

***Impressions Non-Native Speakers of
English Make with their Spoken English***

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Introduction

One of the aspects that noticeably attract the interests of EFL/ESL learners is how close their spoken English can be to the spoken English of native speakers. Many learners go the extra mile enrolling in training programs that focus on conversation and dialogue to enhance their speaking skills and achieve a better impression as they speak English to others, being native speakers (NS) or non-native speakers (NNS).

Literature Review

A considerable number of researchers investigated the attitudes that people, in general, have towards the phonological abilities that EFL/ESL learners exhibit. Riney showed this in his study concerning Black English Vernacular spoken in Northern Iowa (Riney, pp. 88-93). Davis and Houck (1990) also conducted a similar study involving female speakers of northern and southern American English vernaculars, which studied the listeners' attitudes as well, (Davis and Houck, pp. 115-122).

The NNSs preference of an accent they want to learn and reflect in their spoken English is a factor that attracted the researchers' attention. Chiba et al (1995)

conducted a study in Japan on a group of students looking for patterns of attitudes they may have toward English accents. The study suggests that students seem to resort to American English when it comes to deciding the model for their English. The authors focused on the attitudes of Japanese university students toward the different varieties of spoken English. It was based on the results of they found in previous research, which showed the preference for American English among Japanese students. The aim was to examine the link between the acceptance of varieties of English spoken by NSs and NNSs and the related attitudes toward people, culture, and English learning. The results showed that subjects with more instrumental motivation were more positive towards non-native English accents than those with less instrumental motivation. It also found that the level of subjects' respect for indigenous languages has affected their attitudes toward non-native English accents. In addition, the subjects' familiarity with accents had an influence on their acceptance of varieties of English. That acceptance is believed to stand behind the NNSs choice of dialects they attempt to reflect in their spoken English.

Further than dialects of English native speakers, studies were conducted to look at English native speakers'

attitudes toward French-American speech and Standard French speech, (Gardner and Lambert, pp. 97-104).

Eisenstein and Swacker looked at the native speakers' and non-native speakers' attitudes towards accentedness, (in Preston, p.52). The studies were concluded in attention grabbing results based on stereotypical viewpoints, although notably expected.

Davis and Houck (1990) targeted northern and southern female speech. Their study revealed that 81.2% of the raters considered northern speakers to be of a higher socioeconomic status, while 49.1% of them felt that the southern female speakers were of a higher socioeconomic status, (Davis and Houck, p. 119).

Gardner and Lamber (1972) investigated the American French from Louisiana and Standard French. They found that listeners rated Standard French speakers as less honest and less dependable in comparison to English speakers, whereas the American French speakers were believed to be less thoughtful and less honest than English speakers, (Gardner and Lambert, p.99).

Riney (1993) revealed a rating of only 18.0% for black English vernacular speakers as being above average in intelligence. Their "Network English" (or Standard

American English) counterparts were assumed to be intelligent by 72.1%, as raters put it (Riney, p.90).

These studies show that people do, in fact, have attitudes, perceptions, and possibly preconceptions towards certain speakers of dialects. They reveal that stereotypes of speakers of different languages could be inherent throughout all variations of English as well as other languages.

Research suggests that listeners have a set of already set language stereotypes, which influence the way they view other speakers of that language. Gardner and Lambert state that listeners' attitudes stem from their experience with NSs of the language in question or from the attitudes of the people close to them, (Gardner and Lambert, p. 103). Giles (in Williams, 1989) adds to that by defining the "Implicit Personality Theory" which states that people "evaluate and make judgments of other people's speech based on impressions of people with the help of gestures, bodily appearance, facial expressions, age, sex, and intelligence," (Williams, p.59).

This perspective, based on Gardner and Lambert's statement, is supported by previous research and basic assumptions related to the experience, which all lead to the question of how NSs of a language view NNSs of their

language. Moreover, how do NS's attitudes compare to NNS's attitudes towards the same audio-recorded material? For this reason, this study asks the following questions: What attitudes do native English speakers' have towards non-native English speech? In addition, what are non-native speakers' attitudes towards non-native English speech? How can we compare those attitudes? The attempt to answer these questions will replicate Alford, R. & Strother, J. (1990) methodology. They conducted an empirical investigation sought to determine the attitudes of both L1 and L2 listeners toward specific regional accents of U.S. English and to compare and/or contrast those attitudes. While Alford & Strother's study took an opposite direction compared to this study, their work still created an inspiring approach towards the study of other people's attitudes towards spoken discourse. Alford & Strother (1990) conducted their study using data collected from 97 university students from Florida Institute of Technology, half of whom were L2 listeners (advanced ESL students) and half of whom were L1 listeners. Using a modification of the matched guise technique, the students listened to tapes of the same passage read by a male and female native speaker from each of the following accent groups: (a) southern (South

Carolina), (b) northern (New York), and (c) midwestern (Illinois). Respondents then recorded their attitudes about each of the readers using a Likert scale. The results indicated that the judgments of L2 subjects differed from those of L1 subjects and that L2 subjects were able to perceive differences in regional accents of U.S. English. While Alford & Strother's study seeks the attitudes of native and non-native speakers towards the spoken English spoken by non-natives, this study seeks to investigate the opposite attitude of native speakers toward the spoken English of non-native speakers of English using Likert scale and a similar method.

Methodology and Procedures

Participants

Data was collected from four male native speakers of Arabic, Spanish, Swahili, and Korean languages. The participants were selected based on their proficiency levels. All participants have TOEFL scores above 550 and have lived in an English-speaking country for a minimum of a year and a half.

Procedures

This study uses a multimedia software for audio-recording and administering the listening procedures. It

also utilizes the Internet to facilitate communication and exchange of needed material for the purpose of the study.

Each participant was audio-recorded while he was reading the story "Arthur the Rat," which was taken from the DARE Dictionary of American Dialects of English. Following audio-recording, the story was divided into four parts and each speaker was assigned one part. A final audio file was made with each speaker reading one-fourth of the story. The readers' group of participants consists of the following:

Speaker 1: Korean

Speaker 2: Kenyan

Speaker 3: Mexican

Speaker 4: Saudi Arabian-KSA

A Likert scale, which is explained next, was developed listing ten sets of opposing characteristics (As in appendix I). A ten-item questionnaire was made to use in conjunction with the Likert scales (As in appendix II). A group of participating raters was assembled to respond to the audio-recorded material using the tools developed for this study (appendices I and II). The group consists of 10 non-native speakers and 10 native speakers. The native speakers were all from the United States. They were

students in the English department at an American university with different academic backgrounds. This group of participants consisted of 4 males and 6 females. Five of them were undergraduate students. The other five were graduate students in a masters program majoring in TESOL. The NNSs were all graduate students. They are distributed as follows:

1	Female Japanese
1	Female Puerto Rican
1	Female Turkish
2	Female Korean
1	Female Thai
1	Male Turkish
2	Male Thai
1	Male Korean

Table1. Raters' group of Participants' distribution on different languages

The participants were given explanations on the use of the Likert scale and then they were asked to listen to the audio files and to respond to the items in the questionnaire as they listen to each fourth.

After collecting the data, the numbers of answers reported were tabulated for each trait based on the Likert scale and the ten questions. Tendencies were then noted and analyzed both quantitatively and qualitatively for the NNS and NS reaction data and comparisons were made.

Likert Scale

A Likert scale is a psychometric scale used in for data collection using survey research. When responding to a Likert questionnaire item, respondents specify their level of agreement to a statement. The scale is named after its inventor, psychologist Rensis Likert. The format of a typical five-level Likert item is:

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Agree
- Strongly agree

Findings

A number of factors of socio-political, socio-economic, historical, and ethnic nature seem to have affected the impressions that raters had about the non-native participants' spoken English. However, the study assumed those factors were expected to have some influence over the ratings regardless of the participant's proficiency.

Findings rendered similarities that resulted in the data between the NSs and NNS's impression responses. However, some differences were noted as well. The findings will be noted separately for each speaker in the following table that shows the score average for each speaker:

Speakers	#1 Japan		#2 Kenya		#3 Mexico		#4 KSA	
Characteristic	NS	NNS	NS	NNS	NS	NNS	NS	NNS
Friendly	4.0	3.7	3.7	2.7	3.2	3.0	3.1	3.2
Strong	2.7	2.7	3.8	3.1	2.9	2.9	3.5	3.3
Interesting	2.9	2.4	3.7	2.6	1.9	2.3	3.2	2.7
Leader	2.3	2.6	3.5	3.2	2.3	2.7	3.4	3.3
Kind	4.3	3.9	3.6	2.9	3.1	3.5	3.1	3.0
Trustworthy	4.0	3.7	3.7	2.7	2.8	3.2	3.0	3.5
Educated	3.9	4.0	4.0	3.2	2.9	3.3	3.8	3.8
Self-confident	3.2	3.0	3.8	3.4	2.3	2.6	3.8	3.7
Rich	3.1	3.3	3.3	2.9	2.7	2.9	3.3	3.2
Informative	3.4	3.0	3.4	2.8	2.0	2.9	3.4	3.4

Table 2. : Score Averages by speaker

Table 3.0 below reflects the results that were found significant in the results reflected in table 2.0. The percentages were determined by the number of responses to the left or the right of the middle response. In the non-Native speaker data, the numbers had to equal "8" or more in order to qualify for significance. In the native speaker data, the numbers had to equal "6" or more in order to qualify for significance. The trait which is considered to be dominant for that speaker is identified.

The following table reflects those percentages for each speaker:

Speakers	#1 Japan		#2 Kenya		#3 Mexico		#4 KSA	
	NS	NNS	NS	NNS	NS	NNS	NS	NNS
Friendly	80%	73%	60%	27%				
Strong			70%	40%				
Interesting			60%	13%				
Boring					80%	53%		
Kind	100%	67%	60%	13%				
Trustworthy	80%	67%	60%	13%				
Educated	80%	80%	80%	33%			60%	53%
Self-confident			70%	53%			60%	67%
Uninformative					90%	47%		

Table 3.: Significant Percentages for the dominant traits for each speaker

Discussion

Overall, both groups of raters considered Speaker 1 as holding positive traits. The other traits on the Likert scale averaged around the middle point (around 3.0) for both groups of raters. While the NSs rated this speaker with an overwhelming 100% agreement on his "kindness", the NNSs saw this speaker to be kind, but only 67% agreed to that trait. It should be noted that all participants (NSs and NNSs) regarded this speaker as speaking acceptable non-native English.

As for Speaker 2, findings show the most interesting split between the two groups of participants. Positive traits are given to Speaker 2 more frequently by the NSs in this study than by the NNSs. Many reasons could stand behind this finding, yet the average of these traits shows a substantial difference as well:

Friendly:	NSs- 3.7	NNSs-2.7
Interesting:	NSs- 3.7	NNSs- 2.6
Kind:	NSs- 3.6	NNSs- 2.9
Trustworthy:	NSs- 3.7	NNSs- 2.7

Evidently, the NNSs were hearing different things when listening to this speaker than the NSs. When asked this question: "*Do you think this speaker is speaking acceptable*

non-native English?" 73% of the NNSs responded "No" while 90% of the NSs said: "Yes".

Regarding Speaker 3, raters were consistent in their views. Most of the raters were somehow reserved either positively or negatively to this speaker. The two points listed in Table 2, boring and uninformative, the participants agreed to negative qualities, but in differing degrees. The NSs were much harsher and less interested in listening to the reading than the NNSs were.

Both groups of raters marked Speaker 4 as having no noticeably positive or negative traits. All of the native speakers thought this speaker was speaking acceptable non-native English and 87% of the NNSs thought that it was acceptable. When responding to Speaker 4, the participants had a general reserved attitude. Many verbally commented that he was a very "nice" speaker.

With reference to the data, a number of observations can be drawn. The NSs found the speaker from Japan (Speaker 1) to be more friendly, kind and trustworthy, whereas the speaker from Kenya (Speaker 2) was thought of as more strong, interesting, and self-confident. The other two speakers were given traits of mainstream nature.

The NNSs had positive perceptions regarding Speaker 1 (from Japan) and Speaker 4 (from Saudi Arabia). They found the Japanese speaker to be friendly, kind, and trustworthy-as the native speakers did. However, to a certain extent-but not overwhelmingly, they found Speaker 4 to be strong, interesting, and self-confident, more than the other speakers. The latter perceptions were expressed qualitatively. With respect to Speaker 2, the NNSs gave more middle marks than the NSs did. It would appear then, that with respect to Speaker 2 and 4, NSs and NNSs are in opposition to which speech is more desirable.

Conclusion

Prior perceptions and stereotypical impressions seem to have affected the views and attitudes of respondents. Some of those attitudes and views about the speakers could have been "expected" based on some historical, cultural, socio-economic, and socio-political commonly held by people from different cultures and background about each other. However, this study brought up some interesting results to the difference of opinions between native speakers of English and non-native English speakers. The findings with respect to Speaker 2 and 3 were consistent with previous findings that varieties of British English are held as more desirable than other varieties. These earlier

findings would seem also to support another aspect of the results from this study regarding Speaker 1. American English could be considered friendlier than the British variety. This concurs with the opinion on the American English influence. The Japanese speaker-Speaker 1- was considered to be friendlier, kinder, and more trustworthy. To verify this claim, many of the NNSs questioned if Speaker 1 was an American.

Important implications can be drawn from this and similar studies on the attitude and counter-attitude towards the spoken English L2 learners may exhibit as they are in the process of acquiring English as a second language. Students ought to be encouraged to attain a native-like command of spoken English. Attention to the differences between dialects and accents of English should become part of spoken English education. Attention in L2 acquisition was found critical to the accuracy in acquisition of L2 skills (Gass, 2001). Many pedagogical solutions are now present through computer assisted language learning (CALL) solutions, which now offer a unique opportunity for learners to acquire better spoken English better than ever before.

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Appendix I.

Appendix I.

Speaker: _____

Instructions: Please put an "X" in the space at the end of the scale which is closest to your opinion.

.....

friendly _____ : _____ : _____ : _____ : _____ unfriendly

strong _____ : _____ : _____ : _____ : _____ weak

boring _____ : _____ : _____ : _____ : _____ interesting

follower _____ : _____ : _____ : _____ : _____ leader

kind _____ : _____ : _____ : _____ : _____ mean

trustworthy _____ : _____ : _____ : _____ untrustworthy

educated _____ : _____ : _____ : _____ uneducated

self-confident _____ : _____ : _____ not self-confident

rich _____ : _____ : _____ : _____ poor

informative _____ : _____ : _____ : _____ uninformative

Appendix II.

Speaker: _____

Please answer the following questions with regard to this speaker. Feel free to comment on your answers.

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1. Would you like to sound like this person?
2. Do you think that this speaker is speaking acceptable non0native English?
3. Did you have difficulty with understanding the speaker due to his pronunciation?
4. Where do you think this speaker is from?
5. What occupation do you think this speaker has? (example: lawyer, factory worker, businessman, etc.)
6. Would this speaker be a good friend?
7. Would this speaker be a good teacher for native English speakers?
8. What socio-economic class do you think this speaker is from? (high, middle, or low?
9. Would you like to speak this speaker's native language?
10. Have you ever been to the country where you think this speaker is from?