Chinese Students' Perceived Difficulty Levels when Listening to Non-Native and Native English Speakers

Alan Robert White[1]

[1]International College, Rajamangala University of Technology Krungthep, Bangkok, 10120, Thailand

* Corresponding author. E-mail address: alan.w@mail.rmutk.ac.th

Received: 15 December 2023; Revised: 14 November 2024; Accepted: 25 January 2025

Abstract

This study examines the effects of non-native practitioners' accents on non-native participants' listening comprehension. The participants were 26 Chinese post-graduate students studying in international programs related to education and business. Students completed listening tests (30 items at 5 per accent) for both native (Australian and New Zealand) and non-native (Singaporean, Japanese, Bangladeshi, and Indian) accents. They were then required to grade them out of 5 for perceived difficulty (5=very easy; 1=very difficult). The results showed the highest test scores for the Australian accent (mean=4.65 out of 5) and the lowest test scores for the Indian accent (mean=3.08 out of 5). The Singaporean accent was perceived to be the easiest (mean=3.85) and the Bangladeshi and Indian accents were both perceived to be the most difficult (mean=1.88). There was no correlation between the perceived difficulty levels and test scores. The results of this study suggest a need for students to listen to and be aware of accents that they are likely to encounter on a regular basis.

Keywords: English language, accents, native, non-native, perceived difficulty

Introduction

English is now indispensable to many individuals as local people adopt it as a means of conducting business as a Lingua Franca for general daily communication. Therefore, low levels of English proficiency can have an impact on trade and business negotiations. This situation is exacerbated by the different accented forms of English spoken worldwide. It is estimated that approximately 1.5 billion people worldwide speak English. Around 1.1 billion of these speakers are second-language users. English is now a global language. However, the issue in regard to non-standard English accents has largely been ignored. As the number of people learning and speaking English around the world continues to rise, this situation will only become worse. Thus, it is essential that students have the necessary skills and knowledge to understand, or at the very least, be aware of other variations of English and different accents (Crystal, 2019).

The distinctive manner of pronouncing a language, known as an accent, can be associated with a particular region, area, or even social group. This is true whether the speaker is a native or non-native user of the language. A person's accent encompasses the phonetic and phonological aspects of a dialect and can be both formal and informal. Non-native speakers often have a different way of pronouncing words than native speakers. Unlike native speakers, a mother tongue can influence the pronunciation of the target language. English is the world's Lingua Franca and is used for communication. However, the biggest challenge for second language learners is listening comprehension. Non-native English speakers or those learning English as a second or foreign language can face this challenge. Language

learning and accent are intricately connected, and the four skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing are essential for mastering any language. It is known that, listening is the first and most important skill for language learners to develop (Irfan et al. 2021). English is spoken by millions of people around the world as a second language. It is estimated that up to 200 million people in India alone speak English (Betageri, 2017). Therefore, it is important that language learners are aware of the different accents that they may come into contact with. This will help avoid any breakdown in communication and avoid any misunderstandings.

In recent years, several test publishers, including TOEFL and IELTS, have included a diverse range of native accents into their assessments. This was done in order to more accurately represent authentic academic contexts. Since 2013, TOEFL iBT's Listening and Speaking sections have incorporated accents from North American English, Australian English, British English, and New Zealand English (Educational Testing Service, 2011). IELTS has also incorporated a comparable selection of various accents into their listening tests (British Council, 2015). Therefore, it would appear reasonable to create listening assessments and learning materials that align with authentic situations using non-native accents. These tests and learning materials could reflect the accents most likely to be encountered by the language learner (Bachman & Palmer, 2010).

This study aims to answer the following research question: Is there a correlation between test scores and perceived difficulty levels when listening to different accents in English?

The objective of this study is as follows: To investigate whether there is a correlation between test scores and perceived difficulty levels when listening to different accents in English.

The findings of this study could be used as a reference for those working in associated disciplines. The results could facilitate additional inquiry aimed at comprehending the challenges learners face in regard to English language listening comprehension.

Literature Review

Osada (2004), suggests the importance of listening as a skill is being undermined by both educators and learners. This has led to the neglect of this fundamental and important skill in language instruction and the learning process. Consequently, the development of listening comprehension among learners is being hindered. This is impeding their overall language learning progress.

A study at a university in North Lampung, Indonesia discovered that students had difficulties when it came to listening comprehension. The results of the study showed that a large number of students often found listening difficult when the accent was not familiar to them. Students were found to have difficulties understanding a dialogue when a word mentioned by the speaker could not be understood (Toni et al., 2021). This could therefore result in misunderstandings due to several words not being heard or understood correctly.

Matsuura et al. (2014), examined the listening comprehension skills of 75 Japanese university students. The researchers used Indian and Canadian accents in the study. The Japanese students were shown to have lower listening comprehension scores when listening to the unfamiliar Indian accent when compared to the more familiar Canadian accent.

Suppatkul (2009), studied students' comprehension levels of American, Thai, and Filipino accents. The study participants were 412 Thai high school students. The results of the listening comprehension test showed that the Thai listeners were disadvantaged when the speaker was Filipino, but not Thai or American. Due to their generally strong English skills, many Filipinos are employed as English instructors in Thailand. Therefore, exposure to Filipino accents could prove beneficial in this context.

In a study by Major et al. (2002), four groups of 100 participants, listened to short lectures presented in English by speakers with different native languages. The participants, whose native languages were Chinese, Japanese, Spanish, and standard American English, then answered questions based on what they had heard. The results showed that both the native and non-native participants scored significantly lower on the tests when listening to non-native speakers of English.

It has been shown that English is generally spoken with an accent related to the mother tongue. Many studies have found that a speaker's first language has an influence on the pronunciation of the target language. This is a significant factor in the speaker's accent when using the target language. Interference from the speaker's native language can produce errors in aspiration, stress, and intonation in the target language. Particular sounds that are not common in the native language can pose difficulties (Abu Taher, 2019). The following section provides a basic overview of some of the phonology characteristics of the non-native speakers of English studied within this research.

Chinese English language learners are known to have difficulties with “h” and “sh” sounds such as those found in “he” and “she”. Mandarin speakers have difficulty hearing and saying the “r” sound. The “r” sound is not generally found in the Chinese language. Native Mandarin speakers often do not pronounce the “r” in English when it appears near or at the end of a word (Recine, 2015a).

Most East Asian languages have few “closed” syllables. Closed syllables are those that end in a consonant. Words and syllables that end in a consonant are common in the English language. It is quite common for native Chinese speakers to leave out the consonants at the end of a word. Words such as “thought” and “bought” can quite often sound like “thaw” and “bore”. In some cases, Mandarin speakers will replace an English consonant with one that appears in the Chinese language. For example, a “g” sound found in English may be substituted for the “ng” sound that appears in Mandarin Chinese (Recine, 2015a).

Voiced consonants such as the “g” sound are difficult for Chinese learners to produce. The voiced consonant “th” is particularly difficult for Chinese speakers. Chinese speakers of English often substitute the “th” sound for other consonants such as “l,” “d,” “s,” and “z” (Recine, 2015a).

There are an estimated 200 million English users in India. Unfortunately, this regional form of English can often be difficult to understand for those not familiar with some of the characteristics. The main differences between the English spoken in Indian and the English spoken by a native speaker relate to the pacing and intonation. The characteristics of Indian English are also influenced by approximately 800 different native languages. These languages though often differ in similar ways from ‘standard’ English. Pronunciation of consonants often difficult for Indian natives when speaking English (Pandey, 2015; Recine, 2015b).

India speakers of English do not differentiate the sound of “v”, produced with the lower lips and top teeth; and the sound “w” where both lips are used. Also, the two “th” sounds in English (/θ/ and /ð/) are often replaced with d and t. The schwa sound in 'adjust' /ə/ and the 'u' sound in 'upper' /ʌ / often disregarded and replaced with the vowel (a) as in 'father'. In many of the Indian languages the consonants “r,” “t” and “d” are quite similar. In English, these sounds are more distinct. The “t” and “d” sounds in English are produced by tapping the tongue against the upper front teeth. “t” is voiceless, whereas “d” is voiced. The “r” for instance is made in the back of the throat (rhotic). In 'native' English the “r” is a “rhotic” sound, not a “rolled” sound. Indian speakers of English will often pronounce the “r” by “rolling” it. The replacement of two adjacent vowels by a single long vowel followed by the “r” sound is a characteristic of English spoken in India. For example, beer becomes “bir” and pear becomes “per” (Pandey, 2015; Recine, 2015b).

It is known that Bengali vowels are not conditioned by length. In English, range distinguishes the vowel sounds /iː i, ɔː ɔ, uː u/. However, Bengali speakers generally do not differentiate between long and short vowels. Another issue for a Bengali speaker of English is the use of the weak forms /ə/ and /ɪ/ in unstressed syllables. In general, these are not usually observed by Bengali speakers of English (Abu Taher, 2019).

When speaking English, the voiced palatal plosive /z/ and the voiced palato alveolar affricate /ʤ/ are generally pronounced as allophones of the same phoneme by Bengalis. The "z" is produced as /ʤ/ and the "j" as /z/. Consonant sounds such as /f/ and /v/; /z/. /ʤ/ and /ʒ/; /θ/ and / ð /; /t/ and /d/ are often mispronounced. The mispronunciation of some these sounds may be due to their absence the Bangla language's phonemic inventory. Bengali speakers of English often mispronounce the voiceless aspirated dental plosives /θ/ and / ð / as the voiced dental plosives /tʰ/ and /d̪/. Consonant clusters such as /sp/, /st/ and /sm/ are also an issue. The English fricatives /f, θ, ð, ʋ, z, ʒ/ do not exist in the inventory of phonemes in the Bangla language. Therefore, /f/ is replaced with / ph/, /θ/ becomes /th/, /ð/ changes to /d/, /z/ becomes /ʤ/ and /z/ is pronounced as /ʒ/or /ʤ/. The /ʋ/ as /bh/, a bilabial aspirated stop, is common (Abu Taher, 2019).

Singaporeans are known to speak English at a very high level. The accents of Singaporeans that speak English as a first language are similar in many respects to Received Pronunciation. Many Singaporeans speak more than one language. The common languages spoken by Singaporeans are Malay, Chinese, Tamil, or Singapore Colloquial English (Singlish). These languages have influenced Standard Singapore English. Singapore English and Singapore colloquial English are spoken with various accents. The strength of accent can be related to ethnic mother tongue and its dominance (Deterding & Hvitfeldt, 1994).

The Singaporean accent is generally non-rhotic. Many speakers leave out the "r" sound in words such as "far". Singapore English has a different intonational pattern. The rightmost syllable of a stressed word has the highest pitch. Words that are not stressed and unstressed initial syllables have a generally lower pitch. Singaporeans have difficulties pronouncing words that contain "th" sounds. The "th" is often pronounced as either /s/, /z/, or /d/. Singaporeans also have a tendency to shorten certain words ending with a "t" or "d" sound. Some of these issues are similar to those found in Chinese Mandarin speakers of English. Also, the "k" at the end of words and "t" sound in words such as "guest" and "artist" are often omitted (Deterding & Hvitfeldt, 1994).

Japanese speakers of English often confuse the alveolar approximant /r/ and the lateral alveolar approximant /l/. When producing /r/ the tongue does not touch anywhere and is produced at the back of the throat. For the /l/ sound, the tongue touches behind the top teeth. The schwa /ə/ does not exist in Japanese and there is no neutral vowel. In English the neutral schwa is used in many unstressed syllables. Fricatives such as /θ, ð/ are produced in the front of the mouth. These sounds are very difficult for Japanese speakers to produce. The two 'th' sounds: /θ/ and /ð/ are often replaced with either dental /t/ & /d/ or alveolar /s/ & /z/. A difficult English vowel sound for Japanese speakers is /əʊ/. This vowel starts neutrally rather than rounded.

Japanese speakers of English have a tendency to place equal stress on each syllable. This can make longer words unclear. When speaking English, Japanese natives often place a roughly equal stress on each syllable of a sentence. Strong/weak structures are used in English with only certain syllables stressed. Japanese speakers often separate words in a sentence rather than joining them with consonants or vowels. Japanese speakers sometimes add a small 'o' after consonants at the end of syllables. A small vowel is often added between two adjacent consonants. However, the consonants should be spoken quickly one after the other (Hudson, 2013; Shemesh, 2023).

Methodology

The accents used in this study were selected by considering their phonological characteristics. The listening comprehension tests involved a word identification gap-filling exercise that included 5 words per accent (30 words overall). The listening texts were then rated for difficulty on a scale of 1 (very difficult) to 5 (very easy). The listening texts were based on familiar subjects and rated at a lower intermediate level. Listening materials for the tests were sourced from elllo Lean English Naturally (elllo productions, 2023). The native and non native accents chosen for this study were Singaporean, Japanese, Bangladeshi, Indian, New Zealand and Australian. The study was constrained to a narrow demographic cohort. Further limitations were imposed by variations in students' English language proficiency levels. Although the tests were based on familiar topics, the subject matter may have impacted the test outcomes. The search for appropriate listening comprehension materials was hindered by a lack of availability, topic choices and language ability levels. The researcher attempted to make it difficult to guess the word based on context. The answer was not obvious based solely on the surrounding sentences and context. The study did not account for students' prior exposure to the accents used within this study. Furthermore, the research was restricted due to the students' primary fields of study being education and business, rather than English language.

The participants were 26 Chinese students studying on post-graduate international programs related to business and education taught in the English language. The students were of mixed genders and ages. The students were chosen for convenience and having the necessary attributes for this study.

Results and Discussion

The following section of this paper presents the results from the tests and self-perceived difficulty ratings (see Tables 1 and 2).

Table 1. Shows students' test scores (out of 5).

Accent	Mean	Standard Deviation
Singaporean	4.42	.76
Japanese	4.50	.51
Bangladeshi	4.04	1.04
Indian	3.08	1.26
New Zealand	4.62	.57
Australian	4.65	.56

Table 2. Shows students' self-declared perceived difficulty levels (1-5).

Accent	Mean	Standard Deviation
Singaporean	3.85	1.08
Japanese	3.38	.80
Bangladeshi	1.88	1.11
Indian	1.88	1.07
New Zealand	2.88	1.21
Australian	3.42	1.14

The results of the study revealed highest test scores for the Australian accent and lowest test scores for the Indian accent. The Singaporean accent was perceived to be the easiest and the Bangladeshi and Indian accents were both perceived to be the most difficult.

A Pearson correlation coefficient was computed to assess the linear relationship between the Singaporean accent test score and the perceived difficulty level of the Singaporean accent. There was no significant correlation found between the two variables, r(24) = [.277], p = [.170]. A Pearson correlation coefficient was computed to assess the linear relationship between Japanese accent test score and the perceived difficulty level of the Japanese accent. There was no significant correlation found between the two variables, r(24) = [.293], p = [.147]. A Pearson correlation coefficient was computed to assess the linear relationship between Bangladeshi accent test score and the perceived difficulty level of the Bangladeshi accent. There was no significant correlation found between the two variables, r(24) = [.248], p = [.223]. A Pearson correlation coefficient was computed to assess the linear relationship between Indian accent test score and the perceived difficulty level of the Indian accent. There was no significant correlation found between the two variables, r(24) = [.214], p = [.294]. A Pearson correlation coefficient was computed to assess the linear relationship between New Zealand accent test score and the perceived difficulty level of the New Zealand accent. There was no significant correlation found between the two variables, r(24) = [.280], p = [.165]. A Pearson correlation coefficient was computed to assess the linear relationship between Australian accent test score and the perceived difficulty level of the Australian accent. There was no significant correlation found between the two variables, r(24) = [.051], p = [.806]. The results showed no correlation between test scores and perceived difficulty levels in regard to the different English accents used in this study.

Various factors can aid English listening comprehension in regards to accent and pronunciation. Familiarity with the speaker’s accent may aid understanding for the listener. Japan is a major pop culture export country within its region. Soap operas such as Long Vacation and Tokyo Love Story are popular in China. One of China's biggest video platforms Bilibili, was originally established as a fan community for Hatsune Miku a virtual Japanese character. Many videos on this site relate to Japanese animation, comics, and games (Wu, 2021). The Japanese accent would therefore be familiar to many Chinese people.

Like many multinational nations, Singapore has a complicated linguistic landscape. Despite the government of Singapore's decades-long efforts to encourage ethnically varied Singaporeans to speak Standard English. The language of everyday communication though remains Singlish. A language is more than just a collection of forms that live in a cultural vacuum. Language is inextricably related to the society in which it is used. Some of the main linguistic and cultural factors that have shaped Singlish are rooted in the languages and cultures of China (Wong, 2021).

The English proficiency levels of Singaporeans may also influence listening comprehension. In the largest ranking of non-native English proficiency skills, Singapore ranked second behind the Netherlands as having very high English proficiency out of the 113 countries tested. In addition, Japan were ranked 87 with low proficiency levels. India and Bangladesh were ranked moderate at a joint place at 60 (English Proficiency Index, 2023).

Conclusions and Suggestions

The results from this study revealed that the 26 Chinese participants rated the Bangladeshi and Indian accents as the most difficult. Although, students scored lower in the tests for both the Bangladeshi and Indian accents, no strong correlation was found for perceived difficulty. However, the results of the study showed that students scored lowest for the Indian accent

and also perceived it to be the joint most difficult. Indian speakers of English are large in number and likely to be encountered in a business and a travel context. Therefore, language learners should be made aware of the various accents spoken by both native and non-native speakers. At a beginner level, some native and non-native accents may not always be appropriate for listening training. However, these accents could always occur in everyday conversations. Consequently, it is imperative to expose higher level language learning students to different accents. Furthermore, students should be encouraged to listen to various different accents outside of the classroom environment. Relevant listening materials should be used in the language learning classroom. This could help ensure student are exposed to accents that they are likely to encounter. In the future, a larger scale study that investigates the phonological differences between the participants first language and the accented language in greater detail may prove beneficial.

Acknowledgments

The author would like to thank all of the students that participated in this study.

References

Abu Taher, G. M. (2019). English pronunciation problems of Bengali speaking learners: A case study. *International Journal of Research in English, 1*(2), 10–16.

Bachman, L., & Palmer, A. (2010). *Language assessment in practice: Developing language assessments and justifying their use in the real world*. Oxford University Press.

Betageri, A. (2017). A case for the standardization of Indian English. *Indian Literature, 61*(1 (297)), 171–181.

British Council. (2015). *Understand the listening test*. Retrieved from http://takeielts.britishcouncil.org/prepare-test/understand-test-format/listening-test/

Crystal, D. (2019). *The Cambridge Encyclopaedia of the English Language*. Cambridge University Press.

Deterding, D., & Hvitfeldt, R. (1994). The features of Singapore English pronunciation: Implications for teachers.

elllo productions. (2023). *Natural English Conversations*. Available from: https://elllo.org/index.htm

English Proficiency Index. (2023). *The world's largest ranking of countries and regions by English skills*. Available at: https://www.ef.com/wwen/epi/

Educational Testing Service. (2011). *Reliability and comparability of TOEFL iBT™ scores*. Retrieved from www.ets.org/s/toefl/pdf/toefl_ibt_research_s1v3.pdf

Faisal Irfan, Syed Abuzar Naqvi, Tajammal Hussain Awan, & Abdul Wali Ahmad Abbasi. (2021). Impact of L2 performers' accent on foreign language learners listening comprehension. *Palarch's Journal of Archaeology of Egypt/Egyptology, 18*(3), 171–186.

Hudson, J. (2013). 10 English pronunciation errors by Japanese speakers. *Pronunciation Studio*. Available at: https://pronunciationstudio.com/japanese-speakers-english-pronunciation-errors/

Major, R. C., Fitzmaurice, S. F., Bunta, F., & Balasubramanian, C. (2002). The effects of non-native accents on listening comprehension: Implications for ESL assessment. *TESOL Quarterly, 36*(2), 173–190.

Matsuura, H., Chiba, R., Mahoney, S., & Rilling, S. (2014). Accent and speech rate effects in English as a lingua franca. *System, 46*, 143–150.

Osada, N. (2004). Listening comprehension research: A brief review of the past thirty years. *Dialogue, 3*(1), 53–66.

Pandey, P. (2015). Indian English pronunciation. In M. Reed & J. M. Levis (Eds.), *The handbook of English pronunciation* (pp. 301–319). John Wiley & Sons.

Recine, D. (2015a). Common problems with English consonants for native Chinese speakers, TOEFL speaking. *Magoosh Blog – TOEFL® Test*. Available at: https://magoosh.com/toefl/common-problems-with-english-consonants-for-native-chinese-speakers/

Recine, D. (2015b). Pronunciation tips for Indian speakers of English, TOEFL speaking. *Magoosh Blog – TOEFL® Test*. Available at: https://magoosh.com/toefl/pronunciation-tips-for-indian-speakers-of-english/

Shemesh, H. (2023). 10 pronunciation challenges for Japanese speakers. *Accent's Way Magazine*. Available at: https://hadarshemesh.com/magazine/english-for-japanese-speakers/

Suppatkul, K. (2009). Effects of teachers' English accents on listening comprehension ability of upper secondary school students (Master's thesis, Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok, Thailand).

Toni, A., Susilowati, R., & Sartipa, D. (2021). Students' difficulties in listening comprehension at the third semester of the English education study program of University Muhammadiyah Kotabumi academic year 2019/2020. *Griya Cendikia, 6*(2), 130–154.

Wong, J. O. (2021). The "Chineseness" of Singlish. In Z. Ye (Ed.), *The Palgrave handbook of Chinese language studies* (pp. xx–xx). Palgrave Macmillan.

Wu, Y. (2021). Can pop culture allay resentment? Japan's influence in China today. *Media and Communication*, *9*(3), 112–122.