



EXPLORING UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' ATTITUDES TOWARDS THEIR ENGLISH ACCENT AND NATIVE ENGLISH ACCENTS

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Abstract

This current study examines university students' attitudes towards their English accents and native English accents. Over the past few decades, the study of attitudes towards English accents has gained considerable attention owing to its multifaceted nature within the context of second language acquisition. The examination of such attitudes is known to be thought-provoking due to its entanglement with sociocultural, sociohistorical, language contact, and language learning experience factors. To achieve the study's objectives successfully, a semi-structured interview was conducted to gather rich and authentic data. The participants of the study, comprising first-year and third-year English literature students, were interviewed to elicit their views on English accents. The findings of the study reveal the presence of both positive and negative attitudes towards the participants' English accents, with a prevailing belief that so-called native English accents carry greater prestige than others. The implications of these findings have enriched the fields of applied linguistics and provide insights into future English Language Teaching, particularly from the English as an International Language perspective.

Keywords: English, English accent, language attitude, university students

INTRODUCTION

Accents have emerged as a prominent area of interest within the field of second language acquisition in recent decades (Jenkins, 2015). In this context, an accent is defined as the phonology and intonation of a native language that affects the pronunciation of the target language (Lippi-Green, 2012). According to Freed's study (1995), assessors often find accents to be a significant influencing factor when sharing their experiences, along with other socio-cultural and socio-historical variables. Factors such as language contact and learning experiences play a crucial role in shaping accent acquisition, as well as shaping one's identity and motivation.

From Kachru's concentric circle model (1985), the use of 'Inner Circle English accents is often referred to as the obedient English accents from the 'Inner Circle countries, such as Britain, The USA, Australia, Canada, and New Zealand. In other words, many people still believe that the standard English ideology still belongs to the 'native speaker'. However, with the immense spread of English all across the globe, English varieties that differed from native speakers have emerged due to the influence of English and different mother tongues, specifically in terms of accents (Jenkins, 2007; Utami & Suprayogi, 2022). As a result, the singular form of English has now become the plural Englishes. There are many English diversity, such as Singaporean English, Indian English, Nigerian English, African American English, and many more (Kachru, 1985).

This means that in English as an International paradigm, English should receive global ownership rather than be owned by the 'Inner Circle' group as it has been nativized and localized in various contexts. Furthermore, the number of people who speak English as a second language has exceeded the number of people who speak English as their first language (Crystal, 2012; Kirkpatrick, 2017). Thus, scholars in World Englishes, English as a Lingua Franca, and English as an International Language believe that it is necessary to review various motivations for learning and speaking English to recognize English innovation in different contexts (Fang, 2020; Galloway, 2017). With the emergence of English varieties, it is essential to unpack students' attitudes towards their English accents and native English accents, so that this research will enrich the study of English language attitude.

Language attitude is an umbrella term for describing one's perceptions of particular languages or varieties, language preferences, language communities, reasons for learning a language, language pedagogy, and learning situations (Galloway, 2017). Language attitude is an individual's evaluative orientation towards their language or the language of others (Fabrigar et al., 2005). Examining language attitude involves several elements, such as a social process, contact with languages and cultures, exposure to the language of others or familiarity, and specific ideologies and preferences (Fang, 2020; Jenkins, 2007).

Some people may positively view English diversity as the unique varieties associated with its speakers' cultural backgrounds (McKay & Brown, 2016; Shim, 2002). For instance, a study by Ahn (2014) has shown that his Korean participants in Korea displayed positive attitudes towards Korean English. This was mainly because they believed that Korean English expressed the uniqueness of Korean culture. The participants also optimistically believed that Korean English might become legitimate once it reached a broader range of contexts. Similarly, a study by Bernaisch and Koch (2016) has discovered positive attitudes and acceptance towards Indian English alongside British English and American English in India.

Yet, negative attitudes towards English varieties may also exist among others as they perceive them negatively as 'bad' English (McKay & Brown, 2016). These negative views emerge as the users of English varieties and the associated cultures may be perceived as either 'deficient' or 'inferior' since it differs from the so-called 'standard' Inner Circle varieties of English (Hundt et al., 2015). For example, Young and Walsh (2010) found in their study that their Korean participants in Korea preferred American English over any other varieties. The participants agreed that American English was considered more useful if they entered a global context, while Korean English was regarded as 'ungrammatical'. Additionally, Matsuda (2003) revealed that the Japanese participants in Japan disliked Japanese English because it was considered an 'incorrect' and 'disappointing' version of English.

Tokumoto and Shibata (2011) examined the attitudes of students in Japanese, South Korean, and Malaysian Universities toward their own English accents and found that different groups perceived differences in English accents. More specifically, Japanese students highly value the importance of their English accents, because students from Japan and South Korea do not like their English accents and prefer to use a demonstration of native-like English pronunciation. Likewise, Fang (2020) has investigated Chinese University Students' attitudes and English accents of other groups. This investigation shows that others are generally dissatisfied with their English accent and tend to prefer the English accent used by native speakers.

Based on prior research, some students prefer the accents of Anglophone English varieties which are considered suitable, concise, and globally recognized, while non-native varieties are considered ineffective and unpleasant for them (Boonsuk & Fang, 2022; Pinget et al., 2015). Subsequently, it was concluded that English learners adapt to English accents because native English and the Anglophone variety of English are seen as the more authentic and legitimate model of ELT (Fang, 2020; Jenkins, 2007; Tokumoto & Shibata, 2011). Another related previous research is that students perceive British and American accents as the most important English for ELT, especially in subjects that involve them having to use verbal and pronunciation. They think that knowing native English variations will be easier for them and can boost their confidence when using English (Boonsuk & Fang, 2022). In addition, accents can increase perceptions that are free from other factors and accents can show the power of language which not only influences the ideas of speakers but also groups. In essence, previous studies have indicated that accent, language, and ethics are language identities that are intertwined with one another (Garrett, 2010; Moyer, 2013)

Despite the growing number of researchers studying students' preference towards English accents, very few examine Indonesian students' attitudes toward English accents. Thus, to enrich the research about language attitude, this current study explores university students' attitudes towards their English accent and native English accent. This study aims to answer the research question: to what extent do the students view their English accent and native English accent? The answer to this research question will help teachers, educators, or even language policymakers to better understand which accents are more useful or important to learn, and what students feel about their English accents and the accents they aspire to. For instance, negative attitudes towards a specific accent may lead to demotivated feelings about learning the accent, while positive attitudes towards a specific accent can boost learners' confidence, thus, enabling them to keep practising English. In brief, the implication of this study is expected to shed some light on future English Language Teaching from English as an International framework.

METHOD

In this study, semi-structured interviews were adopted to obtain more authentic and rich data. According to Talmy (2011), an interview is defined as a tool for collecting information, specifically revealing the truths, attitudes, beliefs, and mental states of respondents. The four participants analyzed in this study were students majoring in English literature at a university in Bandung (Table 1). Participants in the current research were recruited by established criteria. This research recruited these four students because they were related to what they were learning and expected to have more critical thinking about the related topic in the current research. It was expected that these four students would be more sensitive to accents and could have different perspectives towards English accents. The participants in this study were subcategorized into First-Year Students and Third-Year Students.

Table 1. The participants of the current study

Pseudonym	Academic Year	Major
P1 (Male)	First-Year Student (FYS)	English Department
P2 (Male)	First-Year Student (FYS)	English Department
P3 (Male)	Third-Year Student (TYS)	English Department
P4 (Female)	Third-Year Student (TYS)	English Department
Total	4	

The interviews conducted with the participants were around 25-30 minutes. The language used in the interview is Indonesian so the data obtained can be more meaningful and natural because their first language is Indonesian. The interview questions of this current research were adapted from the studies conducted on the accent topic related to this research. One of the questions from the interview is “Do you think certain English accent is more prestigious than others?”. The data generated all came from the results of joint interviews with FYS and also TYS in the form of transcripts. The results of this interview were then analyzed and discussed using the theory of language attitude in Galloway’s theory.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section displays the research findings for three main themes. The first and the second theme involve the participants’ attitudes towards English accents in general, including the social process, educational background, contact with languages and cultures, exposure to the language of others or familiarity, and specific ideologies and preferences. The third theme addresses the impact of English accents on English Language Teaching.

Students’ Attitudes Towards Their English Accents

Some participants in this study specifically depicted negative attitudes towards their English accents, while others had positive attitudes towards their English accents. These views were affected by educational background, contact with languages and cultures, exposure to the language of others or familiarity, and specific ideologies and preferences. Excerpts 1, 2, and 3 demonstrate the participants’ negative attitudes towards their English accent.

Excerpt 1 (P1):

“I’m not satisfied with my English accent. I want to have British accent to be able to communicate internationally.”

Excerpt 2 (P2):

“I feel like I don’t sound “native” enough. In the future, I want to sound like a real, 100% British native speaker because I want to work overseas.”

Excerpt 3 (P3):

“I really hate my English accent. It sounds so weird because there is a mixture of Indonesian and American accents in my speaking and it doesn’t sound natural.”

The excerpts above are consistent with the findings of Young and Walsh (2010), who observed that English accents other than native English accents are commonly regarded as inferior, unnatural, foreign, and socially unacceptable. This is due to the dominance of American and British culture, especially in the realm of media and entertainment. American and British accents are frequently portrayed as the standard in movies, television shows, and music, which could lead to a widespread belief that other accents are inferior or less desirable. Additionally, people may be more familiar and comfortable with American and British accents due to their exposure to them through language learning programs, international travel, or online media. As a result, accents that deviate from these established standards may be viewed as less authentic or less intelligible (Galloway, 2017). The respondents acknowledged that they had extensive exposure to American and British English, having primarily learned American English in school, watched American or British content, and listened to American music. Consequently, with the global spread of these 'native' accents, any accent other than American or British is regarded as erroneous or deficient. These results support the assertions of McKay and Brown (2016), who suggest that unfamiliarity with certain accents may result in negative attitudes towards them.

Excerpt 4 (P4):

"I think it's okay to have Indonesian accent. I even have Sundanese accent when I speak English. Hahaha. I mean, if I go overseas and I speak English bringing my Indonesian accent, I think it should be fine as long as they understand what I mean. Plus, it's a good point because people will know my identity. People will know that I am from Indonesia."

The aforementioned excerpt highlights the positive attitudes exhibited by the student towards her English accent, as she expressed satisfaction with it. Notably, she acknowledged that she occasionally incorporated her dialect when speaking English, and she was comfortable with doing so. This study aligns with the findings of Ahn (2014), who discovered that his Korean participants displayed contentment with their English accent due to its distinctiveness. Participant 4 similarly demonstrated a sense of pride by asserting that her Indonesian accent served to distinguish her identity. She emphasized that prioritizing intelligibility over achieving a native-like accent was paramount. Therefore, it can be inferred that social processes and individual preferences may significantly shape one's attitudes towards English accents (Galloway, 2017).

Students' Attitudes Towards Native English Accents

All of the informants in this study agreed that they have positive views towards native English accents, specifically British accents. They asserted that the British English accent sounds very prestigious, natural, royal, and luxurious. Furthermore, they also confirmed that the American accent is easy listening and common.

Excerpt 5 (P1):

"I love British accent. When I heard it, I imagine myself being in the royal family, talking like a king and queen."

Excerpt 6 (P2):

"I think the most prestigious accent is British. The accent is very soft and unique."

Excerpt 7 (P3):

"Of course British accent is the most prestigious accent. It sounds very formal, and whenever I hear British accent, it sounds very classy. Also, it is the place where English came from."

Excerpt 8 (P4):

"Yes, I think British accent is good. The way British talk is very luxurious and I just "wow", I want to be like British."

The statements made by the informants suggest a positive perception of the British accent as the most prestigious form of an English accent. They even mentioned that the sound of a British accent is often associated with luxury, particularly about the Royal Family. The British Royal Family is widely recognized as a symbol of national identity and cultural heritage in the United Kingdom. As a result, many people view the British accent as an indicator of high social status and cultural heritage. These views were also largely influenced by the informants' exposure to British accents through various forms of media. As noted by Galloway (2017), one factor that can shape individuals' attitudes towards a particular accent is their level of familiarity with it. When people are exposed to a particular accent repeatedly, it becomes more familiar to them, and they may find it easier to understand and communicate with individuals who speak that accent. As a result, they may perceive the accent as more intelligible

and feel more comfortable using it themselves. In addition, the participants also display positive attitudes towards American English as shown in the excerpt below:

Excerpt 9 (P4):

"In the future, I want to sound like American. I want to have American accent."

Excerpt 10 (P3): *"I want to be fluent speaking English in American accent because I want to be socially accepted. American accent is very common, easy to understand, and the pronunciation is not that hard, it's even more common than British accent."*

These statements endorse a study by Fang (2020) who also discovered in his research that his participants favoured native accents rather than the non-native accent. The findings suggest that students exhibited a favourable disposition towards the native English accent, which can be attributed to their familiarity with it. To conclude, the historical and cultural influence of the British and American countries on the Indonesian education system, coupled with the dominance of these accents in global media and communication, have made the British and American accents the most familiar and widely recognized among students in Indonesia.

Students' Attitudes Towards English Accent on English Language Teaching

In regards to the type of accent that ought to be taught in educational institutions, it was universally agreed upon by all respondents that the primary English varieties for English Language Teaching should be native accents, namely British English and American English. This consensus was based on the practicality of these native accents in the context of future applications, as they are widely accepted and used internationally. The respondents were of the view that British and American accents are widely recognized throughout the world, and therefore, learning these accents is deemed to be the most efficient medium for effective communication.

Excerpt 11 (P2):

"I think school should teach British English because many English tests use British accent, for example IELTS."

Excerpt 12 (P1):

"Schools should teach British and American accents. For example, for Year 1 to Year 9, schools should teach American accent. Next, for Year 10 to College, schools should teach British accent. So, students will be familiar with native accents and they won't experience cultural shock if they go overseas."

According to the abovementioned excerpt, the participant expresses their perspective regarding the optimal pedagogical standard for English Language Teaching, which includes the utilization of the British and American accents. The student in question selected these native accents as the medium of instruction for learning English due to their exam-oriented and future-oriented nature. Furthermore, the student believed that acquiring proficiency in the British and American accents would enhance their ability to communicate effectively across cultures. This viewpoint is consistent with the findings of Bonsuuk and Fang (2022), who discovered that their respondents believed that attaining proficiency in native English variations would be conducive to their learning and bolster their confidence when communicating in English.

CONCLUSION

The current article focuses on the perceptions of university students towards their English accent and native English accent. The study's findings illustrate the diverse attitudes of the students towards English accents. Although one participant maintained a positive attitude towards their English accent due to its connection to their cultural identity, the majority of the students possessed negative attitudes towards their English accent due to their perceived "unnatural" sound. They hold a belief that their English accent might seem unfamiliar to others, hence they attempted to sound like a native speaker for international acceptance. Concerning English accents in English Language Teaching (ELT), all participants concurred that American or British accents should be the primary accents taught in schools for practicality in the future. The factors responsible for this viewpoint included educational background, exposure, language contact, and preference. The participants had prolonged exposure to American and British accents, both from their schools and the media. Thus, the language hierarchy, which upholds native English as the role model, is deeply ingrained in their belief systems. In conclusion, the current research corroborates prior studies and confirms Galloway's, Fang's, and Jenkin's theory that language attitude study requires several approaches, including social processes, language and culture contact, familiarity, exposure to other languages, and specific ideologies and preferences.

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