

English Varieties and Arab Learners in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) Countries: Attitude and Perception

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to explore the attitudes of post-secondary Arab learners towards native and non-native varieties of English. A stimulus tap was incorporated within semi-structured interviews where respondents listened to 6 speakers (an Indian, Arab, Thai, British, American, and Canadian) and then answered 5-Point Likert scale questions. The findings revealed that the interviewees encountered difficulties identifying the speakers' first languages. Whilst the British and Canadian speakers were perceived more positively than the other speech samples and were easier to understand than the Thai speaker, they were less understandable to the interviewees than the Arab and Indian speakers. The American speaker was perceived less positively than the other speech samples and was also the least understandable. The paper concludes with a discussion of the findings and specific recommendations that could facilitate improving Arab learners' tolerance of their own (as well as other non-native) varieties of English. The data in this paper forms part of a broader study investigating the attitude of Arab learners towards the shifting ownership of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF).

Keywords: Arab learners; English as a lingua franca (ELF); native speaker (NS) / non-native speakers (NNS) of English; accent; attitude.

Introduction

English as a lingua franca (ELF) has gained the status of a world language in less than a lifetime and has become the most widely taught, read, and spoken language that the world has ever known (Kachru and Nelson, 2001; McKay, 2002; 2003; Crystal, 2003; Graddol 1997). This worldwide spread has been conceptualized by Kachru's (1985) 'three concentric circles model' representing the type of spread, the patterns of acquisition and the functional domains in which English is used. The inner-circle represents countries where English is used as a native language (the United States (US), the United Kingdom (UK), Australia, Canada, Ireland and New Zealand) and hence are known as native speaking (NS) countries. The outer-circle is primarily made up of countries where English has a colonial history and is used as a second language (such as Malaysia, Singapore and Kenya). The expanding-circle represents the rest of the world where English is used as a foreign language. The majority of the world's English users are now to be found in the periphery (the outer and expanding circles) which are also countries referred to as non-native speaking (NNS) countries (Graddol, 1997). Some researchers proposed alternative descriptions of the spread of English in an attempt to improve Kachru's model and better reflect its sociolinguistic realities (for example Rampton (1990), Modiano (1999), Rajadurai (2005), and Svartvik and Leech (2006)). However, Kachru's model seems to be the most influential one (Jenkins 2003) and is widely used and referred to in ELF literature, for example in Lowenberg (2002), Matsuda (2003) and Jenkins (2006).

The impetus behind exploring attitudes towards native and non-native varieties within these circles stems from the influence of attitude on communication; the ultimate goal behind using a language (Kenworthy, 1987; Ludwig, 1982). Literature on ELF has widely used the term 'intelligibility' which, as a technical term, does not have a precise definition subscribed to by all linguists (Derwing and Munro, 2005, 1997; Pickering, 2006). One of the definitions adopted by some researchers was that established by Smith and Nelson (1985) who refer to 'intelligibility' as the listener's ability to recognize individual words, and they distinguish it from 'comprehensibility' which they use to refer to the understanding of the meaning of the words or utterance in their given context. Numerous studies provide compelling evidence that a negative attitude towards a certain variety has a negative influence on perceiving the intelligibility and/or comprehensibility of speech (Jenkins, 2007; Smith and Nelson, 2006; Rajadurai, 2007; Scales *et al.*, 2006; Pickering, 2006). Perceived intelligibility and/or comprehensibility could also be affected by several factors, one of which is listeners' familiarity with how certain accents of English sound. Another factor is frequent exposure to certain varieties (Ingram and Nguyen, 1997; Smith and Nelson, 1985 and 2006; Rogerson-Revell, 2007; Gumperz, 1982; Gass and Varonis, 1984; Rajadurai, 2007; Smith, 1992; Taylor, 1991; Giles and Smith, 1979; Jenkins, 2000; Tauroza and Luk, 1997). However, the influence of attitude on intelligibility and/or comprehensibility seems to be overtaking the influence of familiarity. That is a negative attitude toward the speaker of a particular variety of English will tend to increase intelligibility/comprehensibility thresholds in spite of the listener's frequent exposure to that variety (Fayer and Krasinski, 1987; Eisenstein and Verdi, 1985). Wolff (1959) found that although the languages spoken by two communities in the Niger Delta, the Nembe and the Kalabari, were linguistically similar, the Nembe group, who were economically poor and politically powerless, said they could understand the speech of the Kalabari. However, the politically powerful Kalabari claimed to find the Nembe's speech unintelligible (in Jenkins, 2007). Similarly, Giles and Powesland (1975) and Ryan and Carranza (1975) found that some

accents or language groups are rated more favourably than others regarding status or position in the social scale. Hence, developing a tolerant attitude (along with other factors such as familiarity and accommodation skills) is argued to enhance both NSs' and NNSs' skills to communicate intelligibly and comprehensibly. This idea has been demonstrated by some scholars, for example Taylor (1991); Kubota (2001); Smith (1983) and (1992); Rajadurai (2007); Smith and Nelson (1985); and Bamgbose (1998). It is worth mentioning that the concepts 'NSs' and 'NNSs' used by them refer to the dichotomy between the speakers from the inner-circle (who are traditionally referred to as NSs) and the outer and expanding circles (who are referred to as NNSs). By using these terms, this paper has no consensus to marginalize the significance of the calls to replace NSs/NNSs concepts with other terms that would better serve the users of English as a world language. Examples of these alternatives terms are 'language expert', 'English-using speech fellowship' and 'multicomponent speaker' (Selvi, 2011). Meanwhile it is also worth mentioning that attitude does not seem to function at a subconscious level. According to Munro *et al.* (2006), although prejudice might penetrate these listeners' assessment of accented utterances, the listeners can choose to downgrade or ignore a speaker's accent in evaluating his/her comprehensibility. For Munro *et al.* (2006), when listeners constrain their subjective attitudes towards accented utterances, they are able to rate speakers' comprehensibility on a dispassionate, if not objective, basis. Hence, it is worth exploring attitude and developing a discussion of its implications.

Attitudes towards Native and Non-Native English

The worldwide spread of English entails the emergence of several varieties of English (for example Singaporean, Indian English and African English) along with so-called native speaker varieties (NS). Although these newly emerging varieties are linguistically equal, they are not considered to be socially equal as they do not seem to be given the same value as NS varieties (McKay, 2002; Phan Le Ha 2005). It is arguable that international norms and rules of the language are not set by all these Englishes, nor even negotiated among them; and control over what is correct and/or incorrect English rests with speakers for whom it is the first language (Seidlhofer, 2004; McKay, 2002; Phan Le Ha 2005). This traditional point of view seems to marginalize the increasing number of studies which critically evaluate the rule of native-like accents in communication (whether among NNSs or NNSs and NSs). An example of this is the work of Wells (2005), Kubota (2001), Yamaguchi (2002), and Smith (1976, 1983) who suggest that even the so-called NSs need to move away from their own models to communicate internationally. In other words, inner-circle Englishes do not necessarily guarantee successful international communication, and what is required from NNSs to communicate internationally is to be intelligible, but not to sound Canadian, Australian, British or American accents. Furthermore, the work of Lenneberg (1967) and Scovel (1995) within the field of second-language acquisition (SLA) suggest that native-like pronunciation appears to be biologically conditioned to occur before adulthood. Researchers, consequently, demonstrate that aiming for native-like pronunciation is an unrealistic burden for both teachers and learners (Cook, 2002; Levis, 2005). Moreover, intelligibility should be the dominant goal of teaching pronunciation (Jenkins, 1998; Celce-Murica *et al.*, 1996; Wells, 2005). These reasons are less likely to develop NNSs' satisfaction towards their own accented Englishes and shift their ultimate goals in learning English from approximating NSs' accents to intelligibility.

Despite research demonstrating the aforementioned ideas, NNS accents are not perceived as positively as NSs' whose norms seem still to dominate pronunciation teaching practices (Levis, 2005). A growing number of studies suggest that NNSs perceive NS models of English as the most appropriate model for international communication, and many learners seem to prefer to model themselves on NSs. According to Pillai (2008), while on the one hand there is a desire among Malaysians to use their own brand of English to construct a sense of belonging and identity, there is still the underlying notion that Malaysian English is *wrong* or *incorrect* English. A study by Dalton-Puffer *et al.* (1997) in Austria confirms the low desirability of non-native English amongst learners. The overall preference is for the three native varieties used in their study: Received Pronunciation (RP), near-RP, and General American (GA). A survey by Timmis (2002) in over 45 countries demonstrates that there is still some desire to conform to NS norms, and this desire is not necessarily restricted to those students who anticipate (or are currently) using English primarily with NSs but with NNSs as well. Fraser (2006) also indicates that NS pronunciation is still highly desired. Despite finding Japanese English easy to understand, participants do not value it highly or want to use it as a model for teaching pronunciation. Matsuda's (2003) qualitative case study on Japanese students ascertained that NS English, especially American pronunciation, was highly desired as a model, whereas Japanese English was not respected. Despite the fact that Matsuda's respondents demonstrated recognition of the worldwide spread and function of English, Britain and the US were the only two inner-circle countries mentioned by them which revealed their aspiration to sound like NSs of these two countries. In another study, Iori (2011) interviewed Taiwanese students who had little exposure to any other varieties of English than the one used as a teaching model in their classroom, namely American English. Iori found that although the majority of the participants agreed that there was no problem with using the language with distinctly Taiwanese characteristics, they still regarded American English as the standard and target model for learning. This might be due to several factors that will be discussed in the following section.

Factors Influencing Awareness and Attitudes towards Non-native Varieties of English

Factors that could possibly influence attitude towards NS/NNS accents could be divided into two broad categories that resemble two faces of the same coin. The first category is *ethnolinguistic vitality*, a construct proposed by Giles *et al.* (1977) and Giles and Johnson (1981; 1987). It holds that there are three factors that can either increase or decrease the speaker's desire to retain his/her identity through accent in communication. These are: *status factors* (economics, financial, political, and linguistic prestige); *demographic factors* (absolute numbers, geographical concentration and birthrate); and *institutional support* (recognition of the group and its language in the media, education and government). The stronger these factors are, the more the group accent tends to be retained. The other category is 'linguistic imperialism' a phenomenon introduced by Phillipson (1992). This exemplifies the inequalities that have been maintained by the UK and the USA through dominating post-colonial countries (like India) and neo-colonial countries (such as countries in Europe) which exploit the weaknesses of former decolonized states and control them economically through maintaining the decolonized states' economic dependent position (Haag, 2011). Inequalities are also exemplified by spreading the ideology of the UK and the USA through the English language (Phillipson, 1992). The economic, financial, and political status of the US and UK facilitated extending their domination over the other countries, and maintaining the linguistic prestige of their own varieties of English.

English language teaching (ELT) practice is a clear example of the linguistic imperialism of the inner-circle countries. This is exemplified through the heavy reliance of the expanding circles on the textbooks and the testing systems like the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) and the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) which are developed and published in the inner-circles, mainly in the UK and US (Matsuda, 2003; Al-Issa 2006). This has, to a large extent, contributed to the current outcome scenario: NNS learners perceive NS varieties more positively than NNS varieties and continuously seek NS models (Lowenberg 2002, Matsuda 2003, Phan Le Ha 2005, Al-Issa 2006). Even if English learners tolerate NNS and do not designate the differences between them and NS varieties as ‘mistakes’ or ‘errors’, especially in differences relevant to pronunciation and accented NNSs Englishes, they still perceive NS English as ‘better’ English compared to other NS Englishes (Phan Le Ha, 2005). The attitude of learners could also be attributed to course tutors; non-native speaking teachers of English who lack tolerant attitudes towards their own varieties seem to carry this attitude to their learners (Smith 1976, Matsuda 2003).

While the above scenario might be true in the case of the expanding circle countries who based their ELT programme material and practices on the inner-circle, there is also the outer-circle which seems to have released itself from the control of the inner-circle over ELT by developing its own testing system (Lowenberg 2002) and receiving wide institutional support and recognition as an official variety of English, such as Indian and Singaporean English (Kachru, 1986; Rajadurai, 2005). Hence the outer-circle is also referred to as the ‘norm-developing’ countries, while the expanding circle is referred to as the ‘norm-dependent’ countries and the inner-circle is referred to as the ‘norm-providing’ countries (Kachru, 1985). The literature has recorded differences in the attitude of the speakers of English in the ‘norm-developing’ and ‘norm-dependent’ countries towards their own English varieties (Jenkins, 2007). However, the norm-dependent countries also have ethnolinguistic vitality privileges which have not yet been made clear and demonstrated to learners in the ELT context, and this made NSs sound more dominant and superior to any privilege which the NNSs might have. These privileges are: the high economical status of many of the expanding circle countries (Jenkins, 2007), and the demographic factor and widespread existence of ELF users which dramatically outnumber the total population of the NSs, and exceed the number of the users of English as a second language in the outer-circle countries. These privileges could be focused on to develop a tolerant attitude towards NNS accents from the expanding circles to their own and other NNS Englishes.

English in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) Countries

The developing economies of the Gulf Cooperation Council countries (GCC) have relied heavily on expatriate labour at all levels to support the spectacular development which has taken place over the last 50 years. In most parts of the GCC expatriates outnumber locals (Randall and Samimi, 2010) and these expatriates mainly represent countries like India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and the Philippines and use English as a medium of communication. This situation has had fundamental sociolinguistic implications, one of which is the emergence of English as a lingua franca at all levels of the societies (Al-Issa, 2010) and which is arguably taking over the role of a lingua franca instead of Arabic (Randall and Samimi, 2010). In some parts of the GCC countries, for example, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), expatriates are nearly 90% of the labour force. The majority are non-Arabs and use English to communicate. Graddol (1997) considers the

UAE, in addition to Lebanon, Somalia and Sudan, as countries in the transition stage from a foreign to a second-language-user country.

The linguistic imperialism of the inner-circles which is exemplified through their control over ELT programmes could be no clearer anywhere else in the periphery than in the GCC, particularly in the field of higher 'transnational' education. The term 'transnational education' refers to education programmes when learners are in a country other than the country where the awarding institution exist. In these institutions education is delivered in one of three ways: distance education, partner-supported delivery or a branch campus. The GCC countries have been the largest recipients of transnational higher education globally, whilst Australia, the UK, and US have been the largest providers. Different forms of transnational provision dominate different countries within the GCC. For example, Oman has no international branch campuses, but does have private higher-education institutions that have foreign partners, whilst Qatar and the UAE have many branch campuses. In fact, the UAE hosts over 40 international branch campuses, which represent almost a quarter of all international branch campuses worldwide (Becker, 2009 cited in Wilkins, 2011). Critics consider transnational higher education as the new neo-colonialism which benefits the providers much more than the receivers (Wilkins, 2011). This significantly seems to increase the possibility of depending on the inner-circle as the main provider of course materials and norms.

Methodology

Stimulus Tape

In the 1960s, Lambert developed the 'matched-guise' technique for measuring attitude towards speeches. In this technique a passage is read by the same speaker who theoretically can pronounce all varieties required correctly, and only one passage written in 'standard English' is used. This technique, however, has not been employed by many researchers and has been modified to the nature and purpose of their research. Such research tends to assume different guises and includes more than one speaker in the stimulus tape. One of these studies is by Dalton-Puffer *et al.* (1997) and tested learners' attitudes towards native and non-native varieties of English in Austria. Another two studies are by Hiraga (2005) who examined British attitudes toward six regional varieties of British and American English and McKenzie (2004) who explored the attitudes of Japanese nationals towards standard and non-standard varieties of Scottish English speech. Since the present study investigates Arab learners' attitudes towards NS and NNS varieties of English, it is important to have the speakers produce accented English (according to their first languages (L1s)) and bring their identity into their spoken English. Thus, including several speakers will be more representative of L1s' accents.

The six speakers represent Kachru's (1985) three circles; the inner, outer and expanding circle. All are fluent speakers of English and are either MA or PhD students. They talked for not more than two minutes about one particular common topic, their field of study and their attitudes towards their majors. Having different rather than identical texts (even though on the same topic) avoids repetition of the same text which itself might affect understanding by listening repeatedly to the same scripts. Speaking spontaneously (rather than reading a written script) will also avoid removing the speakers' speech from the context of real life (Hiraga, 2005).

Because of the complexity revealed by Davies (1991) and Medgyes (1998) about identifying who the NS is, it is worth presenting the linguistic background of each speaker instead of simply

describing them as NSs or NNSs according to their nationality or to their L1. The background as documented by each speaker is as follows:

Speaker #	Speaker's first language	Accent of speaker in the stimulus tape	Background of speaker	Kachru's concentric circle that the speaker presumably represents
Speaker 1	English (Br.E)	Received Pronunciation (RP) or near-RP	Born to British parents, educated and brought up in the UK	Inner-circle
Speaker 2	Thai Language	Thai accent	Has been learning English since the age of eleven, educated and brought up in Thailand where English is used as a foreign language and also acts as an official language in many settings.	Expanding circle
Speaker 3	Malayalam (which is a southern Indian state language of Kerala)	Indian English	Started to use English at the age of three.	Outer-circle
Speaker 4	English (Am.E)	American English	Comes from South Carolina which is in the southern part of the United States.	Inner circle
Speaker 5	Arabic Language	Arabic accent	From Jordan, started to learn English at the age of eleven, has lived, been educated and brought	Expanding circle

			up in Jordan.	
Speaker 6	Two different dialects of Chinese	Canadian English.	Her father is Fijian and her mother is Cantonese. From birth to five, the speaker was raised in a home environment of both of these dialects. She has lived in Canada since she was three years old and started to learn English from the age of five.	Inner circle

The interviewees

The interviewees were 10 volunteer GCC learners (6-males and 4-females) aged from 18 to 25 years old at the post-secondary level in a private higher education institute which has an affiliation with a US university and they belong to different disciplines: Information System (IS); Computer Sciences (CS); Business Administration; and Accounting. They are being taught English in the first year at college by both NS and NNS teachers of English, and have been learning English for a minimum of 10 years before joining college. For ethical reasons, the interviewees' were assigned false names in this study.

Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were used for their adaptability and flexibility which could facilitate the integration of the recordings within the interview schedule. All the interviews were taped and conducted in Arabic, the interviewees' first language, according to the interviewees' request. Using the interviews' L1 reduced the language barriers that could have existed if English has been used and increased the interviewees' opportunity to articulate themselves sufficiently. During the interviews, the interviewees were required to identify what the mother tongues of the speakers were. And then respond to the following 5-point Likert scale immediately after listening to each speech (see also Appendix A):

1. How do you like the way this person speaks?
2. How easy do you find it to understand this speaker?
3. Would you like to sound like this speaker?
4. How easy do you think it would be for you to communicate with this speaker?

Follow-up questions were based on the interviewees' responses. This gave the interviewees an opportunity to elaborate and explain their responses.

Data analysis

All the interviews were translated into English by the researcher while they were being transcribed. Analysis started with *identifying*, *clarifying* and *coding* themes and concepts that

were most important and spoke to the research questions (Cohen *et al.*, 2007; Rubin and Rubin, 2005). The software packages N-Vivo was used in analysing the interview data and MS-Excel was used in analysing the responses of the 5-point Likert scale. In presenting the findings the study considered the top two categories as indicators of a positive response rather than the top one only. The reason is that there is no definite assumption of equal interval between the categories in Likert-scale questions (Cohen *et al.*, 2007).

Finding

What are the speakers' first languages?

The respondents found difficulties identifying each speaker's L1s. As interviewees listened gradually to one speaker following another and started to compare accents, decisions about a speaker's L1 became easier. Figure 1 shows the number of the interviewees who correctly identified the L1 of each speaker and indicates that that six of the ten interviewees recognized that Speaker One (the British speaker) is a NS, and seven identified the Speaker Six (the Canadian speaker) while only four of the subjects could identify Speaker Four (the American) as a NS.

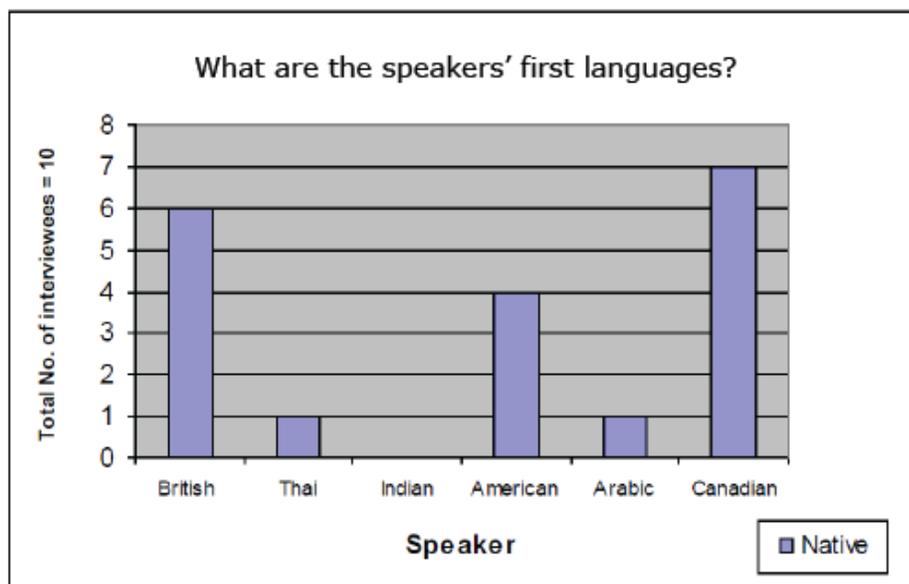


Figure 1. *What are the speckers' firdt language?*

There are two factors that seemed to influence the interviewees' decision of the speakers' L1s. The first was the approximation of the speaker's accent to a model which the interviewees already recognize, and this model might be their own. Hanin said about the Arabic speaker:

'...he talks like us... If I have presentation I will speak just like him I'll be very close to him we pronounce the word the way we write it we pronounce all the letters in the word. He exactly speaks the way I do'.

The second was frequent exposure to certain accents. It was easy for all of the interviewees to identify the L1 of the Indian speaker. Five interviewees indicated that they 'got used to this'

model, as the expatriates in the interviewees' country comprised a large number of Indians which allowed frequent exposure to Indian speakers of English.

Speaker Four (the American speaker) was the most difficult model for interviewees to identify. Six of the ten interviewees reckoned that this was an Asian speaker, either '*Philippino*' '*Malaysian*' or '*Chinese*'.

How do you like the way this person speaks?

Responses to this question revealed that the Canadian speaker's speech was perceived most positively and 9 of the 10 interviewees placed him in the top two categories (either it was liked 'very much' or 'quite a lot'), followed by the British speaker (8), the Arabic speaker (7), the Indian speaker (4), and then the Thai and American speakers (1 for each speech sample) (Figure 2).

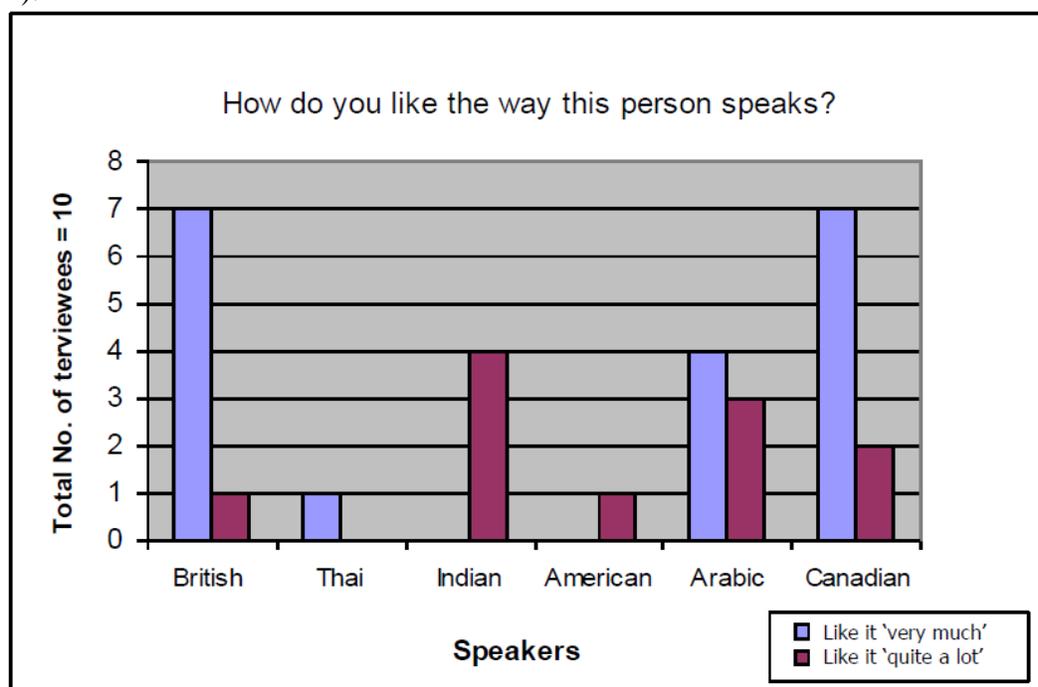


Figure 2. *How do you like the way this person speaks?*

The speaker's L1 does not seem to be the criterion upon which the interviewee depended to answer this question. While four of the ten interviewees reported that American speaker's model as NS, none of them liked it 'very much', only one liked it 'a little', and most of the responses fell in the category 'not much' (See Appendix A for more details about the subjects' responses). The interviewees gave preference to other criteria over the NSs accent and demonstrated that while communicating 'understanding' the speaker was more dominant than having a NS accent. Among these was Hamdan who said: *'I tried to understand her, I tried to catch some of her speech but I could not'*. Asma was one of the interviewees who seemed to have perceived the American speaker speech samples less positively than the other speakers. Explaining her position, Asma said:

I feel that her speech is not clear. She swallows and mumbles. It is really difficult. I cannot imagine that there is any listener who can understand her. She merges the letters together you don't know how many words she pronounces at once is it only one word or two together. It is very difficult to communicate with this lady.

How easy do you find it to understand this speaker?

The interviewees' own model, the Arabic speaker, was the easiest to understand where 9 responses fell in the top two categories where it was either 'very easy' or 'quite easy' to understand, followed by the Indian speaker (7), the Canadian speaker (6) the British speaker (5) and finally the Thai speaker (2) (Figure 3). None of the responses fell in the two top categories in responding to the American's speech. Six of the 10 interviewees' responses fell in the 'average' category, 3 in 'quite difficult to understand' category and only one found this speech 'very difficult' (Appendix B).

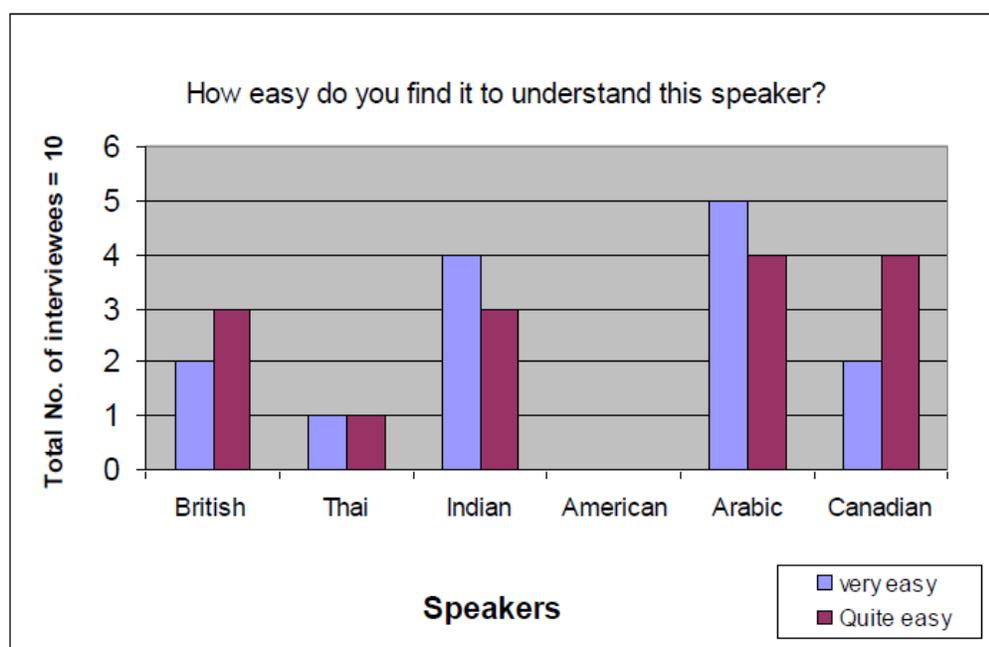


Figure 3. *How easy do you find it to understand the speaker?*

How easy do you think it would be for you to communicate with this speaker?

The interviewees reported that the Arab speaker would be the easiest to communicate with. 9 out of the 10 interviewees placed him in the top two categories, followed by the Indian and Canadian speakers (7 for each), the British speaker (5), the Thai speaker (2) and finally the American speaker (1) (Figure 4).

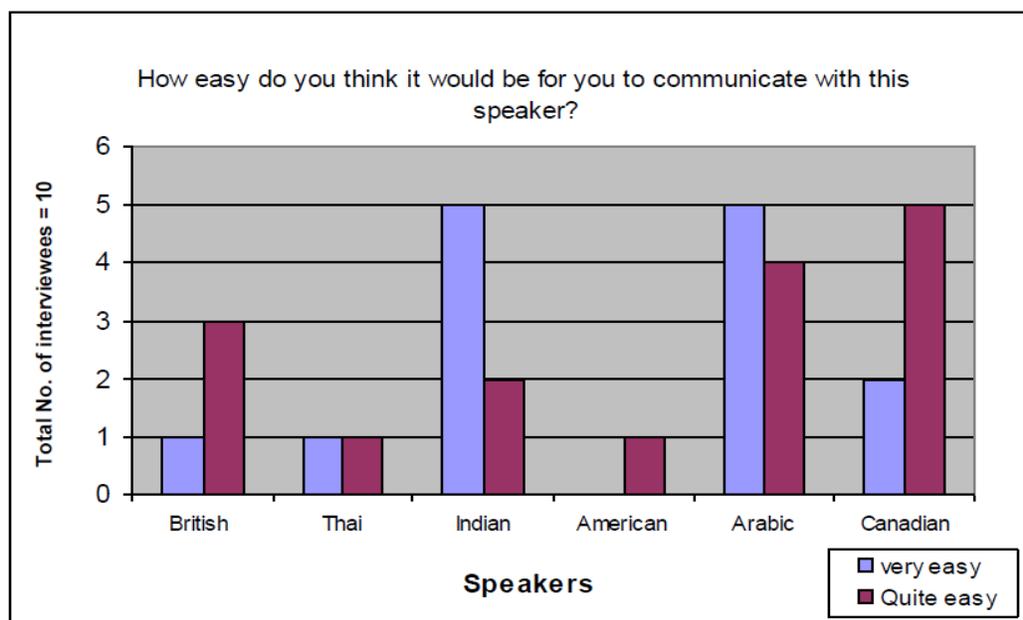


Figure 4. *How easy you think it would be for you to communicate with this speaker*

Sounding more like the interviewees' own way of speaking and frequent exposure could be the reason behind the interviewees' expectations of communicating easily with the Arab and Indian speakers. Mahmoud said about the Indian speaker:

Very easy ... his Indian language interferes with his English but he pronounces English in a simple way and also because I got use to this model even the Philippines (referring to speaker two, the Thai speaker) after two, three or four days I will understand what he means when he draws the endings of words.

Salah said this about the Arab speaker:

I understood him this is why I like this model very much but this doesn't mean that I see him as proficient in English. I can understand him because his English is close to mine. But comparing him with the others, the first speaker (the British speaker) is the best.

The four interviewees who could identify the American speaker as NS anticipated communication with her would be difficult. They elaborated in their responses and one of them, Asma, explained:

If I learn English very well, if I become proficient in English I'll be even better than her. While speaking in English the person should consider the level of the interlocutors. What is important is not to speak like English people while the level of the listener in English is low. For example, the teacher should be able to help her students understand. There are differences between the level of good and weak students. The person with a very good level of English might understand me if I use this model. The person should have the ability to communicate her ideas. The most important thing for the speaker is to express herself.

Another interviewee, Elham, expressed the same attitudes towards the American speaker and indicated that what matters is not to sound like NSs but to be able to communicate. She said:

Not everybody can speak using the native-like model but the most important thing is to communicate and be understood. I might use the native-like accent but how people can understand me it is not the matter of being proud showing off but it is a communication processes.

Would you like to sound like this speaker?

Figure 5 below shows that the responses of 8 out of 10 interviewees fall on the top two categories; 4 interviewees would like to sound like the Canadian speaker ‘very much’ and the same number of speakers would like to sound like her ‘a little’; 7 like the British and Arab speakers; 3 like the Indian speaker, 2 like the Thai. None of the responses fell in the first two positive categories in responding to the American’s speech.

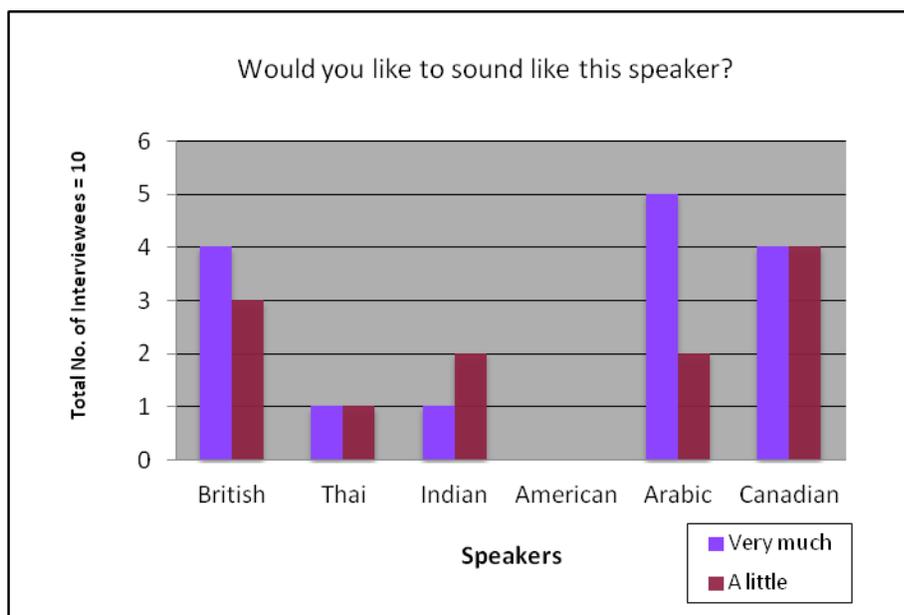


Figure 5. *Would you like to sound like this speaker*

The responses to this question revealed that some of the interviewees aspire to the NS model although (as shown in the responses above) they were not necessarily the easiest to understand. Salem expressed his aspiration to the NS model, mainly the Canadian speaker and said:

If I have such a model, I can use it in different ways. I can speak with some people clearly and slowly ... I can modify my English according to the level of my interlocutors.

Salem’s response contradicted Hamdan’s whose response to this question was ‘not much’ although he liked the way the British speaker sounds ‘very much’ (in response to question two). The reason was that Hamdan recognises that a NS accent is unattainable. He said: ‘*I consider my abilities I wouldn't be able to reach his (speaker one) level in speaking*’. Elham likes to sound

like the British model only 'average' and, explaining her response, she said: *because the people whom I'm communicating with might not understand it*'.

Seven interviewees reported that they would like to sound like the Arab speaker (either 'very much' or 'quite a lot') and the reason was the approximation of this speaker to their own models. This approximation, however, was considered for some interviewees as a disadvantage rather than an advantage. Among these is Hanin who did not like to sound like the Arab speaker and explained: *he is close to the way I sound and I'm not satisfied with it*'. Similarly, Mona said: *If I want to learn a language I should learn it correctly*'. According to Mona, 'correct' in this context does not only mean to have the English that sounds like a native-like accent, but to have the ability to communicate in English in all settings where English is needed. Mona explained this and said:

I feel that he (the Arab speaker) has learned English to function in his job only and I don't think that he can anywhere else ... I feel that he has learned English only because his job requires him to learn this language but not because he wants to use it in other situations. I think that he knows in English only what is related to his job.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore the attitude of Arab learners towards 6 speech samples of NS and NNS speakers. The interviewees could identify most easily the L1s of the Arab and Indian speakers who were also the easiest to understand and probably to communicate with. This could be attributed to the interviewees' familiarity with his/her variety of English being either their own or due to their frequent exposure to its speakers as in the case of Indian variety of English, where Indian speakers in the interviewees' country (in additions to other Asian speakers) comprise a large number of the expatriates. Considering this, the present study is in line with the other studies that suggest the positive influence of familiarity on understanding speech. Some of these studies are Ingram and Nguyen (1997), Smith and Nelson (1985) and (2006), Gass and Varonis (1984), Rajadurai (2007), Tauroza and Luk (1997). This could also be the reason behind expecting communication to be easier with the Indian and Arab speakers than the others in this study.

Similar to the study by Dalton-Puffer *et al.* (1997) in the Austrian context, in this study the overall preference is for the two NS varieties which the interviewee could identify as native speakers, the British and Canadian. The present study also contradicts other studies in terms of how much the speakers would like to sound like their own model. Matsuda (2003) in the Japanese context found that American pronunciation was highly desired as a model, whereas Japanese English was not respected. Pillai (2008) in the Malaysian context found that, although Matsuda's participants recognized the appropriateness of speaking English with their own adaptation of the model to reflect their own identity, they still perceive Malaysian English as wrong. Opposing Matsuda and Pillai, the interviewees in the present study prefer to sound like the Arabic speaker as much as the British and Canadian speakers. The two models which were perceived most positively and could be easily identified as NS by most of the interviewees.

The interviewees also demonstrated recognition that what matters in the current position of English as a lingua franca is to be able to communicate rather than approximate to a NS accents.

This might explain the interviewees' position above. However, some also expressed their aspiration towards an NS accent especially to that of the British and Canadian speakers. Several reasons could explain this position. One could be the absolute reliance on the inner-circle countries on ELT material which consequently controls classroom practices. Furthermore, many of the higher education institutes, including the one to which the interviewees in this study belong, are affiliated with either American or British universities. This could explain the reason behind the interviewees' position who perceived the British and Canadian speakers' speeches most positively and expressed their aspiration to sound like them, although Arab and Indian speakers were easier to understand than the speakers who the interviewees identified as NSs.

Conclusion

The impetus behind investigating attitude in this study stems from the potential which a positive attitude has in reducing the intelligibility/comprehensibility thresholds, where focusing on these two constructs is the main interest of ELF research. Hence, exploring the factors behind the current attitude towards NS and NNS varieties of English and promoting a more tolerant attitude towards NNS varieties become essential. This could be done pedagogically in several ways: Firstly, improving learners' recognition of the worldwide spread and landscape of English devoting time to explain it in classroom teaching; secondly, exposing learners to several NNS varieties in classrooms teaching as familiarity with these varieties increases intelligibility and comprehensibility of its speakers to the learners; thirdly, rethinking goals and objectives and shifting teaching interests from imitating native-like pronunciation into improving learners' accommodation skills and communicating intelligibly and comprehensibly; and finally, focusing on the powerful aspects of the expanding circles which could help promote tolerance towards NNSs and which the ELT learners might not be aware of. These factors are: the high economical status of many of the expanding circle countries and the worldwide distribution of their speakers which outnumber the total population of NSs.

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Appendix A:

The 5-point Likert scale used during the interview

1. How do you like the way this person speaks?

Like it very Much Quite a lot OK Not much Not at all

2. How easy do you find it to understand this speaker?

Very easy Quite easy Average Quite difficult Very difficult

3. Would you like to sound like this speaker?

Very much Quite Average Not very much Not at all

4. How easy do you think it would be for you to communicate with this speaker?

Very easy Quite easy Average Quite difficult Very difficult

Appendix B

Responses of the participants to the Stimulus Tape

Question 1: What is the nationality of the speaker?

Question 2: How do you like the way this speaker speaks?

Question 3: How easy do you find it to understand this speaker?

Question 4: Would you like to sound like this speaker?

Question 5: How easy do you think it would be to communicate with this speaker?

Speakers	Question 1		Question 2					Question 3					Question 4					Question 5				
	Native	Non-native	Like it very much	A little	OK	Not much	Not at all	Very easy	Quite easy	Average	Quite difficult	Very difficult	Very much	A little	OK	Not much	Not at all	Very easy	Quite easy	Average	Quite difficult	Very difficult
1 British	6	4	7	1	1	1	0	2	3	4	1	0	4	3	3	0	0	1	3	5	1	0
2 Thai	1	9	1	0	6	2	1	1	1	4	2	2	1	1	1	3	4	1	1	4	3	1
3 Indian	0	10	0	4	2	4	0	4	3	0	3	0	1	2	1	3	3	5	2	0	3	0
4 American	4	6	0	1	3	5	1	0	0	6	3	1	0	0	4	3	3	0	1	5	3	1
5 Arabic	1	9	4	3	3	0	0	5	4	1	0	0	5	2	2	1	0	5	4	1	0	0
6 Canadian	7	3	7	2	1	0	0	2	4	4	0	0	4	4	2	0	0	2	5	3	0	0