

Saudi EFL Learners' Attitudes with Regard to Using Online and Virtual Solutions for Learning English Accents during the Covid-19 Pandemic

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Received: August 6, 2022

Accepted: September 6, 2022

Online Published: September 6, 2022

doi:10.5430/wjel.v12n6p370

URL: <https://doi.org/10.5430/wjel.v12n6p370>

Abstract

This study investigated Saudi EFL learners' attitudes with regard to using virtual and online solutions for learning English accents. In addition, it investigated the participants' ability to identify British and American accents after attending virtual lectures about English accents. The participants were 42 female and 39 male learners studying at an English Department and from different academic year levels. The quantitative research method was used by using pre- and post-questionnaires, and post-tests. All the data collection tools were presented in electronic form. The findings of the pre-questionnaire showed both male and female learners prefer the American accent. With regard to the post-questionnaire, both males and females had positive attitudes with regard to using online solutions for learning English accents. The findings related to the post-test showed that both male and female EFL learners were able to distinguish between English accents (both British and American). However, gender was not found to be a statistically significant variable when it came to the participants' attitudes towards using online solutions for learning English accents. The results of this study led to some recommendations and suggestions aimed at EFL researchers.

Keywords: online and virtual learning, English accents, Covid-19 Pandemic

1. Introduction

Covid-19 pandemic led to a large disruption with regard to education systems and affected up to 94% of learners around the worldwide (Nation, 2020). Therefore, online and virtual learning solutions were of great interest to several researchers and educators, especially in countries where online/virtual learning, as a quick solution, replaced face-to-face methods of learning (Khanal, 2021). Dhull and Sakshi (2017) mentioned that virtual learning is the best solution in education, especially when there are hindrances to traditional learning situations. In Saudi Arabia, with no exception, the Ministry of Education, therefore, required all educational institutions to shift from face-to-face learning to various online/virtual learning solutions during the full lockdown.

Consequently, many researchers assert that EFL learners' attitudes towards the new applications being used are very important (Van Wart et al., 2020). Dawson (2019) mentioned that exploring EFL learners' perspectives would offer valuable insight with regard to their experiences and expectations. Although several studies have investigated EFL students' attitudes towards online/virtual learning solutions, none, based on the researcher's interrogation of web search engines such as Google Scholar, has focused on the issue of learning English accents online.

Therefore, the current study focuses on exploring the issue of female and male EFL learners' attitudes towards learning English accents through online and virtual solutions, along with the learners' ability to distinguish between American and British Accents.

1.1 EFL Learners' Attitudes towards Virtual/Online Learning

Several studies have investigated learners' attitudes with regard to using online and virtual solutions for language learning. Alahmadi and Alraddadi (2020) found that their Saudi EFL female learners had positive perceptions with regard to using virtual classrooms for language learning based on their responses to a questionnaire. Al-Nofaie (2020) found similar results in a study exploring the perceptions of twenty-five English-major university students with regard to using online platforms during the pandemic.

In contrast to the above studies, Khalawi and Halabi (2020) investigated the attitudes of Saudi EFL learners at a Saudi English Language Institute, with regard to using virtual classrooms by using a questionnaire. They found that

the participants had positive attitudes with regard to using online approaches for English learning. However, although they had positive attitudes towards online classrooms, they preferred face-to-face classrooms to virtual learning classrooms. Similar results were found in Alghamdi's (2021) study. Salman et al.'s (2022:303) analysis "reveals challenges related to pedagogy in the sense that in both face to face teaching and e- learning, the method used is teacher- centered. The method lacks using visual aids which makes lessons more enjoyable and interesting".

1.2 EFL Learners' Preferences with regard to English Accents

To date, most studies have found that learners prefer the native English accent, as native patterns are clearer and more understandable than non-native patterns of speech (Weisi et al., 2019). Consequently, American and British accents, among other English accents, are preferred by EFL learners when learning English. Therefore, several researchers have investigated EFL learners' attitudes towards American English and British English including Alfberg (2009), Alenezy (2017) and Phan (2020). Some studies were conducted to investigate EFL learners' preferences for American, British and other native English accents such that of Bayard and Green (2002). On the other hand, some researchers examined EFL learners' attitudes towards native and non-native English varieties such as Humphries (1995), Alseweed and Daif-Allah (2012), and Almudibry (2018).

Although there are more similarities than differences between American English and British English, attention to differences is of interest, particularly in terms of which accent is preferred by EFL teachers and learners (Larsson, 2012). There are two main factors that have been reported to influence the preference for one variety of English over another in an EFL context:

- 1- General norms and traditions of teaching a certain variety.
- 2- Media influence and exposure.

However, several studies have been conducted investigating EFL learners' preferences with regard to English accents. Modiano (1993) and Modiano and Söderlund (2002) found different results in terms of their learners' preferences for British and American accents. Modiano (1993) investigated upper secondary school Swedish students and found that they prefer the British accent to the American accent, while Modiano and Söderlund (2002) found that university students prefer the reverse. This difference could be attributed to the education stage, where teachers may use only one variety. Carin (2013) investigated the attitudes of 76 Swedish students in an upper secondary school. The researcher used a survey to gather the required data. The results showed that the Swedish learners preferred American English to British English, although their attitudes were equally positive with regard to both two accents.

Alenezy (2017) investigated 63 female University learners' preferences in terms of American and British accents. The context of this study is similar to our study context. She used the Verbal Guise Method to examine her learners' preferences. Her findings were that the participants were unable to identify British and American accents from the recordings. In addition, the findings showed that the participants preferred the British accent to the American accent. Phan (2020) explored 53 learners' preferences with regard to British and American accents in Vietnam. The findings showed that the participants preferred the American accent to the British accent.

1.3 Statement of the Problem

After looking at studies investigating learners' attitudes towards English varieties and using technology for learning accents, the researcher noted that none of the studies reported in the literature had investigated issues related to learning English accents online, while paying attention to gender differences, particularly in the Middle East and Arab world. This indicates that there is a need for further studies about the attitudes of EFL learners towards using virtual learning solutions for learning English varieties, especially after the Covid-19 pandemic, when all schools and universities around the world shifted from face-to-face to virtual classrooms. This shift to online learning and teaching is considered a new experience for some students and teachers around the world.

1.4 Importance of the Study

This study is considered important in the EFL field. To the best of the researcher's knowledge, no research has yet been conducted on EFL learners' attitudes towards online or virtual learning solutions with regard to English accents in Saudi Arabian and other Arab universities. Therefore, this paper is believed to be the first dealing with EFL learners learning English accents online and will help to fill a gap in the literature.

1.5 Research questions

The current study tries to answer the following research questions:

- 1- Which accent - American or British - do Saudi EFL learners prefer?

- 2- Are Saudi EFL learners able to distinguish between American and British accents?
- 3- What are the attitudes of Saudi EFL learners with regard to learning English accents online?
- 4- Is there a statistically significant difference (at the .05 level) between male and female attitudes towards learning English accents online?

2. Methods

2.1 Research Design

The current study made use of quantitative methods research, by using closed-ended pre- and post-questionnaires and a post-test tool. These tools were best suitable for the current study as they help achieve the study aims. In addition, these tools, questionnaire and posttest, have been adopted by several studies such as those of Carin (2013), Alenezy (2017), Khalawi and Halabi (2020), and Alahmadi and Alraddadi (2020).

2.2 Participants

The participants of this study were 81 EFL learners from different academic years studying in the English Departments at Majmaah University in Saudi Arabia. The study was applied in the 2021 academic year. The participants were divided into two groups (39 females and 42 males). The researcher invited English Department students from the second and third years to voluntarily participate in virtual lectures about English varieties through learning online. The average age of the learners was twenty years.

2.3 Data Collection Tools

To gather the required data, this study made use of questionnaire and post-test tools. The questionnaire is divided into two parts. The first part was administered before the commencement of the study. The aim of this part was to gather information about students’ preferences when it came to using British or American accents by using a three-point Likert Scale (1- British, 2-American, 3-Both). This will help answer the first research question. In addition, in the first part, the learners’ were asked to identify their gender (Male or Female) in order to set the data properly in the SPSS. Table 1 shows the items of the first part of the questionnaire:

Table 1. Students’ Questionnaire Part 1

Item	British	American	Both
I prefer speaking with accent in terms of pronunciation.			
I prefer listening to accent in broadcasts and on the radio.			
I prefer watching accents in TV series and on videos.			
I prefer writing with spelling.			
I prefer using vocabulary.			

The second part of the questionnaire consisted of 6 items about the respondent’s attitudes towards using online and virtual learning solutions for learning English accents. The learners were asked to access the e-questionnaire after attending the English Accents virtual lectures. A three-point Likert Scale was used to assess their attitudes (1- Disagree, 2- Not Sure, 3- Agree). Table 2 shows the items:

Table 2. Students’ questionnaire Part 2

Items	Disagree	Not Sure	Agree
1 I enjoyed learning English accents from online resources.			
2 I liked the English accents lectures through virtual classrooms.			
3 I believe that studying English accents via internet resources during the Covid-19 pandemic was useful.			
4 I was able to distinguish between American and British accents more clearly after the online classes.			
5 The quality of sound on the online resources was very good when it came to identifying English accents.			
6 In general, I support using online solutions for learning English accents.			

Both parts were in an electronic version so that learners could easily access them, and the data can be easily analyzed.

With regard to the post-test tool, the researcher selected recordings of one male and one female native British speaker and the same for one male and one female native American speaker. The participants were asked to listen to these speakers and determine which accent the speaker used. This was done in order to test their ability to identify American and British accents. The recordings were selected from Adeptenglish – a free lessons website, focusing on

differences between American and British English such as pronunciation and vocabulary differences.

After having the questionnaire reviewed by two members in the English Department, the Cronbach Alpha of the questionnaire was .76, which means that it was suitable for use in this study. However, the questionnaire was written in Arabic as it is the mother tongue of the participants.

2.4 Procedure

The participants were optionally invited to attend two-week virtual classes using the Learning Management System (Blackboard) about English varieties of speech. Before the virtual classes, the participants were asked to participate in the first part of the e-pre-questionnaire, which has been administered to them via an advertisement tool on Blackboard. The virtual classes were about English accent varieties, in which students were able to learn and try some online resources related to English accents. During the two-week program, the participants were asked to participate in an asynchronous discussion on Blackboard about differences between American and British Accents such as words, pronunciation, and spelling.

After attending the virtual classes, the students were asked to participate in the post-test using the Blackboard exam tool. In the e-exam, the participants listened to two male and two female English native speakers' conversations. The speakers were British and American. The texts of the conversations were shown to the participants in the e-exam screen on Blackboard. They were asked to determine the speaker's accents by choosing from multiple-choice questions (1- British, 2- American).

The students were then asked to participate in the second part of the e-questionnaire which was about their attitudes towards learning English varieties online. One of the associate professors in the English Department gave the virtual lectures. The researcher gathered data and analyzed them using SPSS as can be seen in the results and discussion section.

3. Results and Discussion

After analyzing the data, the results are shown here in this section according to the sequence of research questions, along with a discussion of the results.

3.1 Research Question 1

Which accent - American or British - do Saudi EFL learners prefer?

In order to answer this question, a descriptive statistical analysis was used to assess the participants' preferences. Table (3) shows the results:

Table 3. Students' preferences with regard to English accents

Preference of Accent	Gender	N	Mean	Accent
	Male	39	1.92	American
	Female	42	1.83	American

From Table 3 above, it is clear that both male and female learners prefer American accents to British accents. The male and female mean scores of 1.92 and 1.83 respectively refer to the response "American". This result is supported by their ability to identify the English accents used in the post-test, as will be shown in the analytical findings of the test, below. However, this finding is similar to those of Carin (2013), Modiano and Söderlund (2002), and Phan (2020). These researchers found that the American accent is the preferred accent on the part of their participants. On the other hand, the findings are inconsistent with those of Modiano (1993) and Alenezy (2017). Although Alenezy's participants were similar to our participants, the difference in preference could be attributed to the learning methods used, as our students used online solutions during the Covid-19 pandemic, while Alenezy's participants used traditional methods of learning before the pandemic. Based on the results obtained in the current research, the answer to the first research question is that the participants prefer American English to British English.

3.2 Research Question 2

Are Saudi EFL learners able to distinguish between American and British accents?

In order to answer this question, the frequencies and percentages of the male and female students' answers to the post-test were calculated. The following tables (4 and 5) show the results:

Table 4. Females' Post-test Results

	Frequency	Percent
British	11	15.6
American	31	84.4
Total	42	100.0

Table 5. Males' Posttest Results

	Frequency	Percent
British	9	26.67
American	30	73.33
Total	39	100.0

As shown in Table 4 above, 84.4% of the female learners were able to distinguish the different English accents. The same thing was true of the males, in that most of the male learners (73.33%) were able to distinguish the different English accents. These results indicate that online and virtual solutions were useful when it came to developing the learners' ability to distinguish between the English accents varieties. This finding is supported by the learners' positive attitudes towards learning English varieties through online and virtual solutions as will be presented in the next section.

However, our results are inconsistent those of Alenezy (2017). Her participants were unable to distinguish between English accents, while ours were able to do so. This asserts the effectiveness of online and virtual learning solutions in developing learners' ability to distinguish between English varieties.

3.3 Research Question 3

What are the attitudes of Saudi EFL learners with regard to learning English accents online?

To answer this research question, descriptive statistics were used to analyze the data in order to determine the mean scores for the questionnaire items as shown in table 6 below:

Table 6. Questionnaire Analysis Result

Items	Group	N	M	Std. Deviation
I enjoyed learning English accents from online resources.	Female	42	2.88	.782
	Male	39	2.79	.739
I liked the English accents lectures presented via virtual classrooms on Blackboard.	Female	42	2.64	.439
	Male	39	2.52	.430
I believe that studying English accents via Internet resources during the Covid-19 pandemic was useful.	Female	42	2.77	.960
	Male	39	2.62	.930
I was able to distinguish between American and British accents after the online classes.	Female	42	2.68	.888
	Male	39	2.6	.980
The quality of sound on the online resources was very good when it came to identifying English accents.	Female	42	2.57	.672
	Male	39	2.63	.727
In general, I support using online solutions to learn English.	Female	42	2.91	.983
	Male	39	2.83	.935
Overall Attitude	Female	42	2.74	.965
	Male	39	2.67	.978

All the mean scores relating to the students' responses in terms of their attitudes to learning English accents online were considered positive - "Agree". The male and female participants enjoyed the experience of using online resources to learn English accents as indicated in the first item (M= 2.79 and F=2.88). In addition, the same feeling appears with regard to their attitudes towards attending virtual classrooms for learning English accents as revealed in item 2, as the mean scores were 2.64 for females and 2.52 for males.

The participants in both groups believed that studying English varieties using internet resources during the Covid-19 pandemic was beneficial, as their responses, as revealed in item 3, reflect the choice "Agree" (F=2.77 and M=2.62). This feeling is supported by their answers to item 4 when they reported that there were able to distinguish between English accents after attending the virtual classes (F=2.68 and M=2.6). This is because the quality of sound was very good and this helped them to identify the accents as shown in their answers to item 5 (F=2.57 and M=2.63). This explains why the findings of this study are inconsistent with those of Alenezy (2017), where her participants were unable to identify the accents of the speakers used.

Item 6 of the questionnaire aimed at assessing the participants' attitudes towards using online solutions for learning English in general. Both reported that they support the use of online solutions for learning English accents, as the mean score of the males' answer was 2.83 while the mean score of the females' answer was 2.91.

Based on the overall mean scores of all the questionnaire items, both male and female learners have positive attitudes with regard to using online solutions for learning English accents. This finding is consistent with several other studies, such as those of Alahmadi and Alraddadi (2020) and Al-Nofaie (2020), who found that EFL learners' attitudes towards learning English online, or by using technology, were perceived to be positive.

In contrast to our findings, however, Alghamdi (2021), Khalawi, and Halabi (2020) found that their participants reported that they preferred traditional methods of learning, though they had positive attitudes towards their experiences of learning online.

The answer to the third research question as to whether our participants preferred using online methods for learning English accents indicated that their attitudes were positive in terms of this experience.

3.4 Research Question 4

Is there a statistically significant difference (at the .050 level) between male and female attitudes towards learning English accents online?

To answer the fourth research question, the independent samples t-test was used to check whether or not the difference between male and female attitudes with regard to learning English accents online was statistically significant. The following table shows the results.

Table 7. Independent Samples Test Result with regard to the Overall Students' Attitudes

	Group	N	Mean	Sig
Overall Attitudes	Female	42	2.74	0.200
	Male	39	2.68	

Table 7 shows that there is a difference between the mean scores in terms of female attitudes (2.74) and the mean score in terms of male attitudes (2.68). It is clear that females have more positive attitudes than do males. To check whether this difference is statistically significant or not, Table 7 shows that, based on the t-test result, this difference is not statistically significant at the 0.05 level. This indicates that gender is not an important variable when it comes to learning English accents online. This result is supported by the questionnaire attitude results as both male and female learners have positive attitudes with regard to this experience. This result answers the fourth research question.

4. Conclusion

The current study explored learners' preferences when it came to British and American accents. The findings of the study showed that online and virtual solutions developed the students' ability to distinguish between English accents. In addition, the participants had positive feelings with regard to using online resources for English learning, particularly in terms of English accents.

Gender, as an independent variable, was not statistically significant at the 0.05 level when it comes to male and female attitudes with regard to this experience. The study findings fill a research gap related to the lack of studies on the use of online solutions for learning English accents. This study could be considered as a basis for further research on this issue. It is recommended that EFL teachers should provide EFL learners with online resources for English accent learning. Researchers are urged to duplicate this study in different contexts in order to develop a greater understanding of learners' attitudes towards online and virtual solutions for English accent learning.

Acknowledgement

The author would like to thank the Deanship of Scientific Research for supporting this paper under project number: R-2022-260

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