

# The Influence of American and British Accents on Perception and Comprehension Among Saudi Learners of English

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**Abstract**—Little attention has been paid to the potential influence of accents in the language learning literature. The study's aim was to examine Saudi female university students' attitudes towards British and American accents and whether students face difficulties when listening to speakers of those languages. The study was conducted with seventy-two female Saudi students. Two data collection instruments were used: a sixteen-statement questionnaire and a comprehension test spoken in either a British or an American accent. Participants were observed to: a) be familiar with both accents; b) have been more frequently exposed to the American accent; c) find the American accent easier to understand; d) prefer the British accent in learning settings; and e) perform more accurately in the comprehension test when it was spoken in the American accent. These results highlight the crucial role of learners' perception and comprehension of English accents and the need to incorporate accents as influential variables when learning English.

**Index Terms**—accents, American, British, comprehension, perception

## I. INTRODUCTION

English is used throughout the world, not just in English-speaking countries (Irfan et al., 2021; Yunhua & Budiman, 2024). The English language is called a lingua franca because its communication style is different in every place (Musdalifah, 2022). There are a number of English language varieties which are spoken in different accents and use different lexical items and grammatical properties, including the two major English accents: the British English accent (BritA) and the American English accent (AmA) (Algeo, 2006; Byrd et al., 2023; Vasquez Diaz & Iqbal, 2024). According to Sulaiman and Yuliani (2017), the BritA is used in the United Kingdom. The AmA is used in the United States of America and is simpler than BritA (Widarso, 2002). These two accents vary with regard to intonation, pronunciation, stress, consonant and vowel distribution (Çekiç, 2009). For instance, according to Musdalifah (2022), in AmA the letter 'r' is pronounced in all positions, such as *storm* and *earth*. However, in BritA, 'r' is not pronounced at the end of words. According to Kachru's (1990) classification system, these two accents are part of an 'inner circle' by contrast with the English varieties spoken in places like India and Singapore (which are in the so-called 'outer circle'), where English is taught as a second language (L2). Accents in general are different from dialects, because only pronunciation is affected. However, a dialect can differ from other dialects both lexically and grammatically (van Gelder, 2019; Vasquez Diaz & Iqbal, 2024).

Listening is among the most important English language skills for L2 learners, and enables them to develop effective communication in everyday situations (Musdalifah, 2022). But hearing English spoken in different accents can make it difficult for learners to acquire even basic skills, such as understanding the content of what is being communicated (Ilahiy & Kirana, 2023). Consequently, it is vital to explore students' attitudes towards different English accents (Almegren, 2018). However, very few studies have examined Saudi students' attitudes towards English accents and whether they influence comprehension, in spite of the number of studies which have investigated students' preference for particular English accents (Almudibry, 2022).

This study aimed to answer a set of connected questions about Saudi female students' attitudes towards the AmA and BritA, with a special focus on listening comprehension:

1. Are Saudi students familiar with the American and British accents?
2. How do Saudi students perceive the American and British accents?
3. Do Saudi students believe there is a connection between their ability to learn English and the use of American or British accents in spoken materials?
4. Do American and British accents influence Saudi students' comprehension?

The significance of the study is that its findings could inform educators and curriculum designers in Saudi Arabia of the potential impact of adopting either dialect when teaching students and guide the selection of teaching methods and approaches to improving students' listening skills.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

In educational settings, where listening skills are vital, a range of obstacles to language learning might undermine students' confidence in their own listening abilities, including having to spend extended periods of time listening to challenging accents. This may cause listening fatigue because vocabulary selections fluctuate and words are spoken differently depending on the speakers' accents, which in turn can be difficult to comprehend (Ilahiy & Kirana, 2023; Vančová, 2019). Studies that have addressed these issues are examined in this section.

Pilus (2013) studied the attitudes of thirty-four Malay learners at a secondary school in Malaysia towards the AmA, the BritA and the Malaysian English accent. The method used in this study was a questionnaire that evaluated the different English accents. The results showed that the participants preferred the BritA overall, with 79% preferring it for teaching and learning, although 17.7% preferred to hear both the BritA and AmA and only 3% preferred hearing the AmA alone. Their reasons for preferring the BritA were as follows: a) 23% thought it was easy to learn, b) 17% stated that it was easy to speak, c) 17% said that it was easy to understand, and d) 8% stated that BritA is a familiar accent. Only 2% of the participants preferred AmA on the basis that it was easy to understand. Those who chose both AmA and BritA claimed that learning to understand different English accents was crucial since it would help them communicate with native speakers. They also said that most words in the BritA and AmA were similar in pronunciation to the Malaysian English accent. The participants were not only aware of their own, home-grown Malaysian accents but also felt comfortable with them. However, Pilus thought it would be more practical to choose someone with a native accent to teach pronunciation. In spite of their appreciation of their native accent, the participants were comfortable with their Malaysian accent. The researcher believed that selecting a native accent seemed to be a more practical choice as a model for pronunciation learning.

Liao and Hu (2016) examined 151 Taiwanese female and male students' attitudes towards both the BritA and the AmA and whether they experienced difficulties understanding the BritA in particular, since in Taiwan the AmA is the main English accent used in education and other English accents are neglected. The participants were randomly chosen from two universities and data was collected using listening comprehension tests and a questionnaire with a five-point Likert scale (strongly disagree to strongly agree). The participants were asked to listen to short texts recorded in either the AmA or BritA. In order to avoid any negative effects from the listening comprehension tests, the questionnaire was given first. Twenty minutes were allotted for responding to the questionnaire and another twenty minutes for the listening comprehension tests. To ensure that participants could completely comprehend all the questions and comfortably provide reliable data, the questionnaire was written in their mother tongue (Mandarin). No significant differences in listening comprehension scores emerged from the study, but questionnaire responses showed significant differences in attitudes towards the AmA and BritA; the study demonstrated that participants preferred the AmA as an effect of long-term instruction in the AmA. The researchers stated that the participants' attitudes towards the BritA and AmA were not related to their ability to comprehend these two varieties when spoken and that, overall, exposure to a range of English accents was important for students to be able to converse effectively with speakers of various accents.

To try to find out how Saudi University students perceive English accents, what they think about the apparent domination of one type of English accent, and why they preferred a particular type of English accent, Almegren (2018) first of all interviewed thirty-three Saudi female students and thirty-five Saudi male students, all of whom were undergraduate students majoring in English. The participants were asked to complete a questionnaire after the interviews. To ensure an identical number of genders in both groups, some participants were subsequently screened out (resulting in 25 males and 25 females). The findings showed that the participants were aware of some English accents. They appeared to have a range of attitudes towards this diversity, but while they saw the AmA and BritA as 'standard' English accents, they failed to accept other varieties of English as standard. The study also found that while most of the participants considered teachers who were native English speakers to be better, they preferred to be taught by L2 English speaking Saudi teachers, as they believe them to have similar backgrounds, which helped the students understand them better. Overall, the study found that, in general, Saudi students are aware that English has many varieties.

With a sample of forty-three Dutch college students, van Gelder (2019), investigated attitudes to the impact of AmA and BritA on listening comprehension, their comprehensibility, and – in the case of L1 speakers of Dutch whose L2 is English – what they thought of their teaching ability. The study examined the AmA and BritA as these are the most frequently heard English accents in the Netherlands and are the accents to which learners are most exposed. The study employed a listening comprehension test with sixteen questions taken from British Council material. Half the test was spoken in an AmA and Half in a BritA. Although the participants had twenty minutes to finish part one and an hour to finish part two, they were free to listen to the audio recordings as often as they wanted. The results showed that listening comprehension scores and attitudes towards an accent did not significantly correlate with exposure, either in terms of hours or kind. However, the results also showed that the participants preferred the AmA.

Yuwita and Ambarwati (2023) took a sample of four Indonesian English literature students and explored their attitudes to their own English accents in comparison with native English accents. The participants were first-year and third-year English literature students who were recruited because the study was related to what they were learning and thus they might have different perceptions towards English accents. Substantial amounts of data were collected from semi-structured interviews spoken in the participants' L1 (Indonesian). Although one participant maintained a positive attitude towards their Indonesian English accent due to its connection to their social identity, most of the others felt that their own

English accents sounded unnatural and consequently had negative attitudes. They believed it was important to try to sound as though they were native English speakers, and that other people would find their Indonesian-English accents unfamiliar. The participants stated that they learned the AmA in school, watched American or British programmes and listened to American music, showing that they had had extensive exposure to the AmA and BritA. They had positive views towards native English accents, and in particular to the BritA, which they believed sounded very impressive and natural. They also confirmed that the AmA was commonly heard and easy to listen to. Regarding the practicalities of teaching English accents in the future, all participants agreed that the main accents taught in schools should be either the AmA or BritA.

FaqeAbdulla (2024) examined 101 Iraqi participants, twenty-eight males and seventy-three females, aged between eighteen and twenty-three, who were enrolled in the English Department. He collected data from them via an online survey in which participants were given a series of statements and asked to respond on a Likert scale. Most of his participants agreed that the BritA was more attractive than the AmA. Forty-one participants concurred but forty did not, stating that their accents resembled the BritA more than they resembled the AmA. A total of fifty-two students agreed that the BritA is easier to comprehend than the AmA, and thirty-two disagreed. This could be due to the fact that BritA is spoken in the education system. Forty opposed, while forty-three favoured, watching TV shows and films featuring the BritA rather than the AmA. Twenty-three were against while forty-nine were in favour of preferring speakers who have a BritA. Since they perceived the BritA as more prestigious than the AmA, many of the participants (fifty-five in total) believed that possessing the BritA would help them to achieve their personal or professional objectives, while some participants (thirty-one) did not. Forty-three agreed that it was easier to talk to someone with a BritA but twenty-nine disagreed. Most students selected the 'neutral' option, indicating that they felt at ease with speakers of both the AmA and BritA. In terms of whether they found the BritA easier to understand than the AmA, forty-six agreed that this was the case while twenty-eight disagreed. Most believed that the BritA and the AmA are equally valued. Most also said that they had had a substantial amount of exposure to the BritA.

The studies reviewed above suggest that several factors – including attitudes, exposure and level of understanding – have a role in students' perception of the AmA and BritA. These findings highlight the importance of examining the influence of accents on learning English and listening comprehension. The next sections set out the study's methodological approach to this phenomenon.

### III. METHODOLOGY

Seventy-two female, first-year university students with an average age of 19.1 years took part in the study. The participants were majoring in a range of subjects although to improve the homogeneity of the sample none of them were majoring in English. The reason only female participants were recruited was that in Saudi educational contexts, males and females are segregated. Two data collection tools were used: a sixteen-item questionnaire and a comprehension test. The questionnaire contained three constructs designed to test: a) their familiarity with the AmA and BritA; b) their perceptions of the AmA and BritA; and c) their perceptions of whether there is a connection between learning English and the use of the AmA and BritA. This attitudinal questionnaire used a five-point Likert scale (strongly disagree to strongly agree). This has been one of the most-used research instruments across the social and human sciences, historically. It was chosen because it is considered to be accurate, is easy for researchers to construct and straightforward for respondents to understand (Taherdoost, 2019; Tanujaya et al., 2022). In the version completed by the students, the statements were delivered in random order, but to facilitate comparison they have been re-ordered in the results section below.

The comprehension test consisted of an eleven-minute audio file accompanied by twenty multiple-choice and short-answer questions. Two versions of the audio were recorded – one spoken in the BritA and one in the AmA. Two professional female voice actors were hired via a reliable online platform to make these recordings, one from the UK who spoke in Standard British English, and one from the USA who used the general American standard. The audio files were identical in content and similar in length, clarity and speed. When reading the text, the voice actors were instructed to maintain a moderate and consistent pace of around 180 words per minute, as recommended by Hayati (2010).

All the participants completed the questionnaire first. Then, on another day, they were placed into two groups of thirty-six in two different classrooms. Eighty-one participants completed the questionnaire but nine did not take the comprehension tests so their data was excluded. Also, one of the groups had thirty-eight participants, but two participants' data was randomly excluded to facilitate data analyses. The study's goal was clarified to the participants, who were also reassured concerning their confidentiality and anonymity and told that they could leave the study at any time.

### IV. RESULTS

This section reports the questionnaire and comprehension test results. The four research questions are addressed in turn. Participants' responses to the statements in the first three questions are reported below in the form of means and percentages that show how many of them agreed or disagreed with each and to what extent, along with inferential statistics when statements are compared. The fourth research question was addressed using both descriptive and inferential statistics.

TABLE 1  
FAMILIARITY WITH THE AMA AND BRITA (MEAN AND SD)

Statements	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Mean	SD
1. I am familiar with the AmA.	0/72 0%	5/72 7%	4/72 6%	22/72 31%	41/72 57%	4.4	.9
2. I am familiar with the BritA.	0/72 0%	2/72 3%	9/72 13%	32/72 44%	29/72 40%	4.2	.8
3. I frequently hear the AmA in my everyday life.	1/72 1%	1/72 1%	2/72 3%	26/72 36%	42/72 58%	4.5	.7
4. I frequently hear the BritA in my everyday life.	9/72 13%	22/72 31%	5/72 7%	12/72 17%	24/72 33%	3.3	1.5
5. I am more frequently exposed to the AmA than the BritA.	6/72 8%	20/72 28%	2/72 3%	15/72 21%	29/72 40%	3.6	1.5

Participants indicated that they were familiar with both accents and frequently exposed to them. Their response to the fifth statement revealed that they had been more frequently exposed to AmA than to the BritA.

TABLE 2  
COMPREHENSION OF AND PREFERENCES FOR AMA OR BRITA (MEAN AND SD)

Statements	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Mean	SD
6. I like listening to the AmA.	8/72 11%	19/72 26%	7/72 10%	14/72 19%	24/72 33%	3.4	1.4
7. I like listening to the BritA.	7/72 10%	16/72 22%	12/72 17%	15/72 21%	22/72 31%	3.2	1.2
8. I find the AmA easier to understand than the BritA.	7/72 10%	20/72 28%	5/72 7%	15/72 21%	25/72 35%	3.5	1.3
9. I find the BritA easier to understand than the AmA.	17/72 24%	33/72 46%	5/72 7%	8/72 11%	9/72 13%	2.4	1.3

The participants liked both accents but perceived the AmA to be easier to understand than the BritA.

TABLE 3  
INFLUENCE OF THE AMA AND BRITA ON ENGLISH LEARNING (MEAN AND SD)

Statements	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Mean	SD
10. When learning English, I prefer listening to the AmA.	17/72 24%	22/72 31%	10/72 14%	17/72 24%	6/72 8%	2.6	1.3
11. When learning English, I prefer listening to the BritA.	9/72 13%	13/72 18%	11/72 15%	16/72 22%	23/72 32%	3.4	1.4
12. I want my teacher to have an AmA.	5/72 7%	12/72 17%	28/72 39%	18/72 25%	9/72 13%	3.2	1.1
13. I want my teacher to have a BritA.	6/72 8%	15/72 21%	4/72 6%	21/72 29%	26/72 36%	3.6	1.4
14. I perform better on listening tasks when they are delivered in the AmA.	8/72 11%	19/72 26%	5/72 7%	11/72 15%	29/72 40%	3.5	1.5
15. I perform better on listening tasks when they are delivered in the BritA.	16/72 22%	23/72 32%	9/72 13%	14/72 19%	10/72 14%	2.7	1.4
16. Listening to different accents improves my English.	4/72 6%	6/72 8%	7/72 10%	36/72 50%	19/72 26%	3.8	1.1

Participants indicated that they preferred to hear the BritA when learning English. However, they also indicated that they found this accent more challenging.

To find out whether the differences were significant, a number of statements were compared statistically using multiple Wilcoxon Signed-Ranks tests.

TABLE 4  
WILCOXON SIGNED-RANKS TEST RESULTS FOR QUESTIONNAIRE STATEMENT COMPARISONS

AmA statements	BritA statements	Wilcoxon Results
1. I am familiar with the AmA.	2. I am familiar with the BritA.	$z = -1.431$ $p = .152$
3. I frequently hear the AmA in my everyday life.	4. I frequently hear the BritA in my everyday life.	$z = -5.122$ $p < .001$
6. I like listening to the AmA.	7. I like listening to the BritA.	$z = -.195$ $p = .845$
8. I find the AmA easier to understand than the BritA.	9. I find the BritA easier to understand than the AmA.	$z = -4.166$ $p < .001$
10. When learning English, I prefer listening to the AmA.	11. When learning English, I prefer listening to the BritA.	$z = -3.470$ $p = .001$
12. I want my teacher to have an AmA.	13. I want my teacher to have a BritA.	$z = -1.932$ $p = .053$
14. I perform better on listening tasks when they are delivered in the AmA.	15. I perform better on listening tasks when they are delivered in the BritA.	$z = -2.764$ $p = .006$

The results showed that the participants heard the AmA more than the BritA, which is why they found the AmA easier to understand. They preferred to hear the BritA when learning English even though they found listening tasks easier if they were spoken in AmA.

The graph below displays the two groups' accuracy levels in the comprehension task.

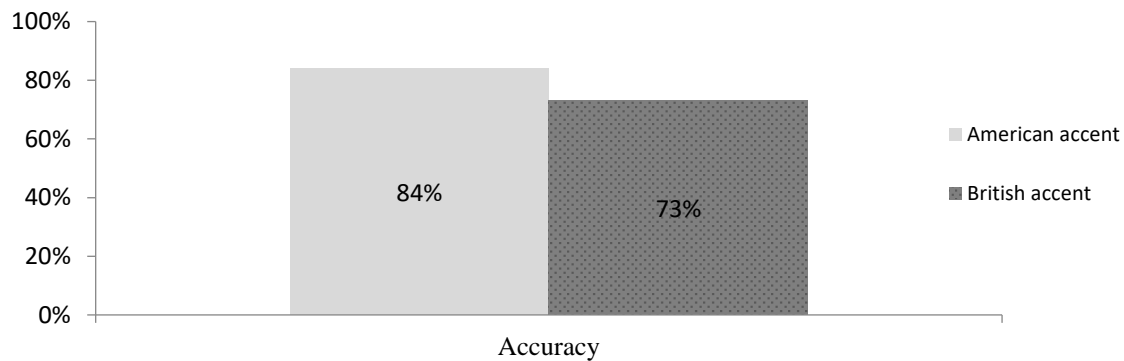


Figure 1. Mean Accuracy Percentages for the Comprehension Test

The participants' accuracy levels were relatively high, especially when the test was spoken in AmA. The Wilcoxon Signed-Ranks test results for the listening comprehension task showed that the AmA group differed significantly from the BritA group ( $z = -3.996$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

## V. DISCUSSION

This section interprets and discusses the study's findings in the light of the literature review. The implications of the study for the education system in Saudi Arabia are highlighted at the end of the section, along with an outline of its limitations and suggestions for future research. Each part addresses one research question.

### 1. Are Saudi students familiar with the American and British accents?

The vast majority of the participants agreed that they were familiar with both accents and were frequently exposed to them (statements 1, 2, 3 and 4). However, they felt that they were more frequently exposed to the AmA than the BritA, and this was confirmed statistically (statement 5). These findings are in line with van Gelder's (2019) findings, but do not support those of FaqeAbdulla (2024). This could be because FaqeAbdulla's (2024) study was conducted in Iraq where his participants were exposed less frequently to an AmA than was the case in Saudi Arabia, where this study was done. In Saudi Arabia, the dominance of American media in the form of movies and tv shows is clear (Alghamdi, 2018), while a number of private and international schools prefer American curricula. These results suggest that the AmA is prevalent in Saudi Arabia. This prevalence means that the accent is accessible for people in both academic and social contexts.

### 2. How do Saudi students perceive the American and British accents?

The participants liked to listen to both accents without preferring one over the other (statements 6 and 7), which did not align with the findings of Pilus (2013), Yuwita and Ambarwati (2023) and FaqeAbdulla (2024). However, the participants found the AmA easier to understand (statements 8 and 9). This is in line with the findings of Yuwita and Ambarwati (2023) but contradicts those of FaqeAbdulla (2024) and Pilus (2013), whose participants thought that the BritA was easier to understand. The participants' preference for the AmA can be linked to its phonological simplicity, which makes it more accessible to non-native speakers (Liu & Jin, 2013). Moreover, this could also indicate that early

academic and social exposure to AmA may have made the participants more familiar with the accent which made it easier to understand.

3. Do Saudi students believe there is a connection between their ability to learn English and the use of American or British accents in spoken materials?

In line with some other studies – specifically Yuwita and Ambarwati (2023) and FaqeAbdulla (2024) – statements 10 and 11 found that participants preferred the BritA when learning English. This contrasts with the findings of Liao and Hu (2016) and van Gelder (2019) who found that their participants preferred to hear the AmA when learning English. The participants in the present study preferred their teachers to have a BritA (statements 12 and 13) even though they found listening tasks spoken in the BritA more challenging than those spoken in the AmA (statements 14 and 15). In relation to statement 16, most participants thought that being exposed to different accents is beneficial for learning English, which supports the findings of Liao and Hu (2016) and Pilus (2013). This indicates that the participants appreciated the importance of accent diversity for improving their English proficiency.

4. Do American and British accents influence Saudi students' comprehension?

Statistical analyses showed that the participants who listened to the AmA audio were more accurate in the comprehension test than those who listened to the BritA audio. This contradicts the findings of some other studies – such as those by Liao and Hu (2016) and van Gelder (2019) – which found no significant differences. This is because the participants in the present study were divided into two groups, and asked to complete the audio task spoken in either BritA or AmA. Other researchers, such as Liao and Hu (2016), chose to provide their students with different tasks spoken in different accents. It is challenging to design two different tasks in two different accents that have the same level of difficulty and the disparity between the findings of this and earlier studies underlines the importance of controlling test variables to ensure that results can be attributed to accents only. These findings also suggest that comprehension is aided by familiarity with an accent (Davidson, 2006) which means that with increased exposure to the BritA, its difficulty may decrease over time.

It can be noted from the above that the participants in the present study have been more frequently exposed to the AmA and that they therefore found it easier to understand. However, for learning English, they preferred to hear the BritA, which they found more challenging. This was confirmed by the results of the comprehension test which revealed that the participants performed more accurately when the audio was spoken in the AmA. The reasons for this may be: a) the prevalence of the AmA in the media and educational curricula in Saudi Arabia (Alghamdi, 2018); and b) the less challenging phonological nature of the AmA (Liu & Jin, 2013). The participants said they found the BritA more challenging which can explain why they preferred it to be used in learning materials. These findings indicate that there is a need to balance exposure to different accents in learning settings because this has beneficial effects on L2 learners' proficiency levels. Curriculum designers in Saudi Arabia may consider incorporating a variety of accents in spoken teaching materials, which could improve students' ability to comprehend different English accents. Moreover, similarities and differences between English accents may be included in English textbooks and teachers should be informed of the importance of pointing out to students' differences and similarities between various English accents.

The study has a number of limitations related to the relatively small size of the sample. However, recruiting larger groups was challenging because the study included comprehension tests. The study focused on only two accents. Future research should cover other English accents and include L2 learners of English from diverse L1 linguistic backgrounds to gain a broader understanding of the relationship between English accents and L2 learners' comprehension.

## VI. CONCLUSION

The study addressed Saudi students' perception of the AmA and BritA and whether the use of these accents in spoken teaching materials affected the learning of English and listening comprehension. The findings showed that the participants were familiar with both accents but had had greater exposure to the AmA. The participants perceived the BritA to be more challenging which made them prefer that this accent be adopted in educational settings. This was confirmed by the comprehension test which found that participants performed more accurately when the test was spoken in the AmA. These findings can be explained by the prevalence of the AmA in the media and educational curricula in Saudi Arabia and as a result of the phonological simplicity of the AmA. These findings indicate the need to consider the role of accents in teaching English to L2 learners in Saudi Arabia.

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