

# The Effect of Non-native Accent on Iranian EFL Learners' Listening Comprehension, Focusing on Persian Accent of English

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**Abstract**—The fundamental purpose of the present paper is to investigate the effect of non-native accent on Iranian EFL learners' listening comprehension. Participants of the study were 44 Iranian EFL learners who were homogenized by OPT (Oxford Placement Test), and then assigned to two experimental groups consisting 22 students. One of the groups listened to a lecture with American accent, and the other one listened to the same lecture which was read by the researcher, a fluent Persian speaker of English. After the students' answering to ten comprehension questions based on the lecture, the scores were analyzed and a sample independent was run. The result showed that the performance of the students in the group which listened to non-native accent (Persian) was significantly better. The result suggested that non-native accent (the accent of the mother tongue of the learners) be beneficial to learners and facilitate their comprehension.

**Index Terms**—listening comprehension, accent, non-native accent, placement test

## I. INTRODUCTION

Listening comprehension has been given a great amount of attention in second language acquisition due to the crucial role it plays in communication. Listening is not only the first of the language arts skills developed, it is also the skill most frequently used in both the classroom and daily life. According to Wolvin and Coakley (1979), the amount of time that students are expected to listen in the classroom ranges from 42 to 57.5 percent of their communication time. Since listening comprehension has a vital role in everyday life, it is essential to develop effective listening comprehension ability.

When students start learning a language in the class, they listen to words several times prior to utter them. Listening can help students improve their vocabulary knowledge and grammar knowledge as well, so it boosts to improve other language skills. Cayer, Green, and Baker (1971) found that students' ability to comprehend written text through reading and expressing themselves through speaking depend largely on their ability of understanding of spoken language through speaking. Dunkel (1986) also claimed that developing proficiency in listening can develop proficiency in speaking.

Despite the importance of listening comprehension in many language classes the emphasis is on reading and writing in the target language. This is especially the case in EFL situation in which the learners only have the opportunity to listen to spoken English inside the classroom. EFL learners are learning English in their countries where English is not spoken natively. Student who are from environment where English is not the native language have no opportunity to hear English spoken natively; therefore these students are not accustomed to hearing to language as it is produced by native speakers for native speakers. Consequently, students from the countries in which English is taught as a foreign language frequently have great difficulty understanding English spoken to them when they come into contact with native speakers of the language.

On the contrary in an ESL situation students in the classroom are those whose native languages are any language other than English. ESL students are studying English in an English-speaking country. In this environment, students are surrounded by the target language both in the community and in the school; listening comprehension is therefore important for everyday survival (Carrier, 1999; Richard-Amato, 1996). Since students reside in the country where the target language is used, they will have more opportunities to experience English language both inside and outside the

classroom. In addition, there are plenty of authentic materials that ESL students will encounter each day. Authentic materials refer to oral and written language materials used in daily situations by native speakers of the language (Rogers & Medley, 1988).

According to the above mentioned shortcomings of EFL situation regarding the opportunity of listening to spoken English outside of the class, teachers in the classrooms try to provide the student with authentic materials to compensate for lack of exposure to natural spoken English. Some examples of authentic materials are newspapers, magazines, and television advertisements.

One of the features of authentic spoken English is the accent with which it is spoken. If English be considered as a person it's a person with too many faces. English is spoken in different areas of the world with different accents such as American, British and Australian accent. In addition to other elements such as speed of the speaker accent plays a crucial role in comprehending spoken language.

There are many researches investigating the effect of different accents on listening comprehension. Various accents have different effect on the listeners; Lippi-Green (1997) found that Dutch learner find British accent as the „norm“ while defines American English as „dynamic“ and „attractive“. However, the effect on non-native accent on listeners' comprehension has not been widely investigated. In particular in Iran which is experiencing a growth in tendency toward learning English. This study tries to investigate the effect of non-native accent, in this case Persian, on learners' comprehension.

## II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

One of the most important differences between different accents is the intonation. Alego (2006, p. 2) states that “the most important difference between British and American is the tune of the language, that is, the intonation that accompanies sentences.” Also there are other pronunciation differences such as consonant and vowel distribution. Lopez-Soto and Berrara (2007) view accents as results of sociolinguistic preference which may or may not be transferred to education. However, it can be argued that preference and cultural closeness of learners are not the only criteria, but the accents' comprehensibility is also a criterion in deciding how accents affect foreign language teaching.

In an experimental study conducted by Prodromou (1992) 300 young adult Greek learners of EFL in different proficiency levels were studied and found that 75% of the students preferred to learn British English while 18 % preferred American English. The results suggested that this preference could be attributed to the overall popularity of British English in the world, and to the bad historical image of America in Greece. The results of his study also indicated that society's perceptions of historical or cultural closeness can also play an important role in accent preference.

In another study regarding the effect of accent on listening comprehension Lopez-Soto and Berrara-Pardo (2007) studied accent perceptions of Spanish ELF learners in three different accents of English, namely; General American, Received Pronunciation of British and found that 60% of the students found British English to be “more correct” than American English. Kovacs and Racsmany (2008) studied the effect of L1 phonetics and phonology on word perception and repetition. They designed an experiment in which subjects were asked to repeat non-word sounds and divided non-words into four categories:

- 1) High probability L1 sounding non-words,
- 2) Low probability L1 sounding non-words
- 3) Non-words containing illegal L1 phoneme sequence
- 4) Non-words containing non L1 sound segments.

The results indicated that phonological/ phonotactic knowledge played an important role in reconstructive processes, while phonetic knowledge affected the perceptual analysis. Furthermore, they pointed out a correlation between Short Term Phonological Memory (STPM) and L2 achievement and claimed that memory performance is generally higher for L1 sounding input.

Similarly, Brown (1968) tested how well Twi and Ewe native speakers comprehended English when spoken by a) native speakers of English (R.P. British), b) Twi native speakers c) Ewe native speakers. His findings were that the Twi native speakers understood English the best when the speaker was also Twi speaker. Similarly the Ewe native speakers understood best when the speaker was an Ewe native speaker. Wilcox (1987), found that Singaporeans, listening to English spoken with four different accents, Singaporean, British, Australian and American, found the Singaporean the easiest to understand. Again, Ekong (1982) found that Nigerians understood English better when the speaker was a native speaker, Yoruba or Igbo.

Smith and Bisazza (1982) conducted a complex international study, testing the comprehensibility of three varieties of English (American, Indian and Japanese) in seven countries, three ESL (Hong Kong, India, the Philippines), three EFL (Japan, Taiwan, Thailand), and one native speaker (Hawaii). Their results were not as clear as in the above studies. In the two countries where both a native speaker and a local speaker were used (India and Japan) the result were dissimilar: in Japan the Japanese was best comprehended of the three speakers (with the American second, and the Indian the third); but in India the American was best comprehended ( with the Indian second and the Japanese third).

Another experiment was conducted in Hong Kong which was in line with the case of India in the Smith and Bisazza (1982) study, and found that native speakers, American and British, were more clearly comprehended than local

Chinese speakers of English. Barlow, L. (2010), also provided evidence that there is no significant effect of accent on academic listening test scores for EFL students enrolled in a university foundations program at UAE University.

### III. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

One of the major problems most Iranian learners complain about is the accent that seems to have exerted an influential effect on their listening comprehension. Accent as one of the most effective variables and elements has been subject of research lately. As it is inferred from the literature, there is no decisive result indicating whether native accent or non-native accent is superior in case of comprehensibility. The present study will delve into investigating the effect of non-native accent on listening comprehension of Iranian EFL learners. Such a study requires statistical analysis of the difference between learners' performance on a listening test with native accent (American), and a listening test with non-native accent (Persian).

### IV. RESEARCH QUESTION AND HYPOTHESIS

Q: Do Iranian EFL learners perform significantly better on listening comprehension test with non-native (Persian) accent?

H1: Iranian EFL learners perform significantly better on listening comprehension test with non-native (Persian) accent.

### V. METHOD

#### A. Participants

Forty two students from two different intermediate level classes in one of the universities in Isfahan (Iran) were selected. They were assigned to American and Persian groups, each group having 22 students in the same class. Due to the researchers limitation they were assigned to two intact groups. They were intermediate students 16 of whom were females and 6 of whom were males in the American group and 15 of whom were females and 7 of whom were males in the Persian group. The students were homogenized by administering an OPT (Oxford Placement Test).

#### B. The Instrument

##### 1. The OPT

Prior to conducting the target study an OPT (Allan, 1985) was administered to neutralize and control the effect of different level of proficiency. It also aimed at homogenizing the experimental groups. Although OPT is basically a grammar test, it was selected as a homogenizing criterion for the present study.

##### 2. The listening comprehension test

For developing the listening comprehension test with American accent a piece of online lecture was selected. 10 comprehension questions based on the selected news were made by the researcher. For developing the listening comprehension test with Persian accent the same text of the lecture was read and recorded by the researcher who is a native Persian speaker.

##### 3. Pilot study

For validating the test in terms of time and direction both American and Persian accent listening comprehension tests were administered to a group of eight students similar to the target groups.

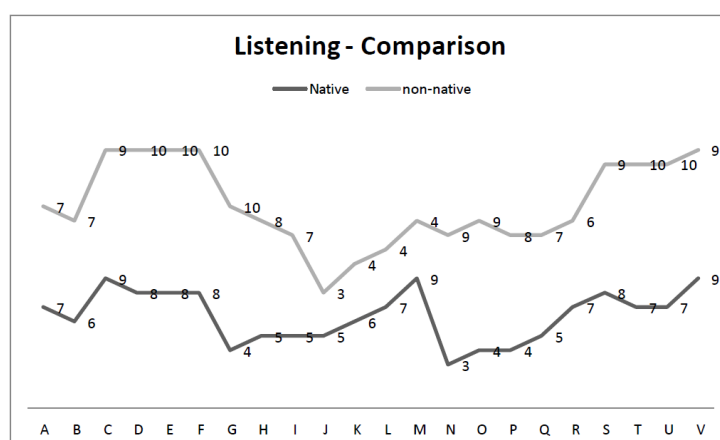
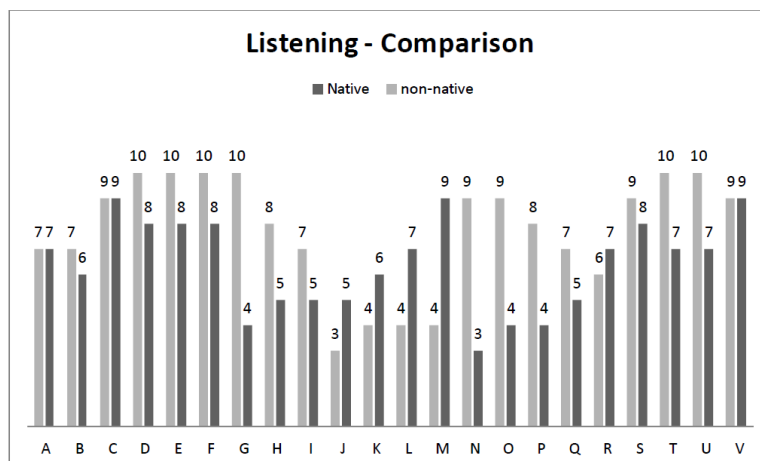
#### C. Procedure

The main study was conducted in May 2011. Data collection was carried out in one session for both groups. Before taking the test, the students were given a brief as to how to complete the test. They were also reassured of confidentiality of their test results. They were asked to submit the test in no more than 10 minutes (the time reached after piloting phase)

#### D. Data Analysis

For data analysis, the SPSS software, version 16, was used. An independent sample t-test was run on the performance of two groups of the present study. This was to show if there was any significant difference in the performance of groups on the listening comprehension with American accent and listening comprehension with Persian accent.

### VI. RESULT



Paired Samples Test

		Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
					Lower	Upper			
Pair 1	Native - Non_native	-1.31818	2.81808	.60082	-2.56765	-.06872	-2.194	21	.040

Based on the values obtained, t-value with 21 d.f is significant enough at the level of 0.05 to confirm the hypothesis. It shows that students performed significantly better on listening comprehension with Persian accent and supports the aforementioned hypothesis

## VII. DISCUSSION

The result discussed above show that the findings of the present research are in line with those of Brown (1968). There is a nevertheless a difference between this study and that of Brown. He considered the British English as the native accent whereas this study considered American English as the native accent. However, the fact that his result is in line with the finding of this study may suggest that accent familiarity (Persian accent) may function to the benefit of the listener.

Also, the findings of the present study supported those of Wilcox (1978). He found that Singaporean while listening to English found Singaporean the easiest to understand among Singaporean, British, Australian and American. In Australia, Britain and the United States English is spoken natively, so the results of Wilcox research proved that non-native accent has superiority to native accent in case of comprehensibility on the part of EFL learners.

Moreover, the findings of this research are supporting those of Ekong (1982). He found that English was better understood when by Nigerian, when the speaker was a native speaker of Yoruba or Igbo (native languages of Nigeria). Besides, the findings of this research are in line with those of Smith and Bisazza (1982) that found Japanese best understand their own accent (non-native).

As it was mentioned in the literature contradictory results were also abundant. Smith and Bisazza (1982) found that native American and British are far more comprehended than local Chinese speakers of English. This report has opposing results to the findings of this research. It suggests that more research in this area is required to find more conclusive results.

### VIII. IMPLICATIONS

From the pedagogical point of view, the results of this study may be helpful to (a) language teachers, (b) material developers. As for the language teachers, the results of the study suggest that not having a native or native like accent is not a barrier to the comprehension. It also helps teachers in evaluating their students' listening comprehension more easily regarding the fact that native accent is not a necessary element of a listening test. So teachers can provide students with good listening tests without having access to native speakers.

Secondly, the results of this study may be helpful to material developers. The findings reported above indicated that students understand English spoken by non-native speakers better than English spoken by native speakers. The material developers can therefore prepare teaching materials which contain listening exercises with non native accents to boost students' comprehension.

### IX. CONCLUSION

This research aimed at investigating the effect of non-native accent of English on Iranian EFL learners' listening comprehension. The findings of the present research suggested that the participants performed significantly better on the listening comprehension with non-native accent (Persian accent) as opposed to that with native accent (American). However, the findings of this research are in contrast with some researches in the literature. There is no conclusive result therefore, future investigations are hope to tackle this more deeply.

### APPENDIX

#### **The lecture's text**

Immigrants from around the world live in Alaska. The population there is diverse. There are many people from the Philippines living in Alaska. More Filipinos live in Alaska than any other Asian group.

Filipinos were crew members on fur trading ships to Alaska in the 1700s. And they were crew members on whaling ships in the 1800s. In the early 1900s some Filipinos worked in Alaskan gold mines. Most of them worked in the fish canneries.

Carlos Bulosan was one of the Filipino workers in the fish canneries in the 1930s. Later he became a famous writer. He wrote his autobiography about being an immigrant in the United States. This is his story...

The Philippines was a territory of the United States when Carlos Bulosan was born. His family lived on a farm. He worked on the family farm and went to schools with American classroom style. Schools in the Philippines taught young Carlos about American beliefs and customs. He dreamed of going to America. He studied English. His two older brothers went to America to California. And he wanted to follow them. At age 17, he traveled by ship to the United States. His ship landed in Seattle, in the northwestern state of Washington.

It was 1930, and the economy was bad everywhere. But some people believed the economy in Alaska was better. Carlos Bulosan left Seattle and went to Alaska. He worked there in the fish canneries. He was one of many thousands of Filipino immigrants working in the fish industry in Alaska. His English was not very good. But he worked hard in the cannery. And he was a member of a close Filipino community in Alaska.

Many cannery workers traveled between Alaska and Seattle, on the west coast of the United States. They worked in both locations. Carlos Bulosan left Alaska with other cannery workers and returned to Seattle. From there, he traveled up and down the west coast of the U.S. searching for jobs. He worked on farms mostly. He used his knowledge from the family farm in the Philippines. He picked fruit and vegetables from the state of Washington south through California. He never settled in one place. During this time he discovered other immigrants with similar histories.

Bulosan also discovered that he loved to read and write in English. He wrote poetry and articles for newspapers. In the late 1930s, he got sick and had to spend months in a hospital. In the hospital he read constantly. People say he read a book a day. He also wrote every day. He wrote letters, poems, essays, and many of his pieces were published in magazines and newspapers.

In the 1940s, he wrote two books of poems and a book about his memories of home. It was called *Laughter of My Father*, and it sold many, many copies. In 1946, at age 33, he wrote his most famous book. It was about his life as a Filipino immigrant. This book, Bulosan's autobiography, is called *America Is in the Heart: A Personal History*. He wrote all of these books in English. And he had only arrived in America 16 years before!

In his writing, Bulosan claimed his place in America. He wanted to help other immigrant workers understand their lives in America. And he wanted to help all Americans respect diverse populations. He also wrote about the difficulties of people with little work and little money. He was a strong voice for Filipino Americans and all immigrants in America.

Today there is a Carlos Bulosan Exhibit in Seattle, Washington, USA. There, you can learn more about Bulosan's life and his very important writing. You can also look for his book in your library: *America Is in the Heart*.

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