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English Language Education Students and their Perceptions Regarding the Various Accents of the English Language

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Abstract

This study intends to identify the perceptions of English Language Education students from a pre-determined private university in Yogyakarta regarding the English language and its accents. Many English Language Education students prefer accents from English-speaking countries to accents from countries that use English as a second or foreign language. However, many of them may not be able to speak in accents from the former category. The current study aims to find the reasons for this phenomenon, and whether or not having a preferred accent helps them learn the English language. The research uses qualitative design to search for more detailed answers and uses a custom-made interview as a research instrument. To that end, the researcher enlists five students of English Language Education from this private university as participants in this study, where they receive questions about their accents, view on accents, and whether or not having an accent has helped them learn English. The results of the research indicated that while the students have a mixed view of accents and use various accents themselves, having a familiar accent to use when learning English has helped them learn the language better. Being familiar with an accent and mimicking the source of language input) gives the participants an easier time when learning the English Language.

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

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Introduction

The English language is one of the most spoken languages around the world. In China, there are over 390 million learners of English, and that number does not include speakers in Taiwan and Hong Kong (Wei & Su, 2012). The English language is so widespread that it leads to the development of multiple different regional accents. There are over 24 English accents in the British Isles alone (Hughes, Trudgill, & Watt, 2012), and the speakers use those accents in different regions of the British Isles. As the English language travels around the world, the number of people who speak it increases, and further variations have developed (Hughes, Trudgill, & Watt, 2012).

Braj Kachru, a Jubilee Professor of Linguistics at the University of Illinois and Urbana-Champaign, is the first scholar to coin the term *World Englishes* to describe the multitude of English accents around the world. Kachru uses the term “Englishes” because it “symbolizes the functional and formal variations, divergent sociolinguistic contexts, ranges and varieties of English in creativity, and various types of acculturation in parts of the Western and non-Western world. This concept emphasizes ‘WE-ness,’ and not the dichotomy between ‘us’ and ‘them’ (the native and non-native users)”

(Kachru, 2008). He categorizes the world Englishes into three different groups based on how English is used in different countries (Kachru, 2008). For countries where English is the first language, such as the United States and Australia, he includes the accents in his inner circle of English. For accents used in countries where English is a secondary language, like Singapore or India, Kachru classifies these English in the outer circle of English. The outer circle refers to countries that do not have English as a native language, but it is useful for a connection between different ethnic groups and language groups living in the country. The foreign circle includes the type of English language used in countries where the people use English on special occasions and places, e.g., international conferences or English classes. In Indonesia, for example, the type of accents typically used is called Indoglish (Saddhono & Sulaksono, 2018). Like many other accents from regions where English is not the first language, Indoglish is created by mixing English words with the grammar and syntax of local languages, which in this case, is the Indonesian accent.

As a language used in international contexts, the English language is bound to have different varieties and accents. However, there has been no agreement

about which version of English to use in the classroom - the one with a local dialect or the ones used in countries with English as a first language (L1). While using L1 variations of English in classrooms of L2 English learners is possible, it may create a sense of abnormality in the classroom, making learners less wanting to take risks (Schweers, 2012). Also, from over 150 accents that exist, the majority of English language learners (ELL), including Indonesian ELLs, gain increased exposure and experience in the English Language through social media and other means of communication (Saddhono & Sulaksono, 2018). From the researcher's experience in an English Language Education Department of a Private University in Indonesia, ELLs in this department prefer to use, copy, or attempt to use an English accent or American accent. While these ELLs might not realize that they are using the Indoglish variant, it is common for ELLs to use said accent, especially on formal occasions, e.g., when they are presenting a paper or when they are speaking. Similarly, Indonesian-English language teachers would tend to give lower scores to students who use Indoglish because it is quite different from the accent commonly used, which is English or American.

With a large number of accents that exist, ELLs should be aware of this phenomenon so that they can be aware of and appreciate the world's multiculturalism, becoming the strong foundation of the emergence of diverse accents. The current study aims to investigate the perceptions of ELLs on the myriad of English language accents and the preference of these ELLs toward the existing accents. The goal of the study is to find out how the preferred accent benefits ELLs to learn English. With acceptance for L2 languages being more widespread than ever (Sung, 2013), it is important to know which side the ELLs take: Are they more partial to L1 accents, or do they use L2 accents?

To make the results of this research seem valid, the researcher has related this research to other similar researches. The first research was conducted by Tracy Derwing in 2006, concerning ESL students and their perceptions of pronunciation problems and the consequences of speaking with a foreign accent. In her research, Derwing interviewed over 100 ESL students regarding pronunciation problems and any consequences they might have when they spoke with a foreign accent. The results of that research revealed that while the students did have pronunciation problems, they could not pinpoint where exactly the

problem was, and those problems were minor at best. Regarding discrimination, the students revealed that there was no accent-based discrimination, but people did respect them more when they spoke with an L1 accent. Derwing's research is similar to this research in that it inquires English Language students' perceptions regarding accents, and that both studies use the interview method. However, it differs in secondary goals: While this research focuses on how the participants' English language learning process is affected by their accent, Derwing's research focused on the accent's impact on their social life.

Literature Review

Definition of a Native Speaker

A native speaker is a speaker of a language that is his or her mother tongue. For the English language, this includes speakers of American, English (Great Britain), and Australian descent (Kachru, 2008). Non-native speakers, on the other hand, are speakers of the target language that does not have the language as a mother tongue. In the case of the English language, non-native speakers usually use the English language in specific situations, such as business or entertainment (Kachru, 2008). As most ELLs usually learn from certain

examples, native English speakers usually become the model for them, especially when it comes to speaking English. It has led to many English learning institutions in non-English speaking countries employing English native speakers as their teachers. However, with the changes in world dynamics, a new source of debate emerges: L2 variations of English have become more accepted globally, and they are no longer concerned with the "integration" of language and more to the creation of a "bi-cultural" or "world citizen" identity (Sung, 2013).

In addition to the discussion regarding accents, there has been a massive debate regarding the teaching capabilities of non-native English and native English teachers (Medgyes, 1992). Compared to non-native English teachers, native English teachers have a better grasp of the language, because they have been using it on a day-to-day basis since they were born. However, knowing a language is very different from being able to teach it. As a result, not all English native speakers can be good English teachers because not all of them are qualified teachers. On the other hand, non-native English teachers may be perceived as better role models because, although they may not be as fluent as native speakers, they have been trained to teach the language,

meaning that they are qualified teachers (Braine, 2011). In the end, both native speakers and non-native teachers are suitable for teaching in one way or another (Schweers, 2012), depending on the needs of the ELLs when learning the English language.

English, as the world's connecting language, is somewhat of a dilemma when taught in classes. While both non-native teachers and native speakers can become teachers in their own right, a debate about which variation of English to teach is still taking place (Braine, 2011). It creates a rift between the users of standardized English (English as spoken in first circle countries) and World Englishes. On the one hand, using standardized English will make the learners' ability to speak English closer to the native source, which may make any communication between international community members less awkward and less prone to misunderstanding. However, some speakers of English have come to see their variation of World Englishes as a part of their culture, which they use in everyday life (Sung, 2013). For example, Singapore and its approach to English. The usage of Singaporean English or "Singlish" as it is more widely known, has been so ingrained in the Singaporean culture that despite its classes teaching usage of standardized

English, the Singlish variation is the one used by most native Singaporeans (Alsagoff, 1998).

Perceived Accents

The division between users of standardized English and native English can create a divide of their own, called language privilege (Subtirelu, 2013). This division happens when speakers of one model think of the others as inferior. For example, speakers of standardized English can consider their counterparts as having a worse skill in English because they do not speak the English language as they do. They feel like mimicking the L1 users of English and thinking the localized version of English is wrong.

While many ELLs still want to sound like native speakers, e. g. British or American, some studies have proven otherwise (Sung, 2013). Native speakers' accents are considered unintelligible; thus, they are difficult to understand. In his study, Sung argues that ELLs prefer non-native speakers as their role model to speak English, such as local high profile people or local news anchors. These speakers are more understandable, and ELLs favor them than native speakers of the English language. Another accent preferred by ELLs is foreign non-native speakers who happen to be a successful public figure. The public figure

comes from a non-English speaking country and speaks fluent English, but becomes a well-known figure in English speaking countries and the world.

English Accents in Indonesia

As a country that falls under the category of the outer circle, Indonesians have a distinct dialect of English. This dialect is called “Indoglish” (Saddhono & Sulaksono, 2018), and it mixes English words and the grammar and syntax of native Indonesian languages. For example, the sentence, “I prepared some book and went to college.” In Indonesian, this sentence is correct because the Indonesian word for “some” is similar in meaning to “several.” It is one example of the use of Indonesian structures and words that have multiple meanings in the English language. The division between users of standardized English and native English can create a divide of their own, especially at a time where L2 speakers are more widely accepted in the wider world (Sung, 2013). However, in regions like Singapore where the elites of the country speak a different dialect of English than their less fortunate counterparts (Alsagoff, 1998), speakers of standardized English may consider their counterparts to have a worse skill in English because they do not speak the English language as they do. They feel like

mimicking the L1 users of English and thinking the localized version of English is wrong.

Related Studies

In addition to the research mentioned above by Derwing, another research that is related to this research was conducted by Johanna Norman in 2017 titled “Student’s Self-perceived English Accent and Its Impact on Their Communicative Competence and Speaking Confidence.” This research took place in Sweden, and it investigated ESL students’ perceptions of whether or not their accent had affected their English learning process and how it affected them. The study was conducted using a web-based survey given to 80 students that took English 6, a mandatory course for further education. The results of the research revealed that native-like accent was overrated and that communication was more important. Norman’s research is similar to this research in that they both inquire about students’ perceptions regarding accents and what impact they might have on the students’ language learning process. However, Norman’s research used a quantitative research method and did not inquire further on how the students’ accents impact the learning, while this research used a

qualitative method, and inquired further on the accents' impact on the learning process.

Methodology

This research used a quantitative research method, specifically the descriptive qualitative design. The design was deemed to fit in with the research because it aims to understand and describe what certain groups think about an issue (Creswell, 2012). The two foci in this research are the variety of World Englishes and the students' opinions regarding World Englishes. As mentioned before, the current study aims to investigate the perceptions of English Language Education students regarding accents so that the first focus would address the students' general knowledge about the variety of World Englishes. The second focus, which was the students' personal opinions of World Englishes, was chosen to investigate the students' feelings and stances about World Englishes, whether they were positive or negative.

This research took place in a private university in Yogyakarta because, based on the researcher's observation, the phenomenon of preferred accents existed in the university. Also, accessibility to the research setting was the reason to collect the data in the university. The participants of

this research were five students from the 2014 batch. The researcher chose this batch because, by the time this research took place, the students of this batch had studied in the university for three years, and would have developed some familiarity and preference for some accents. For this particular research, five students participated, and for their privacy, the participants' identities were under pseudonyms. As this research is qualitative, there is no limit to the number of participants (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011). However, to make sure that the data gathered for this research had enough diversity, the researcher chose to select five participants. The participants answered the researcher's questions under the pseudonyms Della, Amo, Ilya, Sue, and Sara.

To collect the necessary data for the research, the interview method, specifically the interview guideline, was employed. The interview method was employed in this study because the researcher aims to obtain in-depth in the form of statements rather than widespread data in the form of statistics. An interview guideline was used to obtain specific information without a set sequence of questions, which encourages the participants to answer truthfully (Cohen, Manion, & Morisson, 2007). An open-ended structure for the interview was

employed to make sure that the participants' responses provided as much detail on the information as possible. An open-ended structured interview is an interview method that makes the participants respond to questions without any influence from the researcher (Cohen et al., 2007). The format used for this research was the non-direct general format, which makes it possible for the researcher to coax further answers should any be required (Cohen et al., 2007).

The process of data gathering went as follows: First, the researcher contacted the potential participants through a shared LINE group. One of the researchers studied in the same class as the potential participants, which made it easier to contact them through existing media. Then, the researcher and participants decided a place and time for the interview. Regarding the place, the interviews took place on campus. The details regarding the time and date of the interviews were up participants' free time. The interviews used the Indonesian language to prevent any misunderstandings and false data. The researcher used a recording app on a cell phone to record the interviews and get tangible data and informed the participants about the recording to obtain the consent for data collection. All the interview questions were

designed specifically for this research to make sure there are no biased answers.

The first two questions of the research inquired about the participants' knowledge regarding World English and any variants the participants might have encountered. The second set of questions was about their stance regarding World Englishes and their reason for said stance. Then, the researcher asked if there's any variation the participant might prefer. The last question asks whether or not there were any variations they would like to implement further. In total, the participants received six questions.

Member checking was by consulting the interview transcription to the participants to see if they would want to change any information they provided. It aimed to maintain the reliability of the data and to make sure if the participants' current opinions are still similar to the ones they have during the time of the interview (Cohen et al., 2007). To perform the data checking, the researcher called the participants one by one and asked them whether or not they had changed their opinions. The participants did not alter any information given in the interviews.

For validity reasons, the researcher transcribed the recordings of each interview as a Microsoft Word document. For the

coding method, the researcher used the Open, Axial, and Selective coding method. Open, Axial, and Selective coding are methods to catalog and sort the results of an interview or other data gathering methods (Cohen et al., 2007). The first step of coding was open coding, done by labeling the texts to categorize them. Then, Axial coding was the next step. Axial coding involves labeling groups of open codes similar in meaning. Lastly, selective coding was done to identify the core categories of the text data, then theories based on those categories were created. The steps used for data analysis are as follows: the transcribes of the interview were written down in open and axial coding in the form of tables. Then, a selective coding document was created by combining the results of the interview and identifying the main ideas derived from it. Finally, the data were written down in a report seen in the fourth chapter of this research paper.

Findings

The first research question was regarding the participants' perceptions of the various accents of the English language. All five participants showed positive reactions, albeit with different responses. One reason is that some accents are more understandable than others. Participant under the pseudonym Della said, "I think

American is simpler because I have an easier time using an American accent, when I use British it's still a little...difficult, and in American, it's easier to pick up." The fact that Della thought one accent was more comprehensible than others due to her familiarity with the said accent. In turn, it would help her replicate the accent. A study conducted by Mulkeen (2016) finds that replicating a foreign accent is a good way to help a non-native English speaker to understand when speaking English. It explains why students perceived the easier accents as positive. In turn, it will help them with the familiarization of the English language. Also, a study cited by Hough shows that humans tend to mimic accents they are exposed to, familiarizing themselves with the accents (Hough, 2010). As they are used to these accents, they are more comfortable with it, and it helps them learn English better.

However, despite the positive responses from all five participants, several participants also expressed negative responses, citing that some accents are more difficult than others. Participants Ilya and Sue mentioned their difficulty in differentiating accents, with participant Ilya saying that she "has difficulty separating words that are usually in British and American," while participant Sue would

sometimes confuse UK and US accents, as she says, “I sometimes uh...confuse UK and US accents.” What Ilya and Sue experienced is not uncommon to ELLs. Some ELLs learn homonyms of two English accents. For example, ‘chips’ would commonly refer to ‘french fries’ in American English, while ‘chips’ would mean potato snacks in American English. Both Sue and Ilya would sometimes be confused UK and US accents, which they referred to as the intonation, pitch, and pronunciation of the two Englishes. A study conducted by the Acoustical Society of America in 2015 tested their participants’ ability to remember simple phrases in different accents, one they are familiar with and one they are not (Mulkeen, 2016). Their study reveals that learners devote an extra modicum of brainpower when trying to remember things in an unfamiliar language. It may explain the students’ difficulty in learning using an unfamiliar language.

Besides, the positive and negative responses, some of the participants’ responses cannot be necessarily positive or negative. One participant noted that accents were easily differentiated. Participant Amo stated that “The British accent is like, turning color into color, the L is not pronounced, but in American, it’s more pronounced.” Amo used two different

accents, one for learning purposes and one for non-learning activities. A study regarding pronunciations (Yan, Vaseghi, Rentzos, Ho, & Turajlic, 2003) shows that pronunciations of differing L1 accents made it apparent how relatively identifiable these words are to someone perceptive. However, two of the participants are more or less indifferent about accents. Participant Della mentioned her indifference on the interview by saying that she’s “pretty indifferent,” while participant Ilya explained that she tended to focus more on the meaning of the words by saying “When I use the English accent I tend to focus on meaning than thinking about other things.” While Della and Ilya might not have focused specifically on grammatical accuracy, they might also not focus on the intonation or accent of the native speaker. These responses catalog them under the under-user Monitor category (Krahnke & Krashen, 1983), namely language users who focus on meaning over grammatical accuracy.

Regarding the participants’ preferred accents, the researcher made sure to inquire in which context the participants preferred to use them. Some participants preferred to use similar accents in both classroom and casual environments, while others used completely different accents in both cases. The researcher categorized the

participants' responses according to what accents they used regardless of condition. Those categories are L1 users (users of English as is spoken in countries where the language is native) and Mixed accents (users that mix their local accents with L1 accents when they speak).

All participants used an L1 accent to a degree. Some participants clarified that they used the American accent during class activities and British accent when speaking to their friends, while others said that they used the American accent or British accent exclusively. Amo, Della, Sara, and Sue mentioned that they used the American accent, with Amo saying that her use of an American accent was "spontaneous." On the other hand, participant Della mentioned that she preferred British English because it was "easier on the ears.". However, she only used it to play and kid with friends, citing it as "To play and kid with friends, I usually try out the British accent." Hough (2010) clarifies that learners of a language tend to mimic the closest speaker of said language, which, in the case of these participants, their lecturers. Lecturers in their university generally speak in L1 accents, so the students mimic the accent mentioned above.

Despite all participants being comfortable with L1 accents, some of them still use mixed accents. Participant Della,

who has Javanese traces, mentioned that she tended to be more comfortable with the American accent, but "because I have some Javanese tendencies, it still carries over when I'm talking." Ilya said that she prioritized meaning over everything else. She mixed her accent while she was studying. Regarding this, she said, "Mixed accent, when I study English I mix my accents." These two participants were a monitor under users who prioritized meaning over the accuracy of any sort (Krashen, 1987). Participant Della clarified to the researcher that she used a mixture of American and Javanese accents, a byproduct of the globalization of the English language, which mixed with the local language (Rajagopalan, 2012).

Regarding whether or not having a favored accent has helped them learn the English language better, all participants responded in the positive. The reasons for the participants feeling this way are largely similar to their perceptions regarding the various accents: their preferred accents make the learning process easier, they are familiar with their preferred accent, and certain sentences become clearer when spoken in said familiar accent. An ASA study conducted in 2015 states that users of a certain accent must devote extra brainpower to process information spoken in an unfamiliar accent. The participants, being

familiar with the accents of speakers closest to them, mimic said speakers' accents (Hough, 2010), familiarize themselves with their accent, which in turn helps them study other, non-verbal ways of communicating such as body language (Mulkeen, 2016). As they are familiar with the accents that they use, they feel like getting help with their learning process.

Discussions

The researcher set out to find out if the students of the English Language Education Department in a Private University in Yogyakarta have any preferred accents, how they perceive accents in general, and whether or not having an accent has proven to be useful in Learning English. After the research finished, the researcher concluded that the students of English Language Education of this particular university have different perceptions and opinions when it comes to various accents of English. However, they all feel that their English learning process was helped by having an accent. The respondents are familiar with the accents used by their lecturers, and they subconsciously mimic them. It explains why all respondents of this research use L1 accents to some degree. They are familiar with L1 accents, and because of this, they

don't have to think as hard when speaking with their L1 accents. It makes them able to concentrate on comprehending the meaning behind words instead of comprehending the words first before comprehending their meaning.

Besides, even though all participants used L1 versions of English, this does not mean that standardized English is mandatory in classrooms. Some of them felt familiar using mixed accents with their local dialect. Since familiarity is key to learning language, language diversity should be fostered instead of discouraged. In other words, accent diversity must be a research topic.

The findings of this research show that having an accent helps English language learners with the language learning process. By having a familiar accent, the learner becomes more comfortable when learning English with that accent. The findings of this research confirm Derwing's findings that English language learners have pronunciation problems. However, while Derwing's participants reported no lasting effects of the pronunciation problems from a social standpoint, the participants of this research reported that pronunciation problems harmed their learning process.

As for this research's effect on Norman's research, its findings regarding the Swedish students' indifference on accents have correlations to several participants' opinion that it is the meaning of the communication that matters, and that they feel indifferent about accents as a whole. However, Norman's research did not inquire further about the effects that the accents may have on their learning process.

Conclusion and Implication

The researcher revealed perceptions of EED students from this particular university regarding the various accents of English using an interview method. After the initial and following coding processes, the study found that the students have different perceptions regarding the various accents of English and that they feel helped in their English learning escapades by their preferred accent. In this research, one keyword kept popping up to explain this phenomenon: Familiarity. The participants were familiar with the accents used by their lecturers and subconsciously mimic them, which may explain why all respondents used L1 accents to some degree. Since they were familiar with the accents, the time and brainpower required for switching accents are devoted to comprehension, making

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

However, Standardized English can see more use than for a reference point in classrooms. Despite the lecturers of the private university using L1 accents, some students from the university, including some of the participants, still, speak in a mixed accent. It is similar to L1 accents mixed with the local dialect, showing the flexibility of the English language. Indigenization of English still exists and can help a student learn English instead of hindering them. As such, future researchers should foster diversity in English languages, as it could help the students learn the World's most used language.

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