

## The Effects of Different Accents on Listening Comprehension in EFL Classes<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

*Listening skill is practised in English as a foreign language (EFL) classes by the help of listening texts prepared for the coursebooks with a pure British accent which may not reflect the natural communication elements that the learners will face throughout their ordinary lives. As a consequence of the use of English in different geographies, non-native speakers have produced a variety of Englishes. Since English language is used as a lingua franca, accent is one distinctive matter of this diversity. In this context, it is controversial to what extent it is correct to improve learners' listening skills with the tapes recorded in one type of accent, which is the case today in most of the EFL classes. Therefore, this study aims to investigate a sample of secondary school students to evaluate and compare their listening skills in comprehending different accents of English. To this end, participants were subjected to a group of listening tests. A total of 22, 7th grade students participated in the study. Test results were assessed and evaluated, comparisons in the sense of comprehension levels between different tapes were provided. Next, the necessities of developing awareness of different accents in EFL classes were discussed. Finally, based on the results of the study, several practical implications for developing listening skills in EFL classrooms were drawn.*

**Keywords:** *Listening, listening comprehension, accent*

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## İngilizcenin Yabancı Dil Olarak Öğretildiği Sınıflarda Farklı Aksanların Dinleme Becerisine Etkileri

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### Öz

Dinleme becerisi İngilizcenin yabancı dil olarak öğretildiği sınıflarda genellikle ders kitapları için özel olarak hazırlanmış ve gerçek hayattaki iletişim görüntüsünü tam olarak yansıtmayan, kusursuz bir İngiliz aksanıyla kaydedilmiş dinleme metinleri ile çalışılmaktadır. Dilin farklı coğrafyalardaki insanlar tarafından kullanılması sonucu bu insanlar kendilerine özgü konuşma biçimleri ortaya koyarlar. İngilizce dünya genelinde ortak dil olarak kullanıldığından, aksanlar bu çeşitliliğin ayırt edici özelliklerindedir. Bu bağlamda, öğrencilerin dinleme becerilerini geliştirmek için çoğu dil sınıflarında olduğu gibi sadece İngiliz aksanı ile konuşan kişilerden oluşan kayıtlar kullanmanın ne kadar doğru olduğu tartışmalı bir konudur. Bu nedenle bu çalışma bir grup ortaokul öğrencisinin sınıf ortamında duymaya alışık olduklarından farklı konuşan insanları ne derecede anlayabildiklerini araştırmayı ve bu dereceleri karşılaştırmayı amaçlamaktadır. Çalışma 22, 7. sınıf öğrencisinin katılımıyla yürütülmüştür. Öğrenciler her bir kayıtta farklı bir millettten, farklı bir aksanla konuşan insanların olduğu bir grup dinleme testine tabi tutulmuşlardır. Test sonuçları incelenip değerlendirildikten sonra dinlediğini anlama becerisi kapsamında test sonuçları birbiriyle karşılaştırılarak, dil sınıflarında aksan farklılıkları bilincinin oluşturulmasının önemi tartışılmıştır. Son olarak, çalışmanın sonuçları ışığında, yabancı dil sınıflarında dinleme becerilerinin geliştirilmesi için çeşitli çıkarımlar yapılmıştır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Dinleme, dinlediğini anlama, aksan

## Introduction

The nature of language teaching is dramatically challenging teachers and scholars all over the world in both EFL and English as a Second Language (ESL) contexts. There is little doubt that searching for new paths continued to meet the multitude of needs and expectations of language learners in confronting this challenge. The parameters of language learning have highly altered specific learning needs to be achieved. However, along with the rise of the communicative language teaching, the emphasis on the skills of listening and speaking has increased because the goals of language teaching have changed. The modern view of language teaching has led to new methods involving more practice on communicative skills and reshaped the purposes of learning a foreign language. These purposes are variable for each learner. They may include academic purposes, social studies, obligations or many other individualized motives. Regarding the fact that one of the important points of teaching a language is to make learners achieve their objectives, it is beneficial to examine the process and evaluate it in terms of diverse certain perspectives.

English language learners might have their own individualized reasons for learning the language, however, it is justifiable for most of them to unite on a common purpose, as today's world has brought about some universal reasons. According to Aljohani (2016, p. 442), the universal reasons for learning this language include "the idea that English language is one of the global languages spoken in a large number of countries worldwide". Career planning, travelling reasons, to gain a better comprehension on the life experienced in the countries where the language is spoken, and to be able to live in those countries are some of the reasons stated by the English language learners for learning this language (Aljohani, 2016). From different viewpoints, various reasons may be presented. Akçay, Arkan, and Bütüner (2015) affirm that students' basic reason to learn English is to speak with the foreigners/tourists. From a general perspective, it may be argued that the main purpose of learning a language, as well as English, is highly related to communication skills with the people who speak the same language.

Communication is simply described as the procedure of conveying information and creating understanding between people (Keyton, 2011).

*Sender* and *receiver* are two main components of communication process. The information encoded by the sender using words, symbols, or gestures to generate a message is decoded by the receiver to produce a meaningful information (Lunenburg, 2010). The importance of these elements was drawn by Lunenburg (2010, p. 2) as “the elements in the communication process determine the quality of communication”. The effectiveness of the communication process may be damaged by a problem caused by any of these elements (Keyton, 2011). In oral communication, decoding the message sent by the interlocutor through listening is a crucial phase of an effective communication, due to the fact that it provides receivers with meaningful information, and eventually, a healthy communication. From this perspective, a number of researchers offer different definitions of listening in order to highlight its unquestionable role in foreign language instruction.

Listening comprehension is simply defined as the process of comprehending the spoken language. According to Giri (1998), there exist seven main characteristics of listening as follows: informality of language, brevity, pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, noise, and redundancy. In the process of listening in oral communication, lack of improvement in any of these characteristics may cause disadvantages for listening comprehension. Pronunciation of the speaker is one characteristic that is being ignored in most of the language classes or schools in Turkey while listening skill is being practised. Listening is a complex process of many components, such as hearing acuity and auditory perception, so it requires the ability to understand and discriminate similarities and dissimilarities in sounds, intention, attitude, consideration, experience, and training (Giri, 1998). Many similarities or dissimilarities in sounds may occur because of the speaker’s accent, which is related to the speaker’s native language or other distinctives. In this sense, today, with its highly practical flexibility, English is ranked as a lingua franca (House, 2002). This function of English language promotes it to present a diverse range of characteristics all around the world. Majanen (2008, p. 1) asserts that “accent is one evident area of this diversity”. As a result, it is quite unlikely to hear the same phonetic sounds from each person speaking English in the world. Some words may be pronounced differently. By neglecting this matter in EFL classroom settings, listening skill is usually

practised with pedagogical tapes recorded in a native British accent, a case which is arguably far away from reflecting the real use of the language outside the classroom. In this case, it seems possible for learners to have listening comprehension problems while communicating with foreign people, which may affect the quality of communication negatively or even hinder the process. This situation would contradict with most of the learners' objectives and prevent them from using the language outside the classroom. As Bachman and Palmer (2010) suggested, developing listening tests that harmonise with target language use settings in which learners use the language learnt in second and foreign language classrooms is legitimate. Regarding the fact that this does not seem to be the case in most of the classrooms in Turkey, the possible results of this situation is ambiguous. Therefore, this study aims to explore the impacts of different accents on listening comprehension and compare the participants' listening skills towards the different native and non-native varieties of English that they may encounter outside the classroom. With this aim in mind, this research attempts to elucidate the fact that listening tests in one type of accent practised in language classrooms may not always reflect the communication elements in real life and the learners might have the deficiency of listening comprehension skills in their lives.

### **The Characteristics of the Accents Selected for the Study**

Seven different listening tapes in different accents were selected for this research. Three of these listening tapes were recorded by the native speakers of English, which were British, Australian, and Irish speakers. The other four tapes involved people speaking from different nationalities which were Argentinian, Chinese, French, and Italian.

A considerable number of researches have examined the phonetic features of either English or French, however, it is quite difficult to find studies that deal with the comparison of both languages or focus on the linguistic characteristics that occur when a French native speaker talks English or vice versa (Pischel, 2009). Nevertheless, there are numerous concrete different phonological features of these two languages. When a French speaker speaks in English, it is likely for listeners to notice the differences in the pronunciation of the speaker. Especially a number of

phonological sounds that exist in French language but contrast with the phonetics of English language may lead French speakers to be incomprehensible when they speak English. Even if the word is used in both languages, different pronunciations cause phonological problems (Genç, 2017). For instance, the [r] sound is expected to be one of the problematic sounds for a French speaker. The [r] in English is one of the alveolar sounds, whereas the *r* in French is symbolized by [R] and it is a uvular trill sound (Fromkin, Rodman, & Hyams, 2014). A French speaker naturally tends to produce English [r] sound as [R] in French language when speaking English. These two phonological sounds are produced differently in terms of place of articulation. "For [r] (IPA [ɹ]), most English speakers either curl the tip of the tongue back behind the alveolar ridge, or bunch up the top of the tongue behind the ridge" (Fromkin et al., 2014, p. 197). On the other hand, "in the formation of [R], the tongue is drawn back, and the uvula is made to vibrate against it" (Nitze & Wilkins, 1918, p. 21). [ɲ] is another sound which is not used in the English sound system and when a word is written with it, it corresponds to the letter <n> (Pischel, 2009). It draws the sequence 'gn', respectively, as in the words like *gnon*, [ɲɔ̃], or *montagne*, [mɔ̃taɲ] (Tranel, 1987). "Occasionally it can be mistaken with the English symbol /ŋ/" (Pischel, 2009, p. 22). Another difference between the two languages is in the field of intonation and stress. "The most striking feature of the French intonation system is the lack of phonemic stress" (Sturm, 1965, p. 67). "In English, stress is of great importance" (Sturm, 1965, p. 67). Intonation is an important point for the information structure in English. However, in some languages, such as French, it does not have an important role, as a matter of fact, usually the last syllables of the words are stressed in French (Finegan, 2012). The syllables in French words have almost the same loudness, length, and pitch because it is not a stress-timed language, therefore, French speakers of English, they contribute to their *French accent* by not stressing some certain syllables appropriately (Fromkin et al., 2014). These types of phonological differences in these two languages inevitably give the speakers a unique accent.

The English spoken in Ireland is quite different from standard English spoken in England in terms of phonology (Kolárik, 2013). Regarding the fact that the Irish people speak English differently in each part of the

Ireland, as a whole, it is agreeable to claim that it is one of the most difficult accents to understand, at least for a person who speaks English as a foreign language. According to Bliss (1984), during the seventeenth century, Irish people learning English changed and reproduced the sounds in line with their own phonetic system and the pronunciation they produced has been sustained with minor changes to the present day.

One of the characteristics of the typical Irish accent is the identical pronunciation of some words, such as *steal* and *stale*, both /ste:l/ (Wells, 1982b). In this case, more examples can be given such as *meet* and *mate*, both /mi:t/. Wells (1982a) stated that the vowels in the words *see* and *sea* (originally /i:/ and /e:/ respectively) are identical in more standard English since the process called *Fleece merger* took place and merged these two vowels to a single phoneme /i:/ in the seventeenth century. However, the process has not entirely affected the Irish English accent, and the old one still appears in some rural accents in Ireland, although it is recessive in use (Kolárik, 2013). Another distinctive feature of Irish English accent is the possible different placement of stress than the more standard English. As Hickey (2007) averred, stress patterns are not typically in line with standard British Accent, for instance, trisyllabic verbs are usually stressed on the last syllable in Irish accent: adver'tise, edu'cate, and so on, while standard forms are 'advertise, 'educate.

The English spoken by people born in Australia is called Australian English (AusE) (Blair, 1993). However, it should be noted that at least three types of English are spoken by native-born Australians: standard AusE, varieties of Aboriginal English, and different ethnocultural AusE dialects (Cox, 2006). As it is the case, a number of characteristics of standard AusE will be mentioned. Wells (1982a) claimed that variations of consonants in standard AusE are not quite remarkable. However, Cox (2006) maintains that there exist some points to be highlighted about the consonantal features of AusE. Standard AusE is non-rhotic, which means prepausal and preconsonantal /r/ sounds are usually not pronounced. In contrast, linking /r/ and intrusive /r/ are typically used. Additionally, Cox (2006) exemplifies intrusive /r/ as in the word *drawing* (/dro:rɪŋ/) and linking /r/ as in *door in* (/do:rɪn/). Standard AusE differs from Southern British English in terms of the phonetic characteristics of the vowels. For instance, Cox (2006) discusses the vowels /æɪ/ as in *hay* and /æɔ/ as in *how*

in terms of their production in AusE and depicts how they are produced. Another characteristic of vowels in AusE occurs in /u:/. Although Oasa (1989) claimed that this feature is associated with age and regional differences, /u:/ is often retracted before /l/, as in the words *pull* and *pool* (Pa-lethorpe & Cox, 2003). As it is seen in some of the given examples, AusE is stated to have a number of distinctive phonological characteristics, especially in terms of vowels when it is compared to more standard British English. Cox (2006) also depicted the situation in Australia in the 1990s, the time when it was difficult to distinguish between some words, such as *high*, *how*, *hay*, *hoe*, *he*, because of the use of identical vowels in each of them by teenagers.

Typical phonological features of English spoken by Chinese people probably stem from the intonation and phonological system of Chinese language. Yin and Zhang (2009) found that Chinese students may possess issue with English sounds as a result of being influenced by similar Chinese sounds, however, they are not really similar. Most researchers agree that foreign or second language learners tend to substitute problematic sounds of the target language with the nearest equivalents in their native language. These sounds may contain both vowels and consonants. For example, Chinese language does not contain vowels like /æ/, /aʊ/, and /eə/, or no such consonants as /ð/, /θ/ (Yin & Zhang, 2009). Hence, Chinese people who learn English are claimed to have problems producing these sounds, and they may try to substitute these sounds with the other sounds in their native languages. The substitution of /s/ or /z/ for the English /ð/ and /θ/, or /e/ for the English /æ/ may be given as examples (Yin & Zhang, 2009). As well as declared by Wang (2011), Chinese people are argued to have difficulties in producing the sounds of /v/, /θ /, /ð/, and /ʒ /, because they have no equivalence in Chinese. Another point is that, only one type of /i/ sound exists in Chinese language which means it does not make any difference in meaning if the vowel is short or long (Yin & Zhang, 2009). This case contrasts with English because the phonemes /i/ and /i:/ are different from each other, and they may change the meaning in a word, as in the words *ship* and *sheep*. These listed factors are believed to lead Chinese people to have a different kind of accent when they speak English.

In addition, Italian speakers of English language are considered to have a different kind of accent due to the fact that there are certain phonological differences between the two languages. The major phonological difference between Italian and English is related to vowels. Standard Italian contains 7 vowels which are [i], [e], [ɛ], [a], [ɔ], [o], and [u] (Paoli, 2016). However, English language has more vowels than Italian language does. Depending on the source, 12-15 English vowel sounds exist and this case is probably believed to cause a number of difficulties for Italian learners of English (Wheelock, 2016). For example, Italian has only one open unrounded vowel which is [a]. However, English language contains three open unrounded vowels that can be listed as: /æ/ (cat), /ɑ/ (park) and /ʌ/ (cut) (Wheelock, 2016). Therefore, it is possible for an Italian to speak English by using only Italian [a] for all the three different vowels in English. In parallel with this claim, according to the study by Flege, MacKay, and Meador (1999), [ʌ] was the most often misidentified vowel by native English speakers listening to Italian speakers of English. Additionally, Busà (2008) put forward that production of vowels is considered to be one of the biggest problems for an Italian to speak English and Italians tend to have difficulties in identifying the differences between two words in English that differ from each other with one vowel, such as the words *beg – bag, ship – sheep*, and so on.

Another distinctive characteristic of Italian that contrasts with English phonetics is the lack of aspiration of voiceless stops, such as /p/, /t/, /k/ (Agard & Di Pietro, 1965). English language words may have voiceless stops at the end of them, such as the words *cap, pet*, and so on. However, Italian speakers of English tend to articulate a vowel at the end of an English word which ends with a stop consonant. Busà (2008) also stated that this epenthetic tendency is one of the frequently mentioned characteristics of Italian accent in English. Another distinctive feature of Italian should be mentioned in terms of consonants. Italian language does not contain English dental fricatives /θ/ and /ð/. These sounds are argued to be difficult for an Italian to produce in terms of place of articulation, so, when they attempt to produce these sounds, they form the labio-dental fricative [f] or the alveolar stop [t] for /θ/, as well as they have the tendency to produce the alveolar stop [d] for /ð/ (Wheelock, 2016). These

types of features of Italian language are assumed to contribute to English accent of an Italian speaker.

The testing materials of the present study also include an Argentinian speaker. Considering the fact that Argentinian people speak Spanish, it is needed to identify the phonological characteristics of Argentinian speakers in line with the Spanish language. Spanish and English contrast with each other in terms of their phonological systems, although they share a similar alphabet (Gorman & Kester, 2001). For instance, Spanish language has 5 vowels as /a/, /e/, /i/, /o/, and /u/ (Salcedo, 2010). However, English language contains more than 5 vowels including /æ/, /ɔ/, /ʊ/, and so on, which is a situation that may be a problem for native Spanish speakers who speak English. Gorman and Kester (2001) exemplified this case as the possible pronunciation of the word *man* with the tense /a/ as in *mahn* instead of the lax vowel /æ/ by a learner. Other possible pronunciations stemming from the vowel systems of the languages are listed by Gorman and Kester (2001): *hat* sounds like *hot*, *get* sounds like *gate*, *this* sounds like *these*, and so on.

Another point to be highlighted is the difference between the place of articulation of a number of sounds in two languages. For example, the sounds /t/ and /d/ in English are produced on the alveolar ridge above the teeth, however, the Spanish /t/ and /d/ have a dentalized quality as they are produced with the tip of the tongue placed on the back of the teeth (Whitley, 1986). As a result of these types of place of articulation differences, a monolingual English listener may not be able to distinguish the production of some voiceless sounds from their voiced pairs and the production of words, such as *bear* and *pear* or *time* and *dime*, sound very alike (Gorman & Kester, 2001). Another distinctive feature is related to the combination of the sounds. For example, the consonant sound /θ/ is a part of both languages. In English, /r/ may follow /θ/ at the beginning of words (as in *three*, *thread*, and so on), however, in Spanish, this is not a possible consonant sequence, as well as the impossibility of the initial group /st/, unlike the English words, such as *study* and *starter* (Mott, 2010). All in all, considering these features elaborated above, native Spanish speakers of English, as well as Argentinian people, are argued to have a different kind of accent when they speak English.

## Studies on Accent and Listening Comprehension

There are several major factors that highly affect the learners' listening comprehension. These may include vocabulary knowledge, grammatical competence, motivation or the other competencies of the learner. An often cited factor among these is the speaker's accent. As Van Engen and Peelle (2014) remarked, being familiar with the accent of the speaker leads listeners to give little or no extra effort to understand. In a similar study, Gass and Varonis (1984) cited familiarity with the accent as a major element affecting the level of listening comprehension. Bross (1992) also supported the crucial role of familiarity with the accent of the speaker to be able to make correlation between sounds.

Further studies have been carried out in order to find the probable impacts of different accents on listening comprehension. Matsuura, Chiba, Mahoney, and Rilling (2014) investigated the relation between familiarity with an English accent and the level of comprehension. Participants in the study listened to the same text voiced by both one Canadian and one Indian speaker. Canadian was the familiar one to the participants and Indian was the unfamiliar. The results showed that the participants performed better listening comprehension levels when they listened to the Canadian speaker, which leads to the finding that being familiar with the accent contributes to the level of listening comprehension. A similar study was carried out by White, Treenate, Kiatgungwalgrai, Somnuk, and Chalochatvarakorn (2016). The researchers examined how the familiar accents facilitated the listening comprehension of the participants. A group of listening texts which were categorized as familiar, moderately familiar, less familiar, and unfamiliar was used in the study. The findings of the study indicated that the listening texts in the category of familiar (Thai, Irish, British) led participants to the highest scores. The tests for the unfamiliar accents have the lowest scores according to the results of the study. In another study conducted by Goh (1998), the researcher determined the five major elements that influence listening comprehension as follows: vocabulary, background knowledge, speech rate, type of input, and speaker's accent. According to the results of the study, 68% of the participants stated that the speaker's accent strongly influenced their listening comprehension. The participants declared that they

struggled with the unfamiliarity to them. In that sense, it was plausible to put forward that the participants of the study were exposed to British or American accent much more than other accents. In her latest research, Chaipua-pae (in press) aimed to search about the relationship between sharing the same native language with the speaker of English and the listening comprehension. Arabic and Thai learners listened to the Arabic and Thai speakers while they were lecturing in English. The results represented that each group performed a better level of comprehension when they listened to the teacher with whom they shared the same native language. Possibly due to the familiarity with the accent of the teacher.

One of the most recent studies was conducted by Kağıtçı Yıldız (2017), who aimed to find out if the speaker's accent had any impact on students' listening comprehension, as well as the way that students view listening to various accents. She worked with six English teachers and 107 EFL students, all of whom were intermediate level students. The results of this study revealed that the speaker's accent seemed to play a key role in students' listening comprehension, but the results were not generalized. Because, some of the participants performed a better level of listening comprehension when listening to native speakers, however, some of them performed better when the speaker was a non-native speaker of English. The findings illustrated that the Turkish accent of the speaker was not a remarkable facilitator for the students. Another related research was carried out by Abeywickrama (2013), who investigated whether the non-native speakers influence the performance of test takers on the test or not. The results of the study represented that the effects of different accents on test takers' performance were not significant, indicating that the varieties of English used did not affect the participants' performances on the listening tests. Similarly, Major, Fitzmaurice, Bunta, and Balasubramanian (2002) found out an indefinite relationship between accent and performance on listening as a result of their research.

## **Methodology**

### ***Participants***

The study was conducted with the participation of a total of 22 (N=22), 7th grade students attending usual English courses in a state school. They had been studying English for 4 years in the school at the time the present study was conducted and they had been practising their listening skills with the listening texts in native British accent prepared for their coursebooks published by The Ministry of National Education in Turkey. The sample group was chosen from an ordinary state school in terms of the purpose of the study. It was ensured that none of the participants attended any additional language classes or none of them was a native speaker of English language.

### ***Procedure***

A quantitative data obtaining procedure involving different listening test components was employed for the study. 7 different listening tapes were selected and testing papers for each tape were provided. Each listening tape involved different people from different nationalities speaking (Argentinian, Australian, British, Chinese, French, Irish, and Italian). The reason for selecting these materials was that they include native and non-native people speaking English with different phonological characteristics. The main aim of the current research was to test and compare the participants' listening comprehension skills when they listened to the accents including the ones they were not used to hearing in the classroom while practising their listening skills, and also the ones they were familiar with. The accents were selected considering their different phonological characteristics from each other, which reveals the fact that people can sound differently although they speak the same language. In correspondence with the characteristics of each listening text, different types of tests involving true-false, gap-filling and multiple-choice tests were prepared for each tape. In some listening tapes, it was aimed for participants to pay more attention to the vocabulary items, thus, a gap-filling test was subjected. In another tape in which the vocabulary items

did not show any distinctive pronunciation matter, a multiple-choice test or a true-false test was subjected. While selecting the materials, several points were taken into consideration, such as the participants' proficiency levels and background information. It was ensured that the vocabulary items and structures involved in the materials were not in a position to damage participants' listening comprehension levels, thus, also the reliability of the study. The study was conducted in an English course classroom in the school, obtaining the required permission by the institution. Usual classroom environment was preferred to help participants feel relaxed as they were in a regular English course. Testing equipment was checked by the researchers before the practice and proper functionality of all the equipment and features (speakers, computer, and sufficient volume level of tapes for the entire classroom) was verified. Listening tests were subjected to the participants in a regular classroom environment and instruction. In the progress of the study, teaching listening methodology was taken into consideration. Test papers were distributed before the tapes started rolling for participants to check on. They were informed about the tape they were about to hear and a conversation about a related topic between the participants and the researchers were provided as a pre-listening activity. Each tape started rolling after the participants were ready and they were expected to fill in the tests as they listened to the tapes. After each tape, a conversation about the text was provided as a post-listening activity and as a transmission between the tapes. Each recording was played for three times. Test papers of each tape were collected after listening to the text. The researchers assessed the test papers and the average number of true answers for each test was considered to be the average level of listening comprehension for the test. These results were converted into the percentage equivalents to compare with each other and get standardized. For instance, the average value of the true answers for a test turned out to be 3 out of 5 questions asked. This was regarded as the 3/5 of the text was understood by the participants and assessed as equal to the rate of 60% listening comprehension level. Thus, the answers for the questions that the study investigated were provided.

### Research Questions

1. To what extent can students understand speakers with different accents?
2. Which accents are the most and the least problematic ones in terms of listening comprehension by the participants?

### Instruments

Seven different listening tests were subjected to the participants. Materials were selected from several websites distributing recordings of English spoken texts. Proficiency levels of the participants were taken into consideration while selecting the listening texts in terms of the vocabulary items and the grammar structures involved in the texts. Brief information about the listening texts and the tests used for the study is shown in Table 1.

*Table 1. Brief information about the tapes and tests used for the study*

	Speaker's Nationality	Duration	Topic	Type of Test	Number of Test Items
Tape 1	Argentinian	02:37	Speaker's Life	True – False	5
Tape 2	Australian	01:14	Animals in Australia	Multiple- Choice	5
Tape 3	British	00:42	Summer Activities	Multiple- Choice	5
Tape 4	Chinese	00:58	Speaker's Hometown	Gap- filling	5
Tape 5	French	02:17	Speaker's Life	Gap- filling	8
Tape 6	Irish	01:10	Speaker's Life	Gap- filling	9
Tape 7	Italian	02:47	Italian Food	Multiple- Choice	5

### Findings

In this part, the results of the current study are presented. The first research question that the study aimed to investigate was about the degree of the listening comprehension levels of the participants who listened to the tapes recorded in several accents. The answer of the first question is presented with the tables (see Table 2 and Table 3). The second question aimed to provide a comparison between the levels of listening comprehension for the accents. It is depicted by the chart designed according to the findings of the study (see Figure 1).

*To what extent can students understand speakers with different accents?**Table 2. Numbers of the correct (+) and incorrect (-) answers of the tests for each accented tape by the students*

	Argentinian		Austrian		British		Chinese		French		Irish		Italian	
	+	-	+	-	+	-	+	-	+	-	+	-	+	-
St 1	2	3	3	1	4	1	3	2	0	9	0	8	3	2
St 2	2	3	4	1	4	1	1	4	0	9	1	7	3	2
St 3	2	3	2	3	3	2	1	4	0	9	0	8	2	3
St 4	2	3	4	1	4	1	4	1	1	8	3	5	3	2
St 5	4	1	4	1	4	1	3	2	0	9	0	8	3	2
St 6	3	2	3	2	4	1	3	2	0	9	0	8	2	3
St 7	3	2	3	2	4	1	2	3	0	9	0	8	2	3
St 8	2	3	1	4	4	1	0	5	2	7	0	8	3	2
St 9	1	4	2	3	5	0	1	4	0	9	0	8	2	3
St 10	1	4	2	3	5	0	1	4	1	8	0	8	2	3
St 11	0	5	4	1	5	0	1	4	1	8	0	8	2	3
St 12	1	4	3	2	5	0	1	4	0	9	0	8	1	4
St 13	1	4	3	2	3	2	1	4	0	9	0	8	1	4
St 14	2	3	4	1	3	2	1	4	0	9	0	8	2	3
St 15	2	3	2	3	3	2	2	3	0	9	0	8	2	3
St 16	2	3	2	3	5	0	0	5	0	9	0	8	2	3
St 17	2	3	3	2	3	2	2	3	0	9	0	8	0	5
St 18	1	4	3	2	5	0	3	2	1	8	0	8	2	3
St 19	1	4	3	2	4	1	3	2	0	9	0	8	2	3
St 20	3	2	2	3	4	1	4	1	0	9	0	8	1	4
St 21	4	1	3	2	4	1	3	2	1	8	1	7	0	5
St 22	3	2	3	2	3	2	4	1	1	8	0	8	1	4

Table 2 represents the test results by each participant and for each test in detail. Each listening test was assessed and evaluated separately, due to the fact that the results vary from accent to accent. Numbers of correct and incorrect answers by each participant for each test are presented in Table 2.

In the following, for a more clear perspective, Table 3 displays the analyzed data obtained from Table 2.

*Table 3. Analysis of the data obtained from Table 2*

	Number of items asked	Mean scores	Percentage equivalent	Number of students who did not understand anything	Number of students who understood everything
Argentinian	5	2	40%	1	-
Australian	5	2,86	58%	-	-
British	5	4	80%	-	6
Chinese	5	2	40%	2	-
French	9	0,3	4%	15	-
Irish	8	0,2	3%	19	-
Italian	5	1,8	38%	2	-

The first listening tape that the participants were tested was in an Argentinian accent. A true-false test including 5 statements was subjected. According to the results of this test, none of the participants could understand completely what was said on the tape. One of the participants out of 22 did not understand anything from the recording according to the results. The average value of the correct answers is 2 out of 5 questions (Total number of correct answers = 44 / Total number of participants N = 22). This means that this accent was understood by the participants at the rate of 2/5, which is equal to 40%.

Second listening tape was in an Australian accent. A multiple-choice test including 5 questions with 3 choices for each was subjected. According to the table, the level of listening comprehension for this accent is quite decent. None of the participants failed and most of them answered more than 3 questions correctly. The average value of the correct answers is 2,86 out of 5 questions (Total correct answers = 63 / Total Participants = 22). The percentage equivalent is 58%.

Third listening tape was in a British accent. A multiple-choice test including 5 questions with 3 choices for each was practised. This group of participants had been practising their listening skills with the recordings in British accent in their regular English classes. Possibly due to this fact, 6 of the participants managed to understand everything correctly and 10 participants answered 4 questions correctly. The average value of the correct answers is 4 out of 5 questions which means the group performed a success at the rate of 80%.

Fourth listening tape involved a Chinese woman speaking. A gap-filling test was practised for this listening text. 2 of the participants could not recognize any of the words asked in the test and none of the participants managed to understand every word. It was noticeable in the test papers that 6 of the participants mistook the word *town* for *time*. The average value of the correct answers is 2 out of 5 questions, which is equal to 40%. Group performed a level of success at the rate of nearly 50%.

Fifth listening tape was about a French man talking about his life. A gap-filling test was subjected to the participants. The level of listening comprehension in this listening text appeared to be quite low. According to the table, 15 of the participants could not recognize any of the vocabulary items that the speaker said in the recording. Only one participant filled in 2 gaps correctly and 6 of the participants filled in only 1 gap correctly out of 9 gaps. The average value of the correct answers is 0,3 out of 9 gaps. The percentage equivalent is 4%.

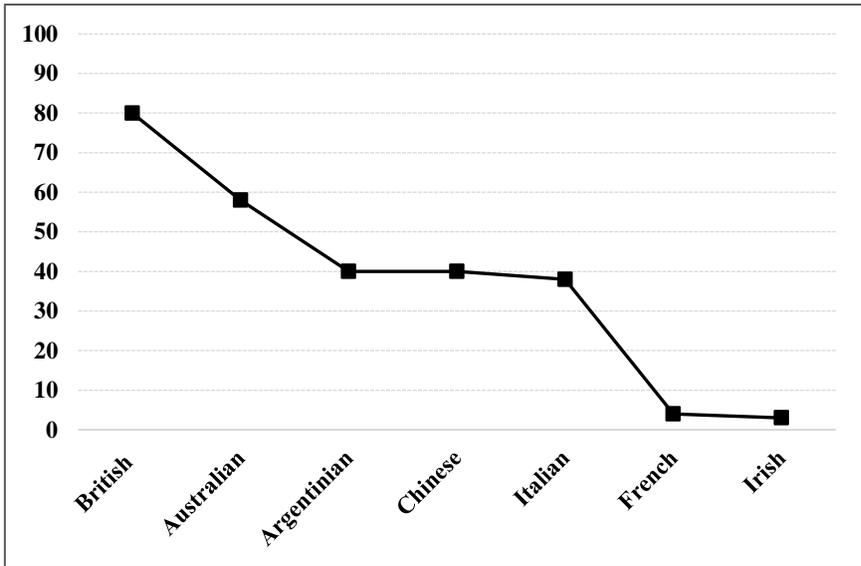
Sixth listening tape involved an Irish woman speaking. A gap-filling test was subjected to the participants. Similar to the French accent test, most of the participants (19) could not fill in any of the gaps appropriately. 13 of the participants, again, mistook the word *town* for *time*, only one of the participants could understand it correctly. 8 of the participants mistook the word *made* for *meet*. The average value of the correct answers is 0,2 out of 9 gaps. The percentage equivalent is 3%.

Lastly, seventh listening tape including 2 Italian men speaking about Italian food was played and the participants were subjected to a multiple-choice test including 5 questions. 2 of the participants could not understand anything, as they do not have any correct answers according to the table. The average value of the correct answers is 1,8 out of 5 questions. The percentage equivalent is 38%.

As the results provided for the first question of the study present, there are variable values of levels of listening comprehension, differing from accent to accent. Participants managed to perform arguably decent listening comprehension levels in some of the tests, such as British accent test, while in some of them they performed low comprehension levels, even lower than 10%, such as the French accent test.

*Which accents are the most and the least problematic ones in terms of listening comprehension by the participants?*

It was aimed to determine the most and the least problematic accents in the second research question. To this end, a chart is designed according to the results of the tests. The percentage equivalents of the average values of the correct answers for each test are ordered in the chart (see Figure 1).



*Figure 1. Percentage values of success in listening comprehension per accent*

According to the chart, the most problematic accents in terms of listening comprehension are French and Irish accents. Participants performed a poor level of listening comprehension at the rates of 4% for French and 3% for Irish accent. In other words, participants did not understand more than 95% of what was said on these two tapes they heard.

On the other hand, British accent appears to be the most understandable one for the participants. They performed the best level of listening comprehension at the rate of 80%, possibly due to the fact that British accent is the one they had been hearing since the beginning of their English classes. Furthermore, as mentioned in the discussion of the first

question of the study, a number of participants managed to answer all the test items correctly when they were being tested with the British accented tape. As for the Australian accented tape test, it has the second best rate of listening comprehension. Participants managed to understand more than half of the recording, at the rate of 58%. According to the chart, it is a fact that the other three accents, Argentinian, Chinese, and Italian accents, have an average level of comprehension at the rate of nearly 40%. This score presents that participants could understand slightly less than half of the tape.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

The findings of the current research suggested that practising listening skills based on a particular accent may cause some disadvantages for learners in the sense of linguistic skills. Abeywickrama (2013) and Harding (2008) reported that non-native accents were more difficult to comprehend and also seemed to distract ESL test takers in the same native language. Similarly, EFL test takers were more familiar with native rather than non-native accents (Suppatkul, 2009), possibly due to the fact that native accents had been used in classroom listening activities. In parallel with this claim, the results revealed that when learners are successful in understanding the accent they are used to hearing all the time, they are not able to understand some people who speak English in a different kind of accent. In parallel with the findings of many other studies, the present study showed significant differences between the different accents in the sense of listening comprehension. As in the results of the studies conducted by Matsuura et al. (2014), White et al. (2016), Goh (1998), and Chaipupae (in press), the present study found out that being familiar with the accent affects the listeners' comprehension.

According to the results of the current study, the participants performed a remarkable success in a group of tests, especially the one they were familiar with. Possibly due to the fact that they had been practising their listening skills with British accented tapes since the beginning of their language education. It is claimed that "different but familiar accents should cause no problems for L2 listeners" (Tauroza & Luk, 1997, p. 54). As for the other tests with rather successful results, such as Australian

accent, the participants probably managed to recognize the familiarity with these accents or they perceived it as similar to British accent or their teacher's accent, so they could comprehend the spoken language at a certain level. On the other hand, the most problematic accents for participants to comprehend turned out to be French and Irish accents. The reason behind the poor comprehension levels they performed in these two accents is disputable. Firstly, the characteristics of the French accent such as substitutional sounds as in /r/ probably led participants to perform this level of comprehension. The grammar mistakes occurred in the speech of the French speaker can be considered to have a low impact on the comprehension level because of the test type subjected. A gap-filling test was subjected which participants were expected to write the words they heard as they were listening. The vocabulary items expected to be recognized were quite simple for the participants' proficiency levels. In this sense, the main problem possibly emerges from the idiosyncratic pronunciation and the intonation style of the speaker. As for the other problematic accent Irish, a similar problem seems on the horizon. The distinctive pronunciation style of the Irish people probably caused participants to perform a poor level of success. In a gap-filling test in which basic vocabulary items of English language were expected to be recognized, the participants failed. It is disputable whether the result is shocking or justifiable for participants in a test very basic vocabulary items asked, such as *babies*, *married*, *lot*, *town*, and so on. It is rather justifiable when the pronunciation differences are examined. For example, a very basic word *town* is normally pronounced as /taʊn/ in British accent. However, the Irish woman speaking in the tape pronounced it as /taɪn/. Another example is the word *made*. It is normally pronounced as /meɪd/ in British accent, however, the woman in the tape pronounced it as /mi:d/. When all these factors are taken into account, the reason behind the low level of success becomes clear. All in all, it is ascertained from the current study that "greater familiarity with an English accent increases overall listening comprehension" (White et al., 2016, p. 7).

It is evidently clear that people from different nationalities may tend to pronounce some words differently. The listeners actually knew the word but they could not recognize it when they were being tested. Due to the discussed reasons above, this situation seems to be quite

normal. They had the chance to hear these dissimilarities for the first time by being the participants of this study. If they had been practising with these accents, possibly they would be aware of these differences and learn them over the time. Various listening texts including different accents and nationalities in language classrooms would help learners be aware of these distinctions. The students should be more aware of different Englishes spoken all around the world, as well as different dialects and accents (Kağıtçı Yıldız, 2017). However, the current education system in most of the language classrooms does not seem to have any concerns about this issue, especially for listening activities. The conclusion that may be drawn from the findings of this research is that, as it is suggested by scholars, EFL learners should be trained by using various listening texts selected properly and well-designed pedagogically or authentic materials in accordance with the students' level with different accents. Specifically, the students should be encouraged and provided with the skills to employ necessary strategies to cope with the comprehension problems which they experienced in English listening courses. This would also help them get ready for the real communication environment they may face outside the classroom. It is highly recommended to incorporate effective listening strategies and skills in language classrooms to know the accents that strongly affect the comprehension of the listening texts.

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