

The Perception of English Education Students of a Private University in Yogyakarta
on the Various Accents of the English Language

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ABSTRACT

Background: This study was intended to identify the perceptions of English Language Education students from a private university in Yogyakarta regarding the various accents of the English language. From the researcher's point of view, the students of English Language Education in this private university seem to rate accents from English-speaking countries higher than accents from countries that use English as a second or foreign language, despite them not being able to speak in accents from the former category. The researcher wanted to find the reason for this phenomenon, and whether or not having a preferred accent has helped them learn the English language.

Purpose: This study's purpose is to figure out what accent is preferred by the students of English Education Department from a Private University in Yogyakarta, and how said accents influence their learning process.

Methods: This research uses a qualitative research method. Five students from the English Language Education Department of a private university in Yogyakarta were interviewed using the interview medium. Data from the interview was then categorized using the open, axial, and selective coding method.

Results: The results of the research indicate that while the students have a mixed view of accents and use various accents themselves, having a familiar accent to use when learning English has helped them learn the language better. Being familiar with an accent and mimicking the source of language input (for example: their lecturers) gives the participants an easier time when learning the English Language.

Conclusion: Students from English Language Education Department of a private University in Yogyakarta have mixed perceptions regarding accents, but they all agree that accents have helped them learn the English language.

Keywords: English language, English language education students, world Englishes, accents, familiarity

Introduction

The English language is the language that has the most speakers in the world. Despite losing to Chinese and Spanish as the language with most L1 speakers (Summary by Language Size, 2014), the large number of countries that speaks it as a second and third language makes it the most used language in the world (Carloz, 2013). This spread of English can always be attributed to the global movement of the world, and how English-speaking countries could almost always be found in the forefront of a connected world (Hammond, 2014). Almost every corner of the world speaks English as a primary, secondary, or tertiary language. Most of them have their own dialect or accent, and sometimes second language and foreign language

speakers could have a very hard time keeping up with all of them.

To keep tabs on the quickly-spreading variations of English, the term “World Englishes” or “International English” was coined. This term serves to catalog the existing variations of the English Language based on how it is used in the country/region, and the time it enters said country/region (Kachru, *The Other Tongue: English across cultures*, 1992). However, there is another term that is close to it in meaning: “Standardized English”. This term refers to how the English Language should be spoken in an English-speaking country (Thorne, 1997). There has been a lot of arguments whether English teachers should teach the standardized version of English or the local version of

English, both with equally good arguments (Martin & Farrell, 2009), but one of the most important argument is that Standard English is only applicable on a country that actually speaks English as a first language, such as the Great Britain or the United States of America (Thorne, 1997). Countries that has English as a second or foreign language use the language differently (Kachru, *The Other Tongue: English across cultures*, 1992). Therefore, World English can also be used in teaching in foreign countries or implemented along with Standardized English (Martin & Farrell, 2009).

During the researcher's experience as a student in the English Education Department (EED), the researcher learned that many lecturers teach the standardized version of English. However, they do not mind if their students use their own variation of the

English language, as long as the initial meaning is not lost. As future teachers, students of English Education Department from a Private University in Yogyakarta might have a mindset that that standardized English, the one taught in classrooms, is absolute and cannot be deviated from. However, there is another form of English that they themselves use, which is the Indonesian variation of English, or *Indoglish*.

This study is conducted in order to find out how the students of an English Education Department from a Private University in Yogyakarta perceive the many variations of English accents in the world. In addition, this study explores the students' awareness of the different accents of English in the world and how those accents influence the development of English learning, including their own development. This

study also serves to raise tolerance about the accent-related mistakes future students would inevitably make, and attribute them to the various components that may influence language learning instead of plain ignorance.

Research Methodology

This research utilized one of the research designs that falls under the qualitative research method, more specifically the descriptive qualitative design. The data gathering process took place in July of 2017, when the participants still have classes in the university. The participants of this research consisted of English Education students from a particular private university in Yogyakarta, more specifically students of the 2014 batch. They were chosen because they attended the same classes as the

researcher, and they have all been proven to have some degree of familiarity with the subject of World Englishes, and they are likely to have developed a stance on it. Moreover, students of the 2014 will have more experience being taught by different lecturers with different English accents and dialects, and they are more likely to have chosen one of them as a role model.

To protect the participants' identities, aliases were used in the transcript of the interview. The aliases that were used are: Amo, Della, Ilya, Sara, and Sue. All participants were female, but this was a coincidence rather than intended. because the first students who volunteered for the research were all female.

The researcher used the interview instrument to gather the data.

The interview type used in this particular research was the interview guide line, in which the researcher only asks specific questions, but with no clear sequence (Cohen et al, 2011).

To ensure that the data collection method is free of any bias, the researcher designed his own interview questions. To maintain the trustworthiness of the data, the researcher performed member checking to make sure that the data on the transcription is the same as their current opinion. The researcher did this by calling the participants and asking them if their opinions are still the same as the ones they had during the time of the interview. The results of the member checking confirm that their opinions are still the same.

The recording of the interview was transcribed into a Microsoft Word

format for validity reasons. As for the coding method, the researcher used the Open, Axial, and Selective coding method, for clarity. Open, Axial, and Selective coding are methods to catalogue and sort the results of an interview or other methods of gathering data (Cohen et al, 2011).

The steps that were used for data analysis are as follows: First, the researcher transcribed the recording into a Microsoft Word document. Then, the result of the interview was written down in open and axial coding in the form of tables. The third step was to create a selective coding document by combining the results of the interview and identifying main ideas of the result. Finally, the data was written down in a report form that can be seen in the fourth chapter of this research paper.

Findings and Discussion

The students of a private university in Yogyakarta's perceptions regarding the various accents of English.

When asked about their perceptions, all five respondents claimed that they perceived these different accents in a positive manner. However, the respondents had several different reasons for saying so. One reason, cited by three different participants, is how several accents were easier than others. One participant under the pseudonym Della said, "I think American is simpler because I have an easier time using American accent, when I use British it's still a little...difficult, and in American it's easier to pick up." (P2.9). Another participant under the pseudonym Sara also preferred the American accent, saying "Because it's easier". (P4.2).

The other participant that mentioned this goes by the pseudonym Amo, who said that the British accent is "easier and enjoyable". (P1.6) It is worth mentioning that the participants who claimed this all referred to an L1 accent. A study conducted by Mulkeen (2016) for Communicaid.com found that mimicking a foreign accent is an excellent way to help a non-native English speaker to be understood when speaking English. When mimicking the speakers of this accent, non-native students copy more than just their accent, but also their body language, although it could not replace the more traditional learning activities. This explains why the students perceived the easier accents as positive: it indirectly helps them with familiarization of the English language, as the points below will explain.

The three other points of the finding are connected to the first point: comfortability, familiarity, and clarity. Participant Amo felt that the British accent, being her preferred accent was more comfortable to use by saying “Feeling, well, more comfortable, it is more comfortable to use the British accent compared to others.” (P1.6). Another key point, familiarity, was pointed out by Participant Della, who claims that her Javanese accent helps her learn English. She is quoted to have said “Maybe it’s easier to see a sort of Javanese accent, so when I say something, I don’t have to think before it.” (P2.11). The more familiar a learner is with an accent, the more comfortable they become with it, and the clearer they communicate with it. Another point, clarity, was pointed out by Participant Ilya. The participant said to the researcher that she “felt clearer

when I speak with (British or American) accent.” (P3.5). In the private university where this research was conducted, the students are taught by lecturers who speak in L1 accents. Participant Ilya mentioned this in the interview, saying “I’m more familiar when the lecturer explains with...British and American accent because it is clearer, compared to other languages.” (P3.4) A study cited by Hough (2010) shows that humans tend to subconsciously mimic accents they are exposed to, familiarizing themselves with the accents. Because they are used to these accents, they are more comfortable with it, and it helps them learn English better.

Despite the participants’ positive perceptions regarding the various English accents of the world, some participants also had negative perceptions of them. Generally, they

tend to find some accents more difficult than others. Among the participants, two of them had difficulties telling one accent from another, while two other participants find difficulty when learning English using a particular accent. Participants Ilya and Sue mentioned their difficulty in differentiating accents, with participant Ilya saying that she “has difficulty separating words that are usually in British and American” (P3.8), while participant Sue would sometimes confuse UK and US accents, as she says, “I sometimes uh...confuse UK and US accents.” (P5.4). Regarding the general difficulty of accents, participant Amo and Sara clarified this when Amo said that “Some people think that British is difficult to pronounce” (P1.5) and Sara mentioned being afraid of speaking something wrong in a British accent, by saying “If British I’m afraid of being

wrong.” (P4.3). A study conducted by the Acoustical Society of America in 2015 tested their participants’ ability to remember simple phrases in different accents, one they are familiar with and one they are not. Their study reveals that learners devote an extra modicum of brainpower when trying to remember things in an unfamiliar language, which may explain the students’ difficulty in learning using an unfamiliar language. This results in a phenomenon called Lathophobic Aphasia, a condition where a language learner becomes afraid to speak because they are afraid of being wrong (Rinvolutri, 2005).

A journal authored by Yan and Vaseghi (2003) and discussed in the IEEE International Conference in Hong Kong compared the three accents of the main L1 countries: American, British, and Australian accents. The journal revealed multiple differences between

the three L1 accents, particularly in pronunciation. This is evident that despite those accents being from L1 countries, they can still confuse learners of the English accent.

Several of the participants' responses cannot necessarily be translated into either positive or negative perceptions. Therefore, the researcher created another, neutral field to categorize said responses. These responses do not condemn or praise the different accents, but they are still notable enough to be included in the research such as difference in pronunciation, predictability, and indifference.

One particularly perceptive participant identified how easy it was to see how different words are pronounced in different accents. Amo stated that "The British accent is like, turning color into colour, the L is not

pronounced, but in American it's more pronounced" (P1.2). Said participant used two different accents, one for learning purposes and one for non-learning activities. She said that "Like an Asian accent, Indonesian is more well-known, so it is more predictable." (P1.3). This is in line with the findings of Yan and Vaseghi (2003) which shows the pronunciations of differing L1 accents, showing how relatively identifiable these words are to someone perceptive. A study conducted by Hough (2010) regarding language mimicry for the sake of familiarity may explain this phenomenon. The participant, being Indonesian, is familiar with if someone speak English with an Indonesian accent. To her, the accent can easily identify the speaker as an Indonesian.

Among the five participants, two of them claim that they did not pay

much attention to accents. They say that they tend to focus more on the meaning of a sentence rather than their accent or grammar. Participant Della mentioned her indifference on the interview by saying that she's "pretty indifferent," (P2.3), while participant Ilya explained that she tends to focus more on the meaning of the words by saying "When I use the English accent I tend to focus on meaning than thinking about other things" (P3.9) and "When I speak I don't think...Most importantly people know what I'm talking about" (P3.11). These are the characteristics of a Monitor under-user (Krashen, 1987), who tends to focus on the meaning of communication rather over any other attributes such as grammatical accuracy. Because they prioritize meaning over accuracy, they tend to disregard what accent they are speaking in, as long as

the meaning of what they are speaking can be successfully communicated.

Participants' version of English accents used

The results of the data gathering process found that all participants used L1 accents to some degree. Some participants clarify that they use American accent during class activities and British accent when speaking to their friends, while others say they use the American accent or British accent exclusively. Participant Amo, Della, Sara, and Sue all mention that they used the American accent, with Amo saying that her use of an American accent was "spontaneous" (P1.9). On the other hand, participant Della mentioned that she prefers to use British English because it is "easier on the ears" (P2.4). However, but she only uses it to play and kid with friends, citing it as "To

play and kid with friends, I usually try out the British accent” (P2.6). This point is clarified by Hough (2010) who claims that learners of a language tend to mimic the closest speaker of said language which, in the case of English Education students from a private university in Yogyakarta, their lecturers. Because the lecturers in this university generally speak in L1 accents, the students subconsciously mimic the aforementioned accent.

Although all participants used an L1 language to some degree, three participants used an accent that mixes an L1 accent with another accent, more predominantly their native accent. Participant Della, who has Javanese traces, mentioned that she tends to be more comfortable with the American accent but “because I have some Javanese tendencies, it still carries over when I’m talking” (P2.2). Participant

Ilya, who said that she prioritizes meaning over everything else, said that she mixes her accent when she studies. Regarding this, she said “Mixed accent, when I study English I mix my accents” (P3.7) These two participants were identified as monitor under users, who prioritize meaning over accuracy of any sort (Krashen, 1987). Participant Della clarified to the researcher that she uses a mixture of American and Javanese accent, a byproduct of the globalization of the English language which mixes with the local language (Rajagopalan, 2012).

Participants’ responses regarding the effect of having a preferred accent on their English learning process.

As the researcher have mentioned, all participants felt that they were helped by their preferred accents. The reasons

of the participants feeling this way are largely similar to their perceptions regarding the various accents: their preferred accents make the learning process easier, they are familiar with their preferred accent, and certain sentences become clearer when spoken in said familiar accent. To understand this, one must look at the findings of the aforementioned ASA study in 2015, which states that users of a certain accent must devote extra brainpower to process information spoken in an accent they are not familiar with. The participants, being familiar with the accents of speakers closest to them, mimic said speakers' accent (Hough, 2010), familiarize themselves with said accent, which in turn helps them study other, non-verbal ways of communicating such as body language (Mulkeen, 2016). Because they are familiar with the accents that they use,

they feel like they are helped with their learning process.

Conclusions

This research revealed that the students have different perceptions regarding the various accents of English, and that they feel helped in their English learning escapades by their preferred accent. Looking into this research, one keyword keeps popping up to explain this phenomenon: Familiarity. The respondents are familiar with the accents used by their lecturers and subconsciously mimic them, which may explain why all of the respondents use L1 accents to some degree. Because they have familiarized themselves with the accents, the time and brainpower that would have been required for switching accents are devoted into comprehension, making them think faster and more efficient.

This level of linguistic competence helps the students learn the materials better, giving them motivation and allowing them to achieve a higher level of understanding.

However, this does not necessarily mean that only Standardized English should be used in classrooms. Despite the lecturers of the private university using L1 accents, some participants still speak in a mixed accent, one that still has its roots on L1 accents, but mixed with the local dialect, embodying the flexibility of English as a language. This is proof that indigenization of English still exists and can help a student learn English instead of hindering them. As such, the diversity in English languages should be fostered, as it could help the students learn the World's most used language.

Recommendations

Regarding the results of this research, the researcher can safely recommend that learners' familiarization of accents be taken into consideration in the teaching and learning process. As seen in the results above, the more familiar the learners are with an accent, the better they will perform. As such, the researcher recommends to students and lecturers of English Education to become more open to the idea of implementing familiarization into the teaching and learning process. Remember that students of English Education are likely to mimic their lecturers' accents, so teach accordingly. On the other side, the researcher also recommends that the lecturers do not get too frustrated if there are speech or articulation errors from the students. They are not

necessarily wrong, they might be speaking in their own accent.

For students who read this research, the researcher would like to point out that English is a very vibrant and flexible language. If you are not speaking in an L1 variation of English, this does not mean that you are wrong. English has many variations, and those variations can include yours.

For future researchers that would like to elaborate more on this issue, the researcher recommends that they inquire further about the details of the mixed accents. It is important to see where these accents come from, and how they might aid in further advancing the teaching and learning process.

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