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Afghan English Major Students' Attitudes Toward Native-Like Proficiency in the English Language

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Abstract

The term native-like proficiency in English refers to the ability to speak the English language like a native speaker. This study was conducted to investigate Afghan English major undergraduate students' attitudes toward native-like proficiency in the English language at two public universities in Afghanistan. The study specifically investigated the attitudes of Afghan English major undergraduate students toward the characteristics of a native speaker of the English language, native speakers' linguistic imperialism, and native-like proficiency in the English language. A mixed research design was used for the study. The quantitative data were descriptively analyzed in terms of frequencies using SPSS and presented in tables. The qualitative data were thematically analyzed and presented. A total of 113 fourth-year (senior students) voluntarily participated in the study. The findings revealed that perfect pronunciation, fluency, and grammatical accuracy were the defining attributes of native speakers. Similarly, students believed that only native speakers have the right to decide the rules or to standardize the English language and that only a native speaker has better English language skills. Moreover, the results revealed that Afghan English major students' attitudes toward native-like proficiency in the English language were highly positive, and they love to speak with a native-like accent. It is hoped that the current study's findings will help educators and will be a valuable addition to the current mass of data on the subject.

Keywords: Afghan English Major Undergraduate Students; Native Like Proficiency; Native Speaker

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Introduction

Globally, the use and need for the English language are increasing in every walk of life. No one can deny the importance of the English language in education, politics, commerce, economics, and cultural activities. It is the language of communication in many international domains like conferences, scientific publications, banking, trade, advertisements, and audio-visual cultural products (Manolescu, 2023; Trzeciakowska, 2020). Looking at the extensive use of the English language worldwide, some scholars believe that English is no more limited to the culture of its native English-speaking countries and that the native English-speaking countries are the sole owners of the English language (Boonsuk & Ambele, 2020). At present, English serves more as a lingua franca worldwide, and it is used as a medium of intercultural communication between native and non-native speakers of English. Speakers from different parts of the globe speak English with different accents. Most scholars believe non-native speakers do not need to speak English like native speakers (Baese-Berk et al., 2020). However, it has been the advertising slogan of many English language institutes, English language centers, and private schools that they can provide their students with native-like English language proficiency. It might indicate that achieving native-like proficiency in the English language is the ultimate aim of learning/teaching the English language.

The number of people speaking English is more substantial than ever. Interestingly, the number of non-native English speakers is far greater than that of native English speakers (Trzeciakowska, 2020). Non-native speakers constitute 75% of the total English speakers (Tauchid et al., 2022). This increase in the number of English language learners and speakers has raised several questions on the part of nativeness value and meaning. Similarly, the idea of dividing English language speakers into two categories, native and non-native, has been criticized widely. This split between English language speakers leads to disparity by placing native speakers ahead of non-native speakers and paved the way for the concept of English as an International Language (EIL) and has resulted in the formation of terms like World Englishes to cover the currently available various local and global varieties of the English language.

The attitude toward native likeness is still the primary focus of teaching the English language. Even though it has been proved by several studies in the field of second language acquisition (SLA) that native-like proficiency is difficult to achieve after a critical period (Azieb,

2021). The native-like English proficiency is still a standard and a norm for a non-native speaker to achieve. However, this makes non-native English inaccurate and inferior (Baese-Berk et al., 2020). It is the truth and a universally accepted reality, especially in Afghanistan, where English is taught and learned as a foreign language.

The history of the English language in Afghanistan is not old, and the country's learning and teaching of English are recent. There is a significant difference between the English language and the indigenous languages of Afghanistan. So, it is quite difficult for Afghans to acquire native-like proficiency in the English language. Moreover, before 2001, Afghans had minimal contact with the English language and had insufficient opportunities to use it. However, the need and importance of the English language grew in Afghanistan with the arrival of international communities and organizations after 2001. The arrival and presence of many international communities in the country have necessitated using English as a lingua franca (Coleman, 2019).

Furthermore, the presence of Americans in the country has promoted the American accent in the region. Afghans highly regard the American accent and believe it to be the correct and original accent. They also consider the non-native accents, including the English accents of the local Afghans, as improper and substandard.

Research Problem

Bearing that students' attitudes toward native-like proficiency have been investigated in various contexts, there is a lack of empirical research on the study in the Afghan context. Also, previously conducted research studies mainly focus on students' attitudes toward native-like accents. The current research conducts a more comprehensive research study and looks into students' attitudes toward native-like proficiency, including native-like accent, grammatical competency, characteristics of native speakers, and linguistics imperialism

Research Objectives

The current research has three main objectives. The study's first objective is to investigate Afghan English major undergraduate students' attitudes toward the characteristics of native speakers of the English language. Similarly, the study's second objective is to investigate Afghan

English major undergraduate students' attitudes toward linguistics imperialism of native speakers of the English language. Finally, the third objective of the study is to investigate Afghan English major undergraduate students' attitudes toward native-like proficiency in the English language.

Research Questions

Three research questions (RQs) guide this study. The first RQ read: what are Afghan EFL undergraduate students' attitudes toward the characteristics of native speakers of the English Language? The second RQ read: what are Afghan English major undergraduate students' attitudes toward linguistics imperialism of native speakers of the English language? And the final RQ read: what are Afghan English major undergraduate students' attitudes toward native-like proficiency in the English language?

Literature Review

Native-like proficiency in the English language means that an individual can speak the English language like a native speaker does. So, it is essential to explore the concept of the native speaker, which is the key element of native-like proficiency.

The Concept of Native Speaker (NS)

For a better understanding of the topic and native-like proficiency in the English language, it is necessary to explore and understand the term native speaker. Professor Charles Hall Grandgent of Harvard, an American Romanist and Italian scholar, used the term native speaker in the 19th century. However, Leonard Bloomfield is considered to have coined the term 'native speaker' to refer to someone who speaks the language they have learned for the first time (Fleming, 2020; Tavarez DaCosta & Almanzar Alvarado, 2020; Rivers, 2018). However, this declaration seems too confined. That is, another language that is learned later on can replace the language that has been initially learned. The frequent use of the newly acquired language can dominate the first learned language. So as a result, the language that was first learned no longer remains useful, generative, or creative and so no longer remains the first language (Yusuf, 2017).

This situation could happen when someone adopts a child or is resettled by migration at an early age.

Theoretical linguistics regards the native speaker as the most authoritative figure of their language. Native speakers have perfect command of their language, have authority over their grammar, and know their language better (Chomsky, 1969; Davies, 1991, as cited in Vakili & Mohammed, 2020). Based on this logic, it is the native speaker who is the reliable and influential person in their language. However, this logic has been challenged by Nayar (1994), as cited in Vakili and Mohammed (2020), who disagreed and insisted that native speaker is not "ipso facto knowledge, correct and infallible in their competence" (p. 4). The researcher further challenges the belief that the native speaker "has the power to err without a blemish in his competence" is completely based on the fact that the person is a native speaker, which is entirely irrational and requires reexamination.

Based on etymology, the word native means a person is labeled "native speaker of a language by place or country of birth" (Davies, 1991, p. ix as cited in Mersad & Senad, 2019) means that the person has learned the language from birth. Yet, this is not the strongest case for a native speaker, as in the case of a child migrating to another geographical location or being adopted in childhood. The place of birth can not necessarily benefit that individual, as the person born in a particular area will be a native speaker. The language used by an individual at home may not match the language of the area where the individual lives. Similarly, the linguistic environment may change for the adopted child, so using birthplace as the criteria for the native speaker may not help.

What Does a Native Speaker Know?

It is essential to recognize what a native speaker knows compared to a non-native speaker to make the concept of the native speaker more understandable. The studies carried out in the field provide several valuable findings. Native speakers can use idiomatic expressions and metaphors properly and use the correct grammatical forms. They also have natural pronunciation and the appropriate vocabulary and are well-conscious of non-verbal cultural features (Chambo Torres et al., 2022; Matthews, 2018). Meanwhile, native speakers have the competence of pragmatics of their language and strategic competence. They can employ verbal and nonverbal

communication skills to cater to conversational breakdowns while exchanging thoughts (Abdulrahman & Ayyash, 2019).

Moreover, they never give up and try to comprehend and produce the language. On the other hand, non-native speakers usually avoid such circumstances. In brief, a native speaker has linguistic competence, communicative competence, pragmatic competence, strategic competence, and intuitive knowledge of their language (Yusuf, 2017).

The Ownership of the English Language

The principal varieties of the English language are American English and British English. There are three circles in the English language, i.e., the inner circle, the outer circle, and the expanding circle (Khatib & Monfared, 2017). These two varieties (American and British) of the English language belong to the inner circle in categorizing the English language (Gargesh, 2019). The inner circle comprises the countries where English is the native language (ENL), like the United Kingdom (UK), the United States of America (USA), New Zealand, Ireland, Anglophone Canada, and some parts of the Caribbean territories. Countries like India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Malaysia, Nigeria, Kenya, Tanzania, and so forth belong to the outer circle, the second circle of the English language. English is not the native language of the outer circle's countries. However, English is considerable in their daily communication, and almost English is their second language. The third circle, which comprises countries like Russia, China, Japan, and most European countries, is called the expanding circle. The English language has no political or historical connection with these countries. In these countries, it is used for international communications, and the status of the English language is considered a foreign language. The countries of the inner circle have control over the English language and the authority to standardize the English language (Halliday, 2019).

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Method

Research Design

The study explored the attitudes of Afghan English major students toward native-like proficiency in the English language and used a qualitative research design and a questionnaire as the main instrument for data collection. The questionnaire comprised both closed-ended and open-ended questions. Having open-ended questions besides closed-ended questions in this study helps researchers to study an issue more authentically, as data from one type of question validates data from the other type (Fraenkel et al., 2016). The quantitative, closed-ended items enable the researcher to quantify data and generalize results, whereas the closed-ended items provide in-depth data. So, both questions in the study provide the research with various data collection and analysis techniques that could help cater to the issue more authentically.

Research Setting

The current study was conducted at the English Departments of two public universities in Afghanistan, i.e., Kabul University and Sayed Jamaluddin Afghani University. Kabul University is the central and largest university in the country, established in 1932 and located in Kabul, the capital of the county. Sayed Jamaluddin Afghani University is a new but fast-growing University established in 2010 and located in the Kunar province of the country. The two universities were selected because of convenience, as the researchers are currently working in the two universities.

Sampling

Overall, 113 students participated in this study. They are fourth-year (senior) undergraduate students in the English department. These students voluntarily participated in the study.

Research Instrument

The questionnaire was the main instrument used for this study which had been adopted from a doctoral dissertation by Šišić (2016). It had two types of questions, i.e., closed-ended and

open-ended questions. The closed-ended questions provided quantitative data, whereas the open-ended questions provided qualitative data for the study.

The questionnaire contains 15 items in three distinct parts. Part one asked questions about the characteristics of native speakers. Part 2 asked for information about the linguistics imperialism of native speakers, whereas the last part, i.e., part 3, elicited the respondents' attitudes toward native-like proficiency in the English language.

In the meantime, part one consisted of 3 closed-ended questions and 1 open-ended question; part two consisted of 5 closed-ended questions and 1 open-ended question, whereas part three contained 4 closed-ended questions and 1 open-ended question (as shown in appendix 1). Each closed-ended item was measured on a five-Likert scale.

Once the data were collected, the quantitative data were descriptively analyzed through SPSS (version 24) in terms of frequencies and percentages. The data obtained through open-ended questions were thematically analyzed.

Findings

The Results from Closed-Ended Questions

RQ1: What are Afghan English major undergraduate students' attitudes toward the character of native English language speakers?

The following responses are regarding the respondents' attitudes toward the characteristics of native speakers of the English language. The respondents were required to provide information about their attitudes toward the characteristics of native speakers of the English language. The results are shown in Table 1.

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Table 1. The frequency and percentage of items showing attitudes toward the characteristics of a native speaker

No	Items		Alternatives					Total
			Strongly Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Disagree	Slightly Agree	Strongly Agree	
1	Pronunciation is the defining attribute of native speakers.	Freq.	0	0	0	24	89	113
		%	0	0	0	21.2%	78.8%	100
2	Fluency is the defining attribute of native speakers.	Freq.	0	0	0	8	105	113
		%	0	0	0	7.1%	92.9%	100
3	Grammatical accuracy is the defining attribute of native speakers.	Freq.	0	0	0	40	73	113
		%	0	0	0	35.4%	64.6%	100

Table 1 illustrates the respondents' responses in terms of frequency and percentage concerning respondents' attitudes toward the characteristics of a native speaker. The results indicate that 24 (21.2%) of the respondents responded slightly agree, and 89 (78.8%) of the respondents responded strongly agree to item 1 (pronunciation is the defining attribute of native speakers). Meanwhile, 8(7.1%) of the respondent responded slightly agree with item 2 (fluency is the defining attribute of native speakers whereas 105(92.9%) of the respondent responded strongly agree. Concerning item 3 (grammatical accuracy is the defining attribute of native speakers), 40 (35.4%) of the respondents responded slightly agree, whereas 73 (64.6%) of the respondents responded strongly agree.

RQ2: What are Afghan English major undergraduate students' attitudes toward linguistics imperialism of native speakers of the English language?

The responses signify Afghan English major undergraduate students' attitudes toward linguistic imperialism. The results are shown in Table 2.

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Table 2. Afghan English major undergraduate students' attitudes toward linguistic imperialism of native speakers of the English language

No	Items		Alternatives					
			Strongly Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Disagree	Slightly Agree	Strongly Agree	Total
1	Only native speakers can decide the rules/standardized English language.	Freq.	0	0	0	5	108	113
		%	0	0	0	4.4%	95.6%	100
2	The English language is inseparable from the culture of the countries where it is a native language.	Freq.	0	0	31	43	39	113
		%	0	0	27.4%	38%	34.6%	100
3	The only acceptable variety of English language is the one used by native speakers.	Freq.	0	49	53	11	0	113
		%	0	43.3%	47%	9.7%	0	100
4	Every native speaker has a better mastery of the English language than non-native speakers, notwithstanding the amount of time they have spent learning English.	Freq.	0	0	2	33	78	113
		%	0	0	1.8%	29.2%	69%	100
5	The English language is inseparable from the culture of the countries where it is a native language.	Freq.	0	0	5	18	90	113
		%	0	0	4.4%	16%	79.6%	100

Table 2 shows that to item 1 (only native speakers have the right to decide the rules/standardized English language), 5 (4.4%) of the respondent responded slightly agree, whereas 108 (95.6%) of the respondent responded strongly agree. Concerning item 2 (the English language is inseparable from the culture of the countries where it is a native language), 31 (27.4%), 43(38%), and 39(34.6%) of the respondent responded disagree, slightly agree, and strongly agree, respectively. Concerning item 3 (The only acceptable variety of English language is the one used by native speakers), 49 (43.3%), 53(47%), and 11(9.7%) respondents responded slightly disagree, disagree, and slightly agree, respectively. As to item 4 (Every native speaker has a better mastery of the English language than non-native speakers, notwithstanding the amount of time they had spent learning English), 2 (1.8%), 33 (29.2%) and 78 (69%), respondents responded disagree, slightly agree and strongly agree respectively. Finally, to item 5 (the English language is inseparable from the culture of the countries where it is a native language), 5 (4.4%), 18 (16%), and 90 (79.6%) respondents responded disagree, slightly agree, and strongly agree, respectively.

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RQ3: What are Afghan English major undergraduate students' attitudes toward native-like proficiency in the English Language?

The following responses are about Afghan English major undergraduate students' attitudes toward native-like proficiency in the English language. The respondents were required to provide information regarding their attitudes toward native-like proficiency. The results are shown in Table 3.

Table 3 shows that about item 1 (I want to sound like a native speaker), 113 (100%) of the respondents responded strongly agree. Also, in terms of item2 (I want to speak with a native speaker accent), 113 (100%) of the respondents responded strongly agree, while regarding item 3 (I want to emulate native speakers in all linguistic aspects (grammar, pronunciation, vocabulary, fluency), 113 (100%) respondents responded strongly agree. Finally, as to item 4 (I want to sound like a native speaker), 113 (100%) of the respondents responded strongly agree.

Table 3. Afghan English major undergraduate students' Attitudes Toward Native-Like Proficiency in the English Language

No	Items		Alternatives					Total
			Strongly Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Disagree	Slightly Agree	Strongly Agree	
1	I want to sound like a native speaker.	Freq.	0	0	0	0	113	113
		%	0	0	0	0	100%	100
2	I want to speak with a native speaker accent.	Freq.	0	0	0	0	113	113
		%	0	0	0	0	100%	100
3	I want to emulate native speakers in all linguistic aspects (grammar, pronunciation, vocabulary, fluency).	Freq.	0	0	0	0	113	113
		%	0	0	0	0	100%	100
4	I want to sound like a native speaker.	Freq.	0	0	0	0	113	113
		%	0	0	0	0	100%	100

The Results from Open-Ended Questions

RQ1: What are Afghan English major undergraduate students' attitudes toward the character of Native speakers of the English Language?

Responding to RQ1, based on the results of the data obtained through open-ended questions, two main themes appeared: (1) native speakers have naturally acquired fluency and the best pronunciation of the language and (2) native speakers will never make any mistakes as they have mastered every bit of grammar from the very beginning of their lives.

RQ2: What are Afghan English major undergraduate students' attitudes toward linguistic imperialism of native speakers of the English language?

Responding to RQ2, based on the results of the data obtained through open-ended questions about linguistic imperialism, three main themes appeared: (1) the native speaker has to establish rules and regulations and standardize the language, (2) the English language represents the culture of the group where it is the native language, and (3) compared to non-native speakers, native speakers have a better mastery of their language.

RQ3: What are Afghan English major undergraduate students' attitudes toward native-like proficiency in the English language?

Referring to RQ3, based on the results of the data obtained through open-ended questions about the attitudes toward native-like proficiency, two main themes appeared: (1) Afghan English major undergraduate students love to sound native-like and love to speak with the native speaker's accent, and (2) Afghan English major undergraduate students wish to copy native speakers in linguistic aspects like grammar, pronunciation, vocabulary, and fluency.

Discussion

The study's main aim is to investigate Afghan English major undergraduate students' attitudes toward native speakers' characteristics, native speakers' linguistic imperialism of the English language, and native-like proficiency at Kabul University and Sayed Jamaluddin Afghani University. Three research questions were used to explore the subject. They are: (1) What are Afghan English major undergraduate students' attitudes toward the characteristics of native English language speakers? (2) What are Afghan English major undergraduate students' attitudes toward linguistics imperialism of native English language speakers? (3) What are Afghan English major undergraduate students' attitudes toward native-like proficiency in the English Language?

The main instrument used for data collection was a questionnaire containing 12 closed-ended and 3 open-ended questions. The data obtained from closed-ended questions were manually analyzed, whereas the data obtained from open-ended questions were thematically analyzed.

Findings for the first research question on the characteristics of native speakers of the English language revealed that perfect pronunciation, fluency, and grammatical accuracy are the defining attributes of native speakers. Kusumawardani and Mardiyani (2018) believed that fluency and grammatical accuracy are among the essential features that characterize native speakers. Karakaş (2017) and Crowther et al.,. (2015) considered fluency and grammatical accuracy as the defining characteristics of native speakers.

Similarly, findings for the second research question on the linguistics imperialism of native speakers in the English language revealed that the English language is inseparable from the culture of the countries where it is a native language. Also, native speakers have the right to decide the rules or standardize the English language, and only native speaker has better English language skills than non-native speakers. Meija-Martinez (2017) explained that linguistic imperialism is a sub-type of cultural imperialism where native speakers are considered exalted compared to non-native speakers. Nair et al. (2017) stated that linguistic imperialism is when teachers demand native-like proficiency from ESL students.

Moreover, findings for the third research question on Afghan English major undergraduate students' attitudes toward native-like proficiency in the English language revealed that students' attitudes toward native-like proficiency in English are highly positive. They want to speak with a native speaker accent, to emulate native speakers in all linguistic aspects (grammar, pronunciation, vocabulary, fluency), and wish to sound like a native speaker. Brabcová and Skarnitzl (2018) conducted a study in the Czech Republic. They found that most EFL Czech learners of the English language had positive attitudes toward native-like proficiency in the English language, and they loved to acquire and use the native-like accent of the English language. Similarly, a study by Šišić (2016) in Croatia found that EFL learners had a strong inclination towards attaining native-like proficiency in the English language.

Conclusion

The current study at two public universities in Afghanistan focused on the Afghan English major undergraduate students' attitudes toward native speakers' characteristics, linguistic imperialism, and native-like proficiency in the English language. The study found that pronunciation, fluency, and grammatical accuracies are the defining attributes of native speakers, and only native speakers have the right to decide the rules or standardize the English language. That native speaker has a better mastery of the English language than non-native speakers. Similarly, the English language is inseparable from the culture of the countries where it is a native language; native speakers have the right to decide the rules or standardize the English language, and only native speaker has better English language skills than non-native speakers. Moreover, Afghan English major undergraduate students' attitudes toward native-like proficiency in English are very positive. They loved to speak with a native speaker's accent and sound like a native speaker. Also, they want to emulate native speakers in linguistic aspects like grammar, pronunciation, vocabulary, and fluency.

Recommendations

The study is small-scale research that explores only selected aspects of the subject. Therefore, researchers in both EFL and ESL contexts are invited to conduct further studies on the subject. Examining the effects of demographic factors involving gender, age, and year of study would add to the thorough examination of the subject.

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Appendix 1: Questionnaire

Dear respondents,

This questionnaire is structured and designed to collect data on Afghan English major undergraduate students' attitudes toward native-like proficiency in the English language. Your responses are crucial for the study, so your genuine response to each questionnaire's items is kindly requested. Your responses are only used for study purposes and will be strictly confidential.

Thank you very much for your cooperation!

Note: *Please, do not hesitate to ask for an explanation in case you face anything unclear while responding.*

If you agree to be part of this study, please sign below.

I agree ☐ (Signature).....

(Date).....

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Part 1: Attitudes toward the characteristics of native speakers of the English language

Instructions: Please tick the box that represents you the most.

1= Strongly Disagree 2= Slightly Disagree 3= Disagree 4= Slightly Agree 5= Strongly Agree

No	Items	1	2	3	4	5
1	Pronunciation is the defining attribute of native speakers.					
2	Fluency is the defining attribute of native speakers.					
3	Grammatical accuracy is the defining attribute of native speakers.					

How would you define the characteristics of a native speaker?
_____
_____
_____.

Part 2: Attitudes toward linguistic imperialism of native speakers of the English language

Instructions: Please tick the box that represents you the most.

No.	Items	1	2	3	4	5
1	Only native speakers have the right to decide the rules/standardize the English language.					
2	The English language is inseparable from the culture of the countries where it is a native language.					
3	The only acceptable variety of English language is the one used by native speakers.					
4	Every native speaker has a better mastery of the English language than non-native speakers, notwithstanding the amount of time they had spent learning English.					
5	The English language is inseparable from the culture of the countries where it is a native language.					

1= Strongly Disagree 2= Slightly Disagree 3= Disagree 4= Slightly Agree 5= Strongly Agree

How would you define the term linguistic imperialism?

_____

_____

_____

_____.

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Part 3: Attitudes toward native-like proficiency in the English language

Instructions: Please tick the box that represents you the most.

1= Strongly Disagree 2= Slightly Disagree 3= Disagree 4= Slightly Agree 5= Strongly Agree

No.	Items	1	2	3	4	5
1	I want to sound like a native speaker.					
2	I want to speak with a native speaker accent.					
3	I want to emulate native speakers in all linguistic aspects (grammar, pronunciation, vocabulary, fluency).					
4	I want to sound like a native speaker.					

How would you define the term native-like proficiency?

_____

_____

_____

_____.