

Yemeni English Teachers' Attitudes Towards English Accents

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A person's attitude towards a particular object may influence his/her behaviour towards this object (Bohner & Wanke, 2002). Actually, in Yemen, British English and American English accents are both used in private institutes, particularly in textbooks. Therefore, identifying the teachers' attitudes towards English accents is quite pertinent in improving the learning of this foreign language. This paper mainly investigates the attitudes of Yemeni English language teachers towards American and British English accents. It also attempts to find out which English accent Yemeni English teachers mostly use in the classroom. A questionnaire was used to elicit the attitudes from 40 Yemen English language teachers, taught at English learning private institutes. The results indicate that most of the participants prefer to use American accent more than British in the classroom. However, they use a mixture of both while teaching. Even though the majority claim that no accent is superior to the other, most of the participants consider British accent as the actual accent.

Keywords: Yemeni English Teachers, Attitude, English Accents, Variety Preference, Behaviour.

1.Introduction

English is the language that has now acquired the status of *lingua franca* all over the world. It has also become the language of science and technology in other than English speaking countries, especially in southern and western Asia. Thus, Yemen is also one of the countries in which English is taught and learned as a foreign language. The structure of the Yemeni school curriculum is such that English is taught as a compulsory subject only from 7th to 12th grade. As a result of which most of the Yemeni students finish schools with a poor level of this foreign language. However, the augmented significance of English drags them to make an effort to improve their competence and performance of this alien lingo. As a part of this effort, most of the students join private English learning institutes. Those who join these educational institutes achieve a good level of different skills in this non-native language. The teaching in most of these institutes is based on American textbooks. By and large, USA and Great Britain are considered to be the two natives to the English language. Thus, teachers in

Yemen have different feelings and preferences towards these two varieties of English; some prefer British accent, and others consider American English to be their favourite. It is also noticeable that, nowadays, the supremacy of US media covering politics and economy influence the feelings of non-native speakers. Consequently, it needs to be questioned whether Yemeni English teachers are affected by the vitality of American English or not.

To appraise the level of English as a foreign language in Yemen, it is essential to assess the teachers' feelings. The contradiction between teacher' and students' attitudes causes some difficulty in learning speaking skills. Attitude towards a particular language variety may affect the behaviour towards that variety. Therefore, investigating attitudes is very important to overwhelm the issues and challenges faced by teachers and students. For that reason, this study focuses on teachers' attitudes towards two accents of English Language. Buckingham (2014) stated that "statements claiming certain accents to be more 'correct' or 'nicer' than others or acts such as enrolling in a particular course because of the teachers' accent are manifestations of attitudes towards language use"(p.53). Investigating attitudes and identifying them is not a long-term aim. A researcher should find out the factors determining and shaping attitude. Crystal highlighted that there is a link between language and power. That is, the power of the people who speak a particular variety plays a significant role in shaping attitudes.

During the period of British imperialism, Received Pronunciation (RP) spread all over the world, and it was this English accent which got the prestigious status. Dalton-Puffer, Kaltenboeck, & Smit (1997) , based on the bulk of the research conducted on attitudes towards English varieties, found that non-native speakers perceived RP as the highest variety of English. Fants and Graddol et al., as cited in (Ladegaard & Sachdev, 2006), pointed out that the reasons which led to a shift of attitude from RP to American English (AmE). In the second half of the 20th century, AmE gained a higher status because of the institutional support, great economic power, and the higher demographic vitality of AmE speakers as compared to British English speakers. Previous research, which has been conducted on AmE variety and BrE variety, supports the hypothesis that AmE is rated high on the status scale. In Japan, using verbal-guise technique and questionnaire, Chiba, Matsuura, & Yamamoto (1995); Matsuda (2003); Sasayama (2013); and McKenzie (2008) investigated Japanese students' attitudes towards AmE, BrE and JE (Japanese English) and found out that the participants had a more positive attitude towards AmE and BrE. McKenzie argues that AmE and BrE were having a higher significance in terms of status, while JE was rated higher in terms of solidarity. Zhang and Hu also found that Chinese ESL participants gave a higher significance to AmE and BrE. Ladegaard and Sachdev also support this view. Many of the studies related to attitudes conducted by non-native speakers viewed American English to be superior to British English (Alftberg (2009); McKenzie (2008b); Sasayama (2013).

However, the question related to the attitudes towards English accents in Yemen has not been addressed so far. Thus, this paper attempts to investigate the teachers' attitudes of the two English accents, American and British.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants

A total number of 40 Yemeni English language teachers were selected purposively based on their experience in teaching the English language at private institutes (26 males and 14 females). The average age of the participants ranged between 21 and 50 years old. The participants had a PhD (15%), M.A (30%), B.A (50%) and others (5%). The years of teaching experience ranged from 1 to 27.

2.2. Instruments

A questionnaire was developed to accomplish the objectives of the study. The questionnaire includes two sections: the first section is to find out the demographic data of the participants. The second section focuses on the personal preferences of American English and British English. The questionnaire has two types of questions. Close-ended questions which help the respondents to choose the suitable choices for them and open-ended questions to investigate the reasons beyond their choices. Open-ended questions allow the respondents to express their opinions freely without any effect of other responses. The questionnaire has been sent to the participants via email through an English language trainer. All the participants were from Yemen.

3. Analysis and Results

A descriptive analysis was conducted via SPSS. The frequency and percentage were obtained to measure the teachers' attitudes. For ethical consideration, the respondents were represented anonymously. The alphabet letters were used to stand for them.

3.1. Teachers' Exposure to English

To know which accent the teachers were exposed to more, the participants were asked to choose which movies do they mostly watch. Results presented in table 3.1 indicated that the majority (60%) of the participants watched both American and British movies. They also revealed that (30%) watch American movies while (2.5%) watched British movies. In this question, the majority of the participants indicated that they were exposed to both accents through movies and programs, but the extent of the exposure to each variety is not brought up.

Table 3.1: Exposure to English

Q1: What programs/movies do you mostly watch?		
	Frequency	percent
American programs/movies	12	30.0
Both	24	60.0
British programs/movies	1	2.5

others	3	7.5
Total	40	100.0

3.2. Teachers' Preferences

Table 3.2 exhibited that 50% of the respondents preferred to use American accent, 22.5% preferred British accent, and 27.5 preferred both. The respondents who preferred American accent stated three reasons beyond their preferences. The first one was the simplicity of the variety. That was clearly indicated in their comments.

A: It's easier to understand American accent.

B: It's more preferable than the British and easier to use.

C: It has Easy Structures, catchy utterances, and no complicated word to use. It is much easier than the British.

D: It is not as complicated and sophisticated as British accent.

E: Students feel in ease with the American accent as it is clearer and smoother than the British.

F: It is more understandable and preferred by students.

G: I think it easier for me and I believe that it is the most commonly used by most of the English language speakers in the countries where English is used as a second or a foreign language.

H: Because I am used to it and it sounds natural and easier for me than British accent. It is clear and sweet.

The Second, reason was the language background and availability of resources, which consider important factors in shaping their preferences. The participants stated that all the books they taught in private institutes were American-based. In addition, they have been watching many American movies and TV series for years. So, the teacher's accent background is constructed through programs. Furthermore, they indicated that AME has more materials on the net and market than BRE.

In brief, it is noticeable that attitudes towards American and British accents are affected more by linguistic features. Most of the teachers prefer American accent because it is clear, easy to use, and catchy.

Similarly, the teachers who preferred to use British accent linked that to the easiness of the accent and its being the original source of English language. First, those teachers who preferred it demonstrated that it is easier to use than American accents. That was clear in their illustrations:

A: I feel British accent is easier than American, though some sounds are difficult to produce like native speakers.

B: There is no specific reason, but I got used to the British accent and I think it is easier than the American one.

Second, considering BRE the actual source of English language was associated with teachers' preferences. In their explanation for the reasons of their preferences, they said that they thought British accent is the source of English because it is a standard English, it is clearer, it is an origin of English language, and it is formal. It is clear that attitudes towards British accent are also affected by the linguistic simplicity. The beliefs concerning the origin of the English language forms another important factor in shaping teachers' attitudes towards British accent. It seems that considering British accent the origin of English is a stereotype for Yemeni English teachers. The famous saying among English language learners and teachers in Yemen which is "English was born in England and got sick in America." plays a paramount role in teachers' attitudes formation. Respondents who preferred both stated that students needed to know both varieties to enable them understand speakers of both accents. What is more important here is that either those who preferred American accent or those who preferred British accent attributed that to the easiness of the accent. The only explanation for that is that American accent speakers pronounce the sound /r/ finally while in British accent, it is not pronounced, so teachers who prefer American accent consider it easier and understandable. While teachers who prefer British accent consider American accent unclear because /r/ and /t/ become /d/ intervocally. So, teachers generalize the difficulty of the variety due to such pronunciations.

Table3.2: Teachers' preference

Q2: Which one of these accents do you prefer to use in the classroom?		
	Frequency	percent
American Accent	20	50.0
British Accent	9	22.5
Both	11	27.5
Total	40	100.0

3.3. Accent Usage in the Classroom

Table 3.3 showed that in the classroom 42.5% of the participants mixed both accents, 37.5% used American accent, 17.5% used British accent, and 2.5% used other accents which meant to be Yemeni English accent. When teachers were asked about their justifications for mixing, they assigned that to the insignificance of distinguishing between the two accents, reflection of what they learned, background training and learning in British and exposure to American accent, students' need to know both, and automaticity of mixing both due to the previous knowledge which was a result of years of learning both. In their explanation, some of the participants commented as follows:

A: There was no specific accent used in the classroom during the process of learning the language. Teachers were mixing the two varieties (American & British) and were not paying

attention to the importance of discriminating them. As a result, the accent I used to during teaching was a reflection of the way I learned the language.

B: We teach both accents in Yemen. Background training in British accent in addition to the interest and more frequent exposure to American accent.

C: I like to make my students know everything about them, so they will be able to understand different speakers from different parts of the world.

D: For it is essential for the students to know both accents and then it is up to them to decide which one to use.

E: In the classroom, when I speak and explain language items, I use the American accent and always explain the differences between American and British accents so that students are not confused when they hear both accents.

F: At school, we sometimes studied in British accent and sometimes in American accent. And I used to do it, automatically.

The comments of the respondents indicate that exposure to American movies, studying British English at schools, and fulfilling the students' needs were the main reasons. The answers were to some extent very pragmatic. Most of the participants claimed that they mixed because of students' needs to know the differences. There seems a contradiction between teachers' preference and usage of the accent. There are a lot of reasons beyond this contradiction. First, even though they preferred American accent more, Yemeni teachers are not interested in learning or teaching one specific variety rather than their concern about learning the language fluently. Second, at school and university, some British linguistic forms are acquired and become a part of their lexicon. Therefore, the British school-university curricula and American-based textbooks taught in institutes results in that combination of language background. Third, teachers take into account students' ability, so they try, for instance, to pronounce the sound /r/ such American and pronounce /t/ and /r/ intervocalically such British to make them understandable and to avoid confusion. The last reason is the inability to master one of the accents, and this is, to some extent, improbable.

Table3.3: Accent usage.

Q3: Which one of these accents do you mostly use in the classroom?		
	Frequency	percent
American Accent	15	37.5
British Accent	7	17.5

A mixture of American and British Accents	17	42.5
Others	1	2.5
Total	40	100.0

3.4. Accent Status

It is indicated, below in table 3.4, that 32.5% of the participants thought that no accent is superior to the other, 32.5% believed that American accent is more superior to British accent, and 25% claimed that British accent is more superior to American accent, 10% did not know which one is superior. For the 13 (32.5%) participants who stated that no accent is superior to the other.

Table3.4: Accent status

Q4: Do you consider any of these accents having superior status than the other?		
	Frequency	percent
American Accent	13	32.5
British Accent	10	25.0
No	13	32.5
I do not know	4	10.0
Total	40	100.0

Some of the respondents mentioned that each accent has its status and function and they are different accents to the same language. The participants' comments support that. To make it clear, let's consider the following comments:

A: I don't think one accent is superior or inferior to the other. Nowadays even non-native speakers can speak the language without the fear of being thought inferior.

B: No accent is more superior to the other on the linguistic level. However, it may be considered based on how the accent is populated and the environment in which it is required.

C: Same with different favours, up to people using them.

D: No accent is superior to any other accent. They are different accents to the same language. They are all the same as long as they are intelligible.

E: Both accents are equally important, and this is a linguistic phenomenon that one has to accept and learn to live with it. It does not matter which accent do you speak; the most important thing is that your pronunciation is clear and understandable.

It is noticeable that their familiarity with both accents makes them consider both accents have the same status. However, the same percentage (32.5%) of the participants considered American accent superior to British accent because they believed it is famous , dominant , and well-known all over the world. The USA dominance and power lead to the popularizing of the American accent. The spread of American movies overseas is one of the main reasons. Some of the participants commented as follow:

A: It is common and dominant worldwide. Total domination by American scholars in all fields of life helped them get their accents popularized.

B: Many reasons behind that, including political ones.

C: Because it's more prevailed than British English everywhere in the world, people mostly speak American accent.

D: As said before, my opinion and belief, it is the most common all over the world. A lot of people use it all over the world.

E: Because of movies.

Likewise, the participants (25%) who claimed that British accent is superior to the American accent, stated that British accent is the origin of English, so it is the standard one. Because it is the English origin, one of the respondents stated. They summarized their reasons as follows:

A: It is easier. It originally takes all the English letters active and used not like the American accent, which swallows some letters and mixes others.

B: From my point of view, British Accent is much better than America. It is a standard language. And because it's the English origin.

3.5. Actual Accent

As shown in table 3.5 that 52.5% of the participants claimed that British accent is the actual accent, 25% thought that American accent is the actual accent, and 22.5% demonstrated that they do not know.

Table 3.5: Actual accent

Q5: Which accent do you think is the actual accent?		
	Frequency	percent
American Accent	10	25.0
British Accent	21	52.5
I do not know	9	22.5
Total	40	100.0

The respondents used words and phrases such as ‘origin,’ ‘roots,’ ‘historical existence,’ and ‘source’, showing that the actuality of the accent associated to the belief they earlier had about the language. It is inferred from the comments that the historical background for the accent has a major influence on the attitude of the respondents. That is why 25 of the respondents (52.5%) believed that British accent is the actual one. Let’s consider the following comments to make it clear:

A: There is a common saying which goes like this: English language was born in Britain and got sick in America. Moreover, reading the history of languages undoubtedly uncovers the origin of the language. I studied this. It is famous. The root is British. British is before America in existence, according to history.

B: British is the origin of the English language. English is originally British, and America is just a new country that has taken the British English and made some changes in terms of grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation to distinguish itself. It is the main source of English.

C: It existed a long time before the American accent. Because it is the original accent. It is very clear and easy to use more than the American. Old is gold. The American accent had been subjected to many other languages and accents as America itself is a country of mixed nations. But the British accent is still far from that much influence of other languages except that of the American one.

D: Because British accent has a long history and dominated the way people speak English all over the world for centuries. The American accent developed fairly recently after the British colonization of America.

E: Because the Americans came from different parts of the world and originated their own accent, so their origins are not English native speakers.

F: The British media is more actual than others. It is the language accent.

It is inferred from the comments that the historical background has the major influence on the teachers' positive attitude towards British accent.

4. Discussion

The results of this study revealed that majority of the teachers tended to have more positive attitudes towards American accent. The attitudes are more influenced by linguistic factors, as illustrated by the participants themselves. Most of the respondents prefer to use American accent. However, British accent is still considered to be the actual accent and having a higher status than American English. These results are in consistent with the previous research of Dalton-puffer et al. (1997) and contradict the results found by McKenzie,2008; Sasayama,2013; and Alftberg,2009, who found that American accent has a higher status than British accent. The knowledge which the respondents have about the origins of English language uncovers a vital role in shaping the attitudes of Yemeni teachers towards British English. Furthermore, the political policy of America in the Middle East in general and in Yemen particularly may play a role in influencing the attitudes. Moreover, the respondents mix the British accent and American accents during teaching. Most of the respondents assign that to the needs of the students, while it is clear that the teachers perhaps have no total mastery of one of the accents and may not pay attention to discriminate both accents. Additionally, the curriculum taught in the schools are British-based, while the textbooks taught in the institutes are mostly American-based. So, mixing both is a natural result.

5. Conclusion

The respondents have a positive attitude towards the American accent even though they are exposed to both American and British movies and programs, and they, for six years in the school, studied English-based books. Their preference is affected more by the linguistic factor. However, British English is still considered the actual accent of English language. Therefore, the educational policy of teaching English and designing English curricula in Yemen should take into account the effect of the linguistic and cultural factors.

In conclusion, this paper has some limitations. First, it included small sample so the results cannot be generalized. Second it focuses on direct attitudes and that may reduce the deep understanding of the issue. Third, there is no examination for effect of variables on attitudes. Therefore, to avoid the mentioned issues, a further study on a large sample selected randomly is needed and the investigation of teachers' attitudes through indirect methods is necessary. Moreover, studying the relationship between teachers' attitude and social factors will reveal more beneficial information assisting in designing successful and effective pedagogical plans for teaching English in Yemen. The question which also should be posed here whether the obtained attitude will be reflected in the behaviour or not. More investigation methods, such as conducting interviews and observation in different contexts, and using the matched-guise technique (Lambert, Hodgson, Gardner, & Fillenbaum, 1960), will reveal the relationship between attitude and behaviour.

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