

A study of listening comprehension differences between American English and British English—taking accent differences for example

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Abstract: This dissertation aims to examine English language learners' different perceptions about American English (AE) and British English (BE) in terms of accent differences. Thirty Chinese-speaking master's program students are recruited to this study, divided into two groups: a TESOL program group and a non-TESOL program group. According to the results, the TESOL students outperform the non-TESOL students in the tasks. The participants complete the listening comprehension tasks in AE and BE, as well as interviews. The results of the listening comprehension tasks indicates that participants with higher accuracy scores were not significantly affected by differences in accent types, while participants with medium or lower scores were largely affected by those factors. Another surprising finding is that participants' major has a profound influence on their tasks' scores.

Keywords: listening, comprehension, accent differences

1. Introduction

Listening, recognized as one of the four most important parts of language learning, is considered to be the important input section, which plays a key role in promoting the successful learning of both the first language and the second language (Buck, 2001)^[2]. There are several factors that probably stood in the way of studying a second language. Those factors could be: personal intelligence, confidence, interests, belief, teaching facility, language environment, finance, accents, etc.(Goh, 2000)^[5]. Although many studies relate to factors in affecting listening, a few studies have been done to investigate how these two English varieties (AE & BE) trigger different listening comprehension among learners whose second language is English, from the angle of accents.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Listening comprehension

Listening is a complicated, synthetic and comprehensive process, which is concerned with the phonological knowledge, syntactic knowledge, semantic knowledge, pragmatic knowledge and kinesic knowledge and discourse structure, in second language learning (Buck, 2001)^[2]. This means that decoding a listening conversation requires cross-knowledge intelligence and cooperation across multi-sections of a brain (Flowerdew and Miller 2005)^[4].

2.2 Factors affecting listening comprehension

Research has been conducted for the purpose of identifying the difficulties associated with English listening and working out solutions for students to improve their listening competency. Those factors responsible for causing difficulties in comprehension are that the differences in second language learners' cognitive processes, the parsing (inability to form mental representation), the utilization (extended meaning), the speed of delivery, the lexical complexity, the syntactic complexity, the course complexity, explicitness and etc.(Goh,1999; Revesz and Brunfaut, 2013)^[6]. For example, English accents have a profound influence on international students' listening comprehension in the US. Universities in the US recruit students and teachers from around the world, so that they speak English with different accents. Thus, understanding accented speeches is critical in ensuring students' academic

success. In the investigation, students are negative about certain types of accented English (Indian accent e.g.) and find it difficult to understand. They have a strong preference towards standard English accents (American English & British English) (Abeywickrama, 2013) ^[1]. Hence, accented speeches probably do have a certain influence on the second language learners' listening comprehension.

2.3 The Gap

With the development of globalization and the media, the divergence between the two English varieties (American English and British English) has become evident. Several surveys have been conducted on the difference between American English and British English in terms of stress, intonation, vowels, collocation, grammar usage and vocabulary. However, Many people from both sides often are unaware of the differences, do not consider other correct forms of English precise and blurred the usage of both types of English. Probably, those differences in accent or lexis might not have a seriously impact on native speakers' understanding, but for other second language learners, these largely do affect their understanding. Presently, few investigations relevant to different listening comprehension between American English and British English from the perspective of accents have been conducted. This essay aims to investigate the Chinese master's program students' different listening comprehensibility between American English and British English in terms of accents.

3. Methodology

3.1 Method of Data Collection

The research aims to examine that Chinese master-program students' different listening comprehensibility between the American English and the British English from the angle of accent through listening comprehension assignments and interviews. The participants are requested to complete listening comprehension tasks including one British-accent task and one American-accent task and some of them would be invited to attend interviews. (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011) [3] The surveys are all conducted at the University of York. All the quantitative data collection would be analyzed using SPSS and the findings of the qualitative data would be drawn from the interviews (Howitt & Cramer, 2008) ^[7]. However, the shortcoming of the study cannot be ignored. Firstly, the samples of the research are not large enough, which are drawn solely from Chinese students at the University of York. Secondly, the majority of the participants are from Department of Education and the pre-sessional program. The research intends to explore the Chinese master students' different listening comprehensibility regarding the American accent and the British accent.

3.2 Participants

The target population of this research is Chinese master-program's students at the University of York. The subjects are categorized into two main groups: (1) geographic difference: coastal areas or inland areas; (2) master programs: TESOL program or non-TESOL program. Thirty subjects are recruited to complete the listening comprehension assignment, and each individual task contains both one American-accent test and one British-accent test. Although the sample is small, it could greatly represent Chinese master program students. All recruits has achieved an IELTS test with an average total score at 6. All participants has obtained their bachelor's degree in state-owned or nation-owned universities. At the University of York, 15 participants are majored in a TESOL program. The other 15 participants studied programs like: social media management, education, bioinformatics, maths, finance, banking finance and etc..

3.3 Comprehension Tasks

3.3.1 Listening Comprehension Task Design

The two different comprehension task topics (shopping and cooking) are audio recorded by a female American and a female British. The listening comprehension assignment materials are selected from the major media (such as BBC news, CNN news and NBC news). Then, those chosen materials would be combined together to create listening comprehension assignment transcripts that are customized to meet the requirement and purpose of the study. The participants are requested to complete two different-topic listening comprehension assignments (one in AE and one in BE). The order of topics and accents is randomized. For example, if topic 1 is shopping and topic 2 is cooking,

participant No.1 would be assigned with an American-accent topic 1 and a British-accent topic 2. This mixed-block design is implemented based on a desire to prevent task effect (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011).

3.3.2 Interview task

About 10 participants would be selected to be interviewed. The interview is conducted on participants based on their performance on the listening comprehension assignments. These ten participants' scores reveal three different levels of performances: excellent, merit and below average.

4. Results and Analysis

The quantitative result is presented separately from the qualitative data, because both the quantitative and qualitative could demonstrate a critical understanding of the aim of the study. To achieve the purpose of the research, the quantitative data analysis is divided into 3 parts: a firstly, performance comparison between MA TESOL program students and non-TESOL master programs students; secondly, an accuracy rate comparison between the British accent and the American accent; thirdly, an accuracy rate comparison for the two topics: shopping and cooking;

4.1 Quantitative Findings

Part 1: performance comparison between MA TESOL program students and non-TESOL master program students.

The respective means of the TESOL and non-TESOL students' scores are analyzed using a related-sample T-test, because the examining method is based on the alternative measure of the same group of people. The data shows that the average score of the TESOL is 16.23 (average correct percentage 60.18%) is higher than those of the non-TESOL is 14.88 (average correct percentage 55.12%). The P value is 0.011[t(14)=2.95, two-tailed], which indicates that the majors participants take have significant impact on their scores.

Part 2: British accent and American accent accuracy rate comparison

The means of the American accent accuracy rate (NYS & ACC) and British accent accuracy rate (LS & BLC) are analyzed using a related-sample T-test. According to the statistic, the average score of American-accent task is 15.94 (average correct percentage 59.04%) while the average score of British-accent task is 15.18 (average correct percentage 56.21%). The P value is 0.344 [t(14)=-0.98, two-tailed p=0.344], which indicates that the accent difference has little profound influence on the participants' performance in the listening comprehension tasks

Part 3: Different topics accuracy rate comparison

The assignments' results are remade into a topic-oriented group, which is designed to exclude another influencing factor: the task topic. According to the statistic, the average score of shopping task is 17.89 (average correct percentage 59.02%) while the average score of cooking task is 13.24 (average correct percentage 55.21%). The P value is 0.063 [t(14)=2.02, two-tailed p=0.063], which is a little bit higher than the break-even point, p=0.05. This demonstrates that there is no strong link between the score and the topic, which implies that the topic difference would not have a significant influence on the participants' performance in the listening comprehension test.

To sum up, compared with non-TESOL students, TESOL students have better performance in the listening comprehension tasks. On the other hand, topic probably do not exert much influence on participants' performance in the tasks, which is good to serve the purpose of the study. From the perspective of accents, participants do not seem to be greatly affected in completing listening tasks, neither in the British accent group (London shopping & British lemon cake) and American accent group (New York shopping & American cheese cake), nor in the pair 1 (American cheese cake & British lemon cake and the pair 2 (New York shopping & London shopping). However, participants comparatively outperform in American accent task in the group 1 (New York shopping & British lemon cake), while participants do not outperform in either task in the group 2 (London shopping & American cheese cake).

4.2 Qualitative data findings

The qualitative data are collected from interviews. There are 10 interviewees purposely selected from those 30 participants from the perspective of participants' performance in the listening comprehension assignment. 10 participants are divided into three groups: high score group (participant 1, participant 2, participant 3 and participant 4), medium score group (participant 6 and participant 10) and below average group (participant 5, participant 7, participant 8 and participant 9).

In the group one, all participants think the task is easy and the English accent does not pose a problem for their listening comprehension. In the group two, participant 6 (P6) thought the American accent is hard for her to follow up, while the participant 10 (P10) has no preference for particular English accent, though P6 (62.96%) outperforms P10 (59.25%) in score. In the group three, participant 5 (P5) does not think this listening comprehension task difficult (score 48.14%) and the English accent would not affect her listening comprehension, whereas, participant 7 (P7) (score 40.74), participant 8 (P8) (score 40.74) and participant 9 (P9) (score 51.85%) consider the comprehension assignment is difficult and they can not follow certain pronunciation.

5. Discussion

This research has attempted to find out whether the difference in accents between the American English and the British English might have impact on the participants' listening comprehension performance. The outcome of the overall study turns out to be that the topic does not have significant influence on the participants' performance in the listening comprehension tasks, which is helpful to meet the purpose of the research; while different English accents has certain influence but not significant on participants' scores of the listening assignment. Interestingly, the programs in which participants studied does profoundly affect the accuracy in the listening comprehension assignment. The reason, Tesol students outperform non-Tesol students in the listening tasks is that most Tesol students major in English or English relating programs. They spend more time in studying English, while their non-Tesol counterparts do not invest as much as they do (Zhang & Yang, 2015) [8]. In conclusion, whether accents would affect people's understanding in listening or not, it depends on their language proficiency. The key to solve the problem is to improve individual language capability and to be open to different accents.

6. Conclusion

Owing to the limitation of the research fund and the size of sample, to some extent, the result can largely present the Chinese master-program students' English proficiency in the University of York, which cannot precisely present Chinese master-program students' English proficiency in the UK. But the result can be a favorable reference. The major finding is that accents cannot pose a significant influence to high-language-proficiency level listeners but can to medium or below-average level listeners.

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