



SHOULD WE USE AMERICAN ENGLISH TO IMPROVE STUDENTS' LISTENING SKILLS?

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Abstract: This study aims to find out whether or not speakers' accents used in educational materials make any difference in the improvement of Turkish elementary EFL learners' listening skills. With this aim in mind, 40 students from two classes at Selçuk University were divided into two groups as American English group (n=20) and British English group (n=20). The students in both groups were given the listening parts of the London Test of English (Level 2) both in General American (GA) Accent and in the Received Pronunciation (RP) accent as pre-tests. Following that, the students in American English (AE) group studied the American version of Longman English Interactive Online for 20 hours, and the students in British English (BE) group studied the British version of Longman English Interactive Online for 20 hours. After this on-line instruction period, the students in both groups were given the listening part of the London Test of English in GA and RP accents. The results revealed statistically significant differences in favor of General American accent.

Keywords: accent, listening, pronunciation

Özet: Bu çalışmanın amacı, İngilizceyi yabancı dil olarak öğrenen başlangıç seviyesinde Türk öğrencilerinin dinlediğinin anlama yeteneklerinin gelişiminde eğitimsel materyalinde kullanılan aksanın fark oluşturup oluşturmadığını bulmaktır. Bu amaçla, Selçuk Üniversitesi Yabancı Diller Y.O. hazırlık sınıflarında 40 öğrenci, 20 tanesi Amerikan İngilizcesi ve 20 tanesi de İngiliz İngilizcesi grubu olarak ikiye ayrıldı. Her iki gruptaki öğrencilere London Test of English (LTE) sınavının 2. seviyesinin dinleme bölümleri ön-test olarak hem Genel Amerikan aksanıyla ve hem de İngiliz RP aksanıyla verildi. Ardından, Amerikan İngilizcesi grubundaki öğrenciler 20 saat boyunca Longman English Interactive Online 2 programının Amerikan versiyonunu ve İngiliz İngilizcesi grubundaki grup ise aynı programın İngiliz versiyonunun dinleme bölümlerini çalıştılar. Bu çevirim-içi çalışmadan sonra, her iki gruptaki öğrencilere yine LTE 2. seviyesi hem Amerikan hem de İngiliz İngilizcesinde verildi. Sonuçlar, Genel Amerikan aksanı lehine istatistiksel olarak anlamlı farklılık ortaya koymuştur.

Anahtar Sözcükler: aksan, dinleme, telaffuz

Introduction

In teaching English as a foreign language, instructional materials are of great importance and have a determining role in students' skills development. Being the single most important factor in academic success, teachers need to be equipped with skills to select appropriate materials for their students in accordance with the specific variables of the teaching context. One of the decisions foreign language teachers need to make is to choose between American English or British English for the development of their students' listening and speaking skills.

British English is the form of English spoken in the British Isles from which all other forms of English have been derived. The present-day British English is not the mother of any other variety of English but like many others, it is the descendent of the British spoken in earlier times.

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American and British are both worth studying; however, these two varieties are chosen as the subject of the study as they are the ones spoken by the majority of the speakers as well as the learners.

When choosing a material, be it a book, an on-line teaching program or a computer assisted pronunciation training software, teachers may want to take the accent used in the material as a criterion amongst many others like the appropriateness of the content, methodological background, design and lay-out or its price. In some cases, making a choice between American English (AE) and British English (BE) materials can even be unavoidable as some publishers publish the same material in two versions, generally labeling them as the American version or the British version, respectively (e.g. *Longman English Interactive Online* by Pearson). In making such a choice, one of the main points teachers need to take into consideration is the accent used in the materials. Favoring one accent over another would not mean much to ELT publishers as they primarily have marketing and language policy concerns rather than pedagogical concerns. This study aims to find out if the accent used in ELT materials makes differences for Turkish EFL learners in the improvement of listening skills. It is mainly concerned with General American (GA) accent and Received Pronunciation (RP) of the British English, which are the most common accents found in ELT materials.

Background

One of the most outstanding differences between American and British English is intonation. Alego (2006, p. 2) states that “the most important difference between British and American is the tune of the language, that is, the intonation that accompanies sentences.” There are also other pronunciation differences in stress, consonant and vowel articulation and distribution. The documentation of such differences is out of the scope of this paper, but the prominence of this study lies in the fact that there is no study investigating the role of accent found in ELT materials in relation to academic success. Most research on accent in educational context is about the accent perception of learners. Research investigating the attitudes toward accent variety is generally focused on GA and RP. Lippi-Green (1997) found that Dutch learner find British accent as the ‘norm’ while defines American English as ‘dynamic’ and ‘attractive’. Just as Dutch learners, Nigerian learners had a similar attitude to RP (Iorati-Uba, 1995). Lopez-Soto and Berrara (2007) view accents as results of sociolinguistic preference which may or may not be transferred to education. However, it can be argued that preference and cultural closeness of learners are not the only criteria, but the accents’ comprehensibility is also a criterion in deciding how accents affect foreign language teaching.

Apart from studies on ELF learners’ preference and perception of accent, there have been some studies proposed models based bilingual phonology. Although the idea of a standard pronunciation model to be used by foreign language speakers is not accepted in current research and practice, the fact that most EFL learners use English among themselves rather than with native speakers makes this decision even harder (Jenkins, 2000, cited in Lopez-Soto and Berrara, 2007). The shift in pronunciation teaching altered the EFL speaker model (native speaker) to competent bilingual speaker with an intelligible accent. Although intelligibility seems to be a plausible criterion, it is still controversial who is intelligible to whom. Therefore, it can be inferred that intelligibility is still measured through the native speaker taken as the model.

Prodromou (1992) studied 300 young adult Greek learners of EFL in different proficiency levels and found that 75% of the students preferred to learn British English while 18 % preferred American English. The results suggested that this preference could be attributed to the overall popularity of British English in the world, and to the bad historical image of America in Greece. The results of his study also indicated that society's perceptions of historical or cultural closeness can also play an important role in accent preference. One reason Prodromou (1992) does not mention is that the participants were studying for Cambridge First Certificate or Proficiency exams which are given in British English.

Lopez-Soto and Berrara-Pardo (2007) studied accent perceptions of Spanish ELF learners in three different accents of English, namely; General American, Received Pronunciation of British and found that 60% of the students found BrE to be "more correct" than AmE. Kovacs and Racsmany (2008) studied the effect of L1 phonetics and phonology on word perception and repetition. They designed an experiment in which subjects were asked to repeat non-word sounds and divided non-words into four categories:

- 1) high probability L1 sounding non-words,
- 2) low probability L1 sounding non-words
- 3) non-words containing illegal L1 phoneme sequence
- 4) non-words containing non L1 sound segments.

The results indicated that phonological/ phonotactic knowledge played an important role in reconstructive processes, while phonetic knowledge affected the perceptual analysis. Furthermore, they pointed out a correlation between Short Term Phonological Memory (STPM) and L2 achievement and claimed that memory performance is generally higher for L1 sounding input. Similarly, Service (1992) and Masoura and Gathercole (1999) pointed out a correlation between L2 sounding non-word repetition and L2 vocabulary development (cited in Kovacs and Racsmany, 2008, p. 598). Therefore, these results show that if any accent of English was shown to be phonologically closer to Turkish, this would have implications not only for speech procession (that is listening comprehension), but also for L2 vocabulary development, fluency etc. Such a study requires an analysis of the phonological aspects of Turkish and GA and RP accents.

Methodology

Participants

Forty students from two different elementary classes at Selçuk University Prep-school were assigned to British and American groups, each group having 20 students in the same class. They were elementary level students 14 of whom were males and 6 of whom were females in the British group and 12 of whom were males and 8 of whom were females in the American group.

The Instrument

Both groups were given the pre-tests in American and British English. The American versions of the tests were created with the help of two native speakers of American English working as language instructors who read the LTE tape-scripts in the studios of Selçuk University Radio. It was found out that there was no significant difference between American and British pre-tests neither in terms of groups nor in terms of accents. However, the researcher plausibly expected the students in both groups to perform better in British pre-test as they had already been studying

primarily British English materials during their in-class and outside the class work for more than 240 hours. LTE was chosen as the pre-test and post-test because it was a standardized test that could be used in the study.

Materials

After the pre-tests, to test the accent's effect in listening comprehension, one group of students studied American version of the *Longman English Interactive Online (LEI)* Level 2 for 20 hours, while the other studied the same material in British version of *LEI* Level 2 for the same amount of time. *LEI* is an on-line program which has four levels totally. Each level is composed of three modules each of which includes 5 units. In each unit, there are Grammar, Vocabulary, Listening, Listening Challenge, Pronunciation, Reading, Writing and Speaking sections together with review quizzes. In accordance with the specific aim of the study mentioned above, students in both groups studied the Listening and Listening Challenge parts presented in each unit for a two-week period. Having 30 class hours of English a week, during this experimental period, the students carried on studying their instructional materials in the classroom without doing the listening parts for 20 hours and studied *LIE* in the school computer lab for 10 hours each week. *LEI* as an on-line material, has certain advantages like other on-line or computer assisted materials. To mention a few amongst many others: listening materials are accompanied with videos; students can work at their own pace, check answers and receive feedback from the computer. But the main reason for choosing *LEI* is that it provides exposure to GA and RP spoken by native speakers, which is crucial to standardize the input variable in the research design. The American and British pre-tests consisted of 10 multiple choice questions and 10 question requiring short answers (two or three words). Both groups took the test on the same day.

Research Design

The research followed a quasi- experimental design to find out statistical differences between the performances of the groups. The research design can be summarized as follows:

	Pre-tests	Sessions	Post-tests
The American English Group	LTE 2 American version LTE British version	LEI American Version (2) Listening-Listening Challenge	LTE 2 American version LTE 2 British version
The British English Group	LTE 2 American version LTE British version	LEI British version (2) Listening-Listening Challenge	LTE 2 American version LTE 2 British version

The groups were given both American and British versions as pre-and post-tests in order to see if instruction in one of the two accents resulted in higher results in both American and British English listening tests.

Data Analysis

The first step in the data analysis involved calculating the number of students' correct answers to the questions given in the pre-test. Since both pre-tests involved twenty questions, each correct answer was given '1' point. Therefore, the maximum score on the pre-test was 20 points. The post-tests were also graded in the same way since they included the same level in the listening comprehension test. As some students did not come to class on the post-test day, there were some missing data. This was compensated by calculating the raw scores of the pre-test first after which the means and standard deviations of the post-test were calculated. A paired sample t-test was administrated in SPSS 15.0 and statistical data within and between the groups was analyzed accordingly.

Interpretation and Discussion

The statistical analysis of pre-tests did not yield any significant difference in terms of groups and in terms of the accents used in the materials.

Table 1. RP tests between groups

	Group	n	x	sd	t	p
Pre-test	British G.	17	5.35	2.05	-1,61	0.125
	American G.	17	6.35	1.90		
Post-Test	British G.	18	8.22	3.47	-0.051	0.960
	American G.	18	8.27	2.78		

*p < 0.05

As can be seen in Table 1, there is no significant difference between the groups taking the British pre-test, which shows that in the beginning, the students are statistically at the same level in terms of listening in the RP. As can be seen in Table 2, there is no significant difference between groups in terms of GA pre-test.

Table 2. GA tests between groups

	Group	n	x	sd	t	p
Pre-test	British G.	16	6.06	1.57	-0.99	0.338
	American G.	16	6.68	1.52		
Post-test	British G.	18	8.16	2.77	-2.70	0.015
	American G.	18	10.00	2.37		

*p < 0.05

One significant difference that can be observed in Table 1 and Table 2 is that although there is a significant difference between American post-tests of the groups in favor of the American group, there is no significant difference between the groups in the British post-tests. Therefore, it can be argued that instruction in GA improves learners' overall listening skills more, an argument which needs to be verified with further studies with tests including both accents.

Table 3. RP Pre-tests and post-tests within groups

Groups	n	x	sd	t	p
British G. (Pre-test- post-test)	18	8.22	3.47	-2.56	0.020
American G. (Pre-test-Post-test)	17	8.17	2.83	-2.12	0.050

*p < 0.05

Although Table 3 and Table 4 indicate that both groups improved their listening scores both in GA and RP post-tests as can be seen in all of these four tables, the significant difference between the groups in GA post-test was in favor of the American group. Furthermore, the statistically insignificant difference between the groups in the RP post-test makes the GA post-test difference more meaningful.

Table 4. GA pre-tests and post-tests within groups

Groups	n	x	sd	t	p
British G. (Pre-test- Post-test)	19	8.21	2.69	-3.53	0.002
American G. (Pre-test-Post-test)	16	-1.08	4.34	-5.11	0.000

*P<0.05

Discussion

The significant finding mentioned above implies that Turkish EFL learners improve their learning skills more by using materials in GA English. Although the results of such a small-scale study cannot be generalized to all Turkish EFL learners and the American accent cannot be regarded as a prescription for these contexts, the findings of this research can lay the foundations for further studies. The finding that both American English and British English groups improved their scores on both GA and RP post-tests can partially answer the question if instruction in either of these two accents improves listening comprehension. As American English is spoken by most native speakers in number and just as it is becoming more widespread in the world, choosing American English for EFL purposes would be more advantageous, which is in line with the findings of this study.

Unlike British colonization which created many variations of English like the Indian English, Australian English, and American English, American English enjoys great popularity all around the world due to films, music, and popular culture elements such as those video games. Alego (2006: p. 1) states that “American English has more native speakers than British and is becoming the dominant form of English in non-native countries other perhaps than those of Western Europe. Much European bias favor British as a model; but evolving popular culture is biased toward American.” British is also viewed as a model in Turkey just as many people regard British Isles as the main land where the purest form of English is spoken. However, much research is needed to check on the relationship between language learners’ academic success in listening in relation to the accent used in instructional materials. Similarly, qualitative research on students’ and teachers’ feelings about and their perceptions of the accents should shed light on this dilemma.

Conclusion

As this study is a small-scale study, the findings cannot be generalized to all Turkish L1 contexts. The number of the participants is limited as the researcher had access to only 2 computer labs. Furthermore, the instruction time and level range is kept limited as the supplement of upper levels of LEI online was not possible in the specific context. Alternatively, this study could have been carried out with all four levels of both American and British English, which would most probably lead to attaining more reliable results. Moreover, together with the number of the students, levels and ages of the students could have been varied. Finally, the study could have included a qualitative research paradigm to find out learners' perception and preferences of accents in English. It is also important to mention that the scope of this study is limited to the comprehension of accents in English, but not comparing phonological or any other aspect of the two accents.

As mentioned throughout the study, although this study has some implications for material selection, or even for language teacher training, these implications are to be supported by further and more comprehensive research. Further studies on this issue, be in it in the Turkish context or in any other context, should include in their final analysis how learners, teachers and teacher trainees view accent in addition to their preferences. They can also include the comparison of Turkish phonetics and phonology to English accents in order to develop a pronunciation teaching model that is adequate and evidence-based. Moreover, these studies can include mixed tests (including both GA and RP or any other) designed according to students the probable encounters with speakers. In conclusion, there is serious need for further research in this area before the results of this study can be generalized, but the findings of this study can lay the foundation for further studies.

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