication, for the foreign language teacher, deciding on what accent to teach in the classroom requires very careful consideration. Teaching a native-like accent, on the one hand, can benefit the learners by equipping them with the covert prestige varieties of the English language. On the other hand, it can deprive them from the greater intelligibility local accents have been said to offer (Wilcox, 1978; Ekong, 1982). The methods have also been known to provide different advice on what accent to teach in the classroom. At the end of the day, EFL instructors either choose to teach English with a native-like accent (i.e. American, British) or decide to train their students to use the language with a local accent. Prior to attempting to look into the pros and cons of each approach, we will begin our discussion by trying to understand the nature of accent.

What is accent?

People generally have a 'common sense' view of accent. Before considering a technical description of accent from the point of view of phoneticians, sociolinguists and psycholinguists, a general description of the term is attempted. The Merriam-

Webster online dictionary describes accent as a “way of speaking typical of a particular group of people and especially of the natives and residents of a region”. From this definition, it can be understood that an accent is a feature or manifestation of speech, which differs depending on the community or region to which the speaker belongs. This feature can, therefore, be regarded as a factor in determining the similarities and differences in speech between speakers, depending on whether they share the same language. For a more detailed definition of accent, it is useful to look at definitions by specialists of various fields, who have also defined accent in terms of their own area of specialty. Phoneticians define accent as a specific pronunciation, determined by the phonetic habits of the speakers’ native language transferred to his or her use of another language (O’Grady et al, 2005). The phonetic view of accent chiefly focuses on the ability and/or inability to produce certain sounds due to their absence or presence in the native language inventory of a speaker.

Sociolinguists adopt a more embracing approach towards the study of accent. Becker (1995), for example, defines accent as part of an individual’s language which serves to specify the speaker’s region of origin or national/ethnic identity regardless of the language being spoken. Contrary to the realm of phonetics and phonology which is quite narrow in its scope of examining accent, sociolinguistics investigates accent in terms of its phonetic, lexical and grammatical variations in diverse social contexts. As clear from the above definition, accent, from the sociolinguistic perspective, serves as a means for identifying people’s attachment to a speech community.

In the context of sociolinguistics, it is of utmost importance to specifically distinguish between accent and dialect. The former describes where a speaker is from regionally or socially (Yule, 1985). While, the latter implies systematic differences in the way language is spoken by different groups.

Accent has also been of great interest to psycholinguists. This importance stems from the perceptions which originate from different accents, both within the speaker and the hearer. That is, people speaking with a particular accent, known to be prestigious, will be recognized as being more attractive both by themselves and by those around them. These stereotypes shaping our attitudes towards accents and their speakers can be the outcome of experience, rumors, books, and most importantly, the media (Alford and Strother, 1990). According to Dixon and Mahoney (2004), speakers with standard accents are regarded to be more intelligent, proficient and fluent than those speaking with a nonstandard accent.

Accent and second language acquisition

Psycholinguists and phonologists who specialize in accent generally hold that the difficulty of learning to pronounce a foreign language is cognitive rather than physical, and that it deals with the manner in which raw sounds are categorized or conceptualized in speech (Fraser, 2000). Accent is also often used to refer to the speech of a person who speaks a language non-natively (Fromkin, Rodman and Hyams, 2003). This means that both native and non-native speakers of a language could be said to have accents. The field of second language acquisition concerns itself with this sense of the term. Southwood and Fledge (1999) define a foreign accent as: “Non-pathological speech produced by second language learners that differs in partially systematic ways from the speech characteristics of native speakers of a given dialect” (p. 335).

As in the case of native accents, foreign accents also result in different attitudes on the part of the speaker and hearer. Most of the studies carried out on perceptions towards accented speech by foreign language speakers have included native speaker subjects and were performed in ESL settings. One of the earliest studies in this area was by Brennan and Brennan (1981) who investigated the attitudes of Anglo-American and Mexican-American speakers towards accented speech. The findings of this study revealed that speakers with lower degrees of accented speech were believed to be of higher social status than those with stronger foreign accents. Other studies, such as that carried out by Ryan and Carranza (1977), showed that there is a high correlation between respondents’ ratings of accentedness and attribution of status and even possible occupation.

In another study on hearer attitudes towards non-native speech, Johnson and Frederick (1994) demonstrated that pronunciation errors resulted in more negative judgments in comparison with grammatical errors, which are more critical to understanding any given speech sample. Stressing the significance of accent, Cargile and Giles (1997) found that pronunciation was a more determining factor in shaping attitudes towards speech than its content. That is, a foreign accent was shown to generate negative attitudes regardless of the tone of the message. Another group of studies have concerned themselves with non-native speakers’ attitudes towards accented English. Manzano (1997) examined the listening comprehension ability and attitudes of Puerto Rican university students with regards to lectures delivered by university professors with varying degrees of English-accented speech. The findings point out that all accents were regarded to be equally

comprehensible. However, the Standard American accent was shown to have the highest ratings with respect to attractiveness, dynamism and superiority. Other studies of similar nature (Chiba, Matsuura and Yamamoto, 1995; Forde, 1995) have also revealed that advanced EFL learners display negative attitudes towards their own regional accents of English. EFL learners also exhibited a marked preference for accents they were more familiar with. The Standard American English was chosen more often due to its cultural influence (music, television, film, etc.).

Considering all that has been said, one is enticed to conclude that language instructors should try to teach English with a native accent (e.g., Standard American or Standard British accent), due to the greater levels of prestige and attractiveness attributed to such accents both by native and non-native speakers of English. Nevertheless, the emergence of English as an international language has made many specialists and language teachers think twice.

Teaching English as an international language

The fast-growing and inevitable globalization of our world has its own consequences which are reflected upon our daily lives. The field of ELT is also significantly influenced by this revolution, and it is important for teachers of language to be aware of these changes and innovations. English as an international language has downplayed the importance of speaking with a native-like accent in the classroom in a number of ways.

First of all, in our modern world, with the increase in the scientific exchange of information, the rapid rise in the rate of global tourism and the perpetual growth in international trade and commerce, English language is no longer used for communicating with native speakers (Warschauer, 2000). The English language is now commonly believed to be shared with a mixed group of non-native speakers. As a result, a variety of possible interactions have been made possible using the English language, not all of which include a native speaker as an interlocutor. Hence, it would seem illogical to have learners take up American or British English when they may only want to communicate with non-native speakers and not necessarily native ones.

Globalization has also given rise to awareness towards linguistic imperialism. This has resulted in an uprising against what is believed to be linguistic hegemony. English as an international language is seen as preserving local identities and values. This movement has had a tremendous influence on taking away all the value assigned to native accents

and sharing it with local varieties. It has also rectified the classical division of English speakers into native-, second language-, and foreign language speakers (Jenkins, 2005).

The importance of needs analysis

Since Munby (1978) first introduced needs analysis to language teaching, much attention has been directed towards learners' needs. The communicative approach advocated the development of a syllabus based on learner needs and the analysis of the target situation. Needs analysis later went on to become one of the vital and most determining parts of English for specific purposes (Dudley-Evans and St. John, 1998).

Needs have been defined and classified into different categories. In other words, contrary to the time when it was first introduced, needs are no longer viewed as a unitary term. A multitude of classifications have been proposed. Brindley (1989) have divided needs into a subjective and objective category. Berwick (1989) drew a distinction between 'perceived' and 'felt' needs. Hutchinson and Waters (1987) also categorized needs as 'necessities', 'lacks' and 'wants'. Therefore, it would no longer suffice for language planners and syllabus designers to regard viewing the target situation as a form of comprehensive needs analysis. This statement holds true for the decision of which accent to aim for in the classroom.

In Hutchinson and Water's (1987) classification of needs, 'wants' refer to subjective needs, as perceived by the learners themselves. It is of great importance for language teachers to not prioritize and impose their own understanding of needs upon their learners and the course. Although it is possible for learners' wants to be in conflict with the views of other interested parties. Nevertheless, due to the close relationship between wants and the learners' level of motivation, it is of utmost importance to include this crucial aspect into our process of needs analysis.

As can be seen, when deciding which accent to teach in class, the teacher is faced with a dilemma. On the one hand, native accents seem to be more prestigious and attractive and consequently, they can possibly result in better job opportunities, improved social life and even higher academic achievement. On the other hand, local accents preserve the speakers' national and individual identity and could also be seen as effort which could be spent on other achievements such as the improvement of comprehensibility and communicative competence. One possible solution to this problem could be to find out about the learners' own attitudes and beliefs towards various accents. That is, we

should take the students' 'wants' into account. The present study aims to find out about Iranian EFL learners' attitudes towards various accents of the English language.

Method

Participants

The participants of this study were 112 (67 F, 45M) learners of English as a foreign language in the city of Mashhad, Iran. The students were studying at private language institutes in this city. Age was controlled by including only those participants who were between 18 to 30 years of age. It is worth mentioning that the first language of all learners was Farsi. All participants were initially asked to take part in a specimen of the paper-based version of the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL). Based on the results of this test, participants were divided into three proficiency groups: Beginners, Intermediate and Advanced students (B, I, A). Participants with a score of over 1 standard deviation above the mean were considered to be advanced. Those with a score of between -1 and +1 standard deviations from the mean were classified as intermediate, and those with a score of below -1 standard deviation were regarded as beginners. The beginner, intermediate and advanced groups consisted of 25, 68 and 19 participants, respectively. The descriptive statistics for the scores obtained on the pretest can be seen in figure 1.

Table 1. Descriptive values for the TOEFL test

Descriptive Statistics

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
TOEFL	112	79.00	135.00	106.22	15.72
Valid N (listwise)	112				

Instruments

The stimulus for this study was provided by three different male speakers. The three speakers each had a different accent: The standard North American, standard British, and the local Farsi accent of English. These accents were selected on the basis of their prevalence in language institutes and availability of teachers and textbooks in Iran. All

speakers read out the same neutral text on the topic of glaciers. The passage was selected on the basis of neutrality with the intention of preventing learners' responses from being influenced by the topic, and, hence, being biased. The text was 52 words long, and each reading took approximately one minute to complete. This was believed to be a suitable length, since a shorter passage would not have provided sufficient stimulus for the participants' judgments, and a longer one would have jeopardized the involvement of the listener. None of the readings included hesitation or rephrasing. The speech samples were randomly organized and copied into an audio disc.

The attitudinal survey used in this study consisted of two parts. The first part used a Likert Scale with 5 bipolar adjectives to discover the learners' attitudes towards the stimulus providers and their accents. These adjectives were: unpleasant/pleasant, unfriendly/friendly, not prestigious/prestigious, uneducated/educated and comprehensible/incomprehensible. The respondents were asked to choose a point on the scale between 1 to 5 for each of the bipolar adjectives. For instance, on the pleasant vs. unpleasant item, a participant who had chosen 4 considered the speaker to be more pleasant than that the one which had chosen 1. The highest possible score for each speaker on this part was 25 and the minimum was 5. In the second section of the survey, participants were provided with three statements about their perceptions regarding pronunciation and accent in foreign language learning. In this part, they were required to express their level of agreement with what was stated on a Likert Scale, with 1 expressing their disagreement, and 5 articulating their agreement with the statement. The maximum achievable score on this part was 15 and the minimum was 3. The statements in the second section of the survey were as follows:

1. *I believe that it is important for me to learn to speak English with a native accent*
2. *I believe that achieving a native accent in English is achievable for me.*
3. *I believe my teacher should spend more time teaching me how to speak with a native accent rather than focusing on grammar and vocabulary.*

Procedure

The participants of this study were carefully briefed by the researchers on what was expected from them. The survey was administered on multiple occasions and in separate venues. However, great care was taken to ensure equal conditions on each administration. The completion of the survey lasted approximately 15 minutes. On

every administration, following each recording, the participants were given time to complete the five attitudinal items for that speaker. Having completed this procedure for all four recordings, the participants were asked to state their level of agreement/disagreement with each of the three statements in the second part.

Results

The test of analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to see if there were significant differences between the three ability groups (i.e., B, I, A) with regards to their attitudes. The findings of the first section of the survey have been summarized in Tables 2 and 3 below.

Table 2. ANOVA: Attitude by level of proficiency

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
AMERICAN	Between Groups	769.75	2	384.87	14.46	.00
	Within Groups	2901.23	109	26.61		
	Total	3670.99	111			
BRITISH	Between Groups	280.80	2	140.40	3.77	.02
	Within Groups	4056.25	109	37.21		
	Total	4337.06	111			
IRANIAN	Between Groups	816.24	2	408.12	21.07	.00
	Within Groups	2110.86	109	19.36		
	Total	2927.10	111			

The results of the comparison of means show that there is a significant difference between the three ability groups since the observed value of $F=14.46$ is greater than the critical value. In order to determine where the exact differences lie, a post-hoc analysis was carried out.

Table 3. Tukey HSD: Post-hoc comparison

Dependent Variable	(I) GROUP	(J) GROUP	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
						Lower Bound	Upper Bound
AMERICAN	1.00	2.00	-.15	1.20	.99	-3.02	2.71
		3.00	6.86(*)	1.57	.00	3.13	10.60
	2.00	1.00	.15	1.20	.99	-2.71	3.02
		3.00	7.02(*)	1.33	.00	3.84	10.20
	3.00	1.00	-6.86(*)	1.57	.00	-10.60	-3.13
		2.00	-7.02(*)	1.33	.00	-10.20	-3.84
BRITISH	1.00	2.00	-1.49	1.42	.55	-4.88	1.90
		3.00	2.81	1.85	.28	-1.59	7.22
	2.00	1.00	1.49	1.42	.55	-1.90	4.88
		3.00	4.30(*)	1.58	.02	.54	8.06
	3.00	1.00	-2.81	1.85	.28	-7.22	1.59
		2.00	-4.30(*)	1.58	.02	-8.06	-.54
FARSI	1.00	2.00	.16	1.02	.98	-2.28	2.60
		3.00	-7.07(*)	1.33	.00	-10.25	-3.88
	2.00	1.00	-.16	1.02	.98	-2.60	2.28
		3.00	-7.23(*)	1.14	.00	-9.94	-4.52
	3.00	1.00	7.07(*)	1.33	.00	3.88	10.25
		2.00	7.23(*)	1.14	.00	4.52	9.94

* The mean difference is significant at the .05 level.

The results of the analysis reveal that beginners and intermediate students favored the Standard American accent significantly more than the Standard British and Farsi accents of English. There was no meaningful difference in attitude towards the three accents among intermediate students. Finally, advanced learners showed significantly more pleasant attitudes towards the Farsi accent of English in comparison with the Standard British and Standard American accents. From another perspective, Standard American was found to be the most favored accent followed by the Standard British and finally, the local Farsi accent of English.

In the second part of the survey, each of the three statements was rated by participants in the three groups. The test of Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was once again used to determine whether the three groups differed in their beliefs towards the statements. The results of the analysis for the first item can be found in Figures 4 and 5.

Table 4. ANOVA: Proficiency level by level of agreement; Item 1

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	46.63	2	23.31	18.76	.00
Within Groups	135.43	109	1.24		
Total	182.06	111			

The results of the comparison of means reveal that based on the critical value, the three groups differed in their level of agreement with this item.

Table 5. Tukey HSD: proficiency by Item 1

(I) GROUP	(J) GROUP	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
1.00	2.00	.62(*)	.26	.04	.00	1.24
	3.00	2.04(*)	.33	.00	1.23	2.84
2.00	1.00	-.62(*)	.26	.04	-1.24	-.00
	3.00	1.41(*)	.28	.00	.72	2.09
3.00	1.00	-2.04(*)	.33	.00	-2.84	-1.23
	2.00	-1.41(*)	.28	.00	-2.09	-.72

* The mean difference is significant at the .05 level

Presenting the multiple comparison of means for the first statement in the second section of the survey, the results indicate the points of difference. The findings show that with regards to the first item, beginners agreed significantly more with this statement than intermediate and advanced learners of English. Advanced learners disagreed with this statement significantly more than any other group. Figures 6 and 7 below describe the results of the same analysis for the second statement.

Table 6. ANOVA: proficiency level by level of agreement, Item 2

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	20.90	2	10.45	12.88	.00
Within Groups	88.37	109	.81		
Total	109.27	111			

The results of the comparison of means for the second statement in the second section of the survey show that once again the three proficiency groups differed in their level of agreement on this item.

Table 7. Tukey HSD: proficiency by Item 2

(I) GROUP	(J) GROUP	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
1.00	2.00	.3800	.21061	.17	-.12	.88
	3.00	1.3537(*)	.27405	.00	.70	2.00
2.00	1.00	-.3800	.21061	.17	-.88	.12
	3.00	.9737(*)	.23366	.00	.41	1.52
3.00	1.00	-1.3537(*)	.27405	.00	-2.00	-.70
	2.00	-.9737(*)	.23366	.00	-1.52	-.41

* The mean difference is significant at the .05 level.

The results of the comparison of means for the second statement in the second section of the survey indicate that beginner and intermediate learners did not differ significantly in their beliefs towards the second statement. However, advanced students disagreed significantly more with this statement than both intermediate and elementary learners.

Figures 8 and 9 show the results of the ANOVA for the third statement.

Table 8. ANOVA: proficiency level by level of agreement, Item 3

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	11.08	2	5.54	7.58	.00
Within Groups	79.62	109	.73		
Total	90.71	111			

The comparison of means for the third statement in the second section of the survey points out that the three proficiency groups also differed in their level of agreement on this item.

Table 9. Tukey HSD: proficiency by Item 3

(I) GROUP	(J) GROUP	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
1.00	2.00	.38	.19	.13	-.08	.86
	3.00	1.01(*)	.26	.00	.39	1.62
2.00	1.00	-.38	.19	.13	-.86	.08
	3.00	.62(*)	.22	.01	.09	1.14
3.00	1.00	-1.01(*)	.26	.00	-1.62	-.39
	2.00	-.62(*)	.22	.01	-1.14	-.09

* The mean difference is significant at the .05 level.

According to the multiple comparison of means for the third statement in the second section of the questionnaire, the results for the second and third item are very similar. Once again, there was no significant difference between the beliefs of elementary and intermediate students. Nevertheless, respondents in both groups agreed with the third statement significantly more than their advanced counterparts.

The findings of the study indicate that most Iranian EFL learners exhibit more positive attitudes towards the Standard American accent of English. This tendency was seen among elementary and intermediate learners. Advanced learners, however, had significantly lower attitudes towards the Standard American accent. Beginners and intermediate learners found the Standard American accent more pleasant, friendly and prestigious. They also rated the speaker of Standard American English to be the most educated and comprehensible. The marked positive attitude towards this accent could be attributed to the widespread use of textbooks drawing heavily on American English. Another possible reason for this trend could be the effect of mass media, such as television, movies and radio programs on learner attitudes.

Following the Standard American accent, Standard British was found to draw the most positive attitudes towards itself. Nevertheless, it was the only accent for which there was not significant difference among elementary, intermediate and advanced learners. It was regarded by most advanced learners to be the most prestigious and its speaker was rated as being more educated than that of any other accent.

The participants of this study had the least positive attitude towards the local Farsi accent of English. However, it is noteworthy that despite its overall lack of popularity, it was found to be more intelligible than the Standard British accent. Perhaps the most

interesting finding of this study was the marked preference among advanced learners towards this accent of English. Although further studies would have to be conducted in order to investigate the reason for this outcome, one could speculate that during their years of studying English, advanced learners become more aware of the utilitarian purpose of learning a foreign language, and, hence, gain more positive attitudes towards their local accent. This preference could also be seen as the result of advanced learners' commonly failed attempts to learn to speak English with a Standard American or Standard British accent.

As the participants in this study became more proficient, they place significantly less importance on learning English with a native accent. Once again, it could be speculated that with experience in learning a foreign language comes the awareness that there are more important aspects to attend to than accent. It may be for this very reason that advanced learners attached the least importance to speaking with a native accent than either elementary or intermediate learners.

Elementary and intermediate learners of English in the present study were not significantly different in their beliefs on the possibility of acquiring a native accent. Advanced learners, on the other hand, believed that it was very improbable for them to speak English with a native accent. This may also have been the result of their experience. As opposed to elementary and intermediate learners who were optimistic towards learning to speak with a native accent, advanced learners believed that achieving a native accent in the English language was significantly less achievable for them.

Advanced learners who participated in this study were of the opinion that less time should be spent on pronunciation practice and accent training in the classroom as opposed to learning grammar, vocabulary and other language skills and components. Elementary and intermediate learners held the belief that more time should be spent on accent training. The importance placed on accent training in the classroom by elementary and intermediate learners may be due to their views on the possibility of achieving a native English accent.

Conclusion

In a time when accent training seems to be effort put to waste, it appears that learners, particularly those in the elementary and intermediate levels, still look forward to

speaking English with a native accent. This subjective need on the part of learners runs contrary to the current significance attached to functional intelligibility and local accent varieties. The question which arises is whether these needs are worthy of our attention or whether they should be neglected for the sake of more compelling needs which learners themselves are not always aware of.

How much value should language planners and instructors set on what students themselves believe to be important for their learning? Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998) introduce a number of sources for gathering information for the purpose of needs analysis. These sources include people studying and working in the field, employers, colleagues, ex-students, documents relevant to the field and the learners, clients and the learners. According to this list, learners are only one of the many sources for collecting information while performing needs analysis. For this reason, it could be argued that the students' perceptions of their needs should not outweigh the other sources which are also crucial to the performing of needs analysis.

Conversely, it could be argued that learners are at the very core of the learning process. That is, unless their needs are addressed, their motivation, which is central to their successful learning, will be drastically reduced. What is more, acknowledging learner needs is a vital component of the liberal education movement. But it could also be claimed that learners are not always aware of their real needs, similar to a child who will not take prescribed medicine due to being unaware of its benefits.

Policies in which learners' perceived needs are rarely taken into account dominate the language education system in Iran. Language schools often impose the variety of English which they deem fit upon their learners. Decisions regarding which variety to teach chiefly depend on the availability of textbooks, materials and the overall preference of teachers. It is common for learners favoring a particular variety to abandon their preference to the domination of one particular type among teachers and policy-makers.

One solution to this problem is to increase and foster the rate of interaction and negotiation between stakeholders. In other words, instead of dictating learners' needs without allowing them to air their views or relying entirely on what the learners perceive to be beneficial for them, we should encourage dialogue among learners, teachers, language planners and all other parties involved in the language learning process.

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