The Effects of Speaker's Accent on Listening Comprehension Tests

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Abstract

Traditionally, native speakers have been considered as the most reliable source of linguistic data (Chomsky, 1965), although non-native speakers of English already outnumber the native ones (Kachru, 1994), and 80% of the English teachers in the world are non-native English speakers (Canagarajah, 2005). Today, there is a tendency towards including more varieties in the materials covered in the preparatory schools, but most of the students are unfamiliar with many accents when they come to university (due to the lack of access or exposure), which could cause a problem during their departmental or postgraduate studies when instructed by academics from different language backgrounds. This study was conducted with the purpose of investigating whether the speaker's accent affects students' performance on listening comprehension tests, and if yes, which accent (native speaker's or non-native's) leads to a higher (or lower) level of comprehension. In this study, 120 students with an intermediate level of English proficiency in a university preparatory programme were selected using stratified sampling based on their listening scores in the midterm exam and divided into six groups. Each group listened to 12 short texts from a TOEIC preparation book, rerecorded by three native speakers of English (American, British and Australian) and three non-native speakers (Turkish, Russian and African) and answered 36 multiple-choice type questions, along with filling in a questionnaire that reveals their perceptions of varieties in English. The ANOVA analyses revealed significant results, which calls for more inclusion of English varieties in classes to prepare students better for the real world.

1. Introduction

1.1. The issue of 'nativeness'

Linguistic theory has traditionally considered native speakers as the only reliable source of linguistic data (Chomsky, 1965); however, there has been a significant divergence from the native speaker fallacy (Philippson, 1992) towards more equal conditions for both native English speaking (NES) and non-native English speaking

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(NNES) teachers, as today 80% of the English teachers in the world are non-native English speakers (Canagarajah, 2005). Despite the efforts for a more homogenised teaching atmosphere in today's globalised world, there seem to be cases where the NNES teachers are treated as step-children (Mahboob et al. 2004), and hiring practices around the world show a preference for native English speaking teachers (NESTs) (Mahboob, 2010, 2013; Selvi, 2010).

When it comes to the students' preferences as to their teacher's 'nativeness', there appears to be an inconsistency in literature. Some students prefer to be taught by NESTs (Clark & Paran, 2007), while some others prefer to have NNESTs (Mahboob, 2004), and one common reason behind the preference towards a NES teacher is that their good English proficiency is regarded as a point of reference, and they speak English clearly and fluently and possess the original English accents (Lasagabaster & Manuel Sierra, 2005), which brings us to the point where native speakers are given full credit while non-natives are usually ignored both by the learners and employers.

In this regard, the purpose of this study is to challenge the idea of 'the original English accents', which are claimed to be facilitating listening comprehension, by examining how the students' comprehension is affected by listening to different accents, and whether or not their perceptions are aligned with their actual test scores.

1.2. Relevant research on the topic

Research on the relationship between speaker's accent and listening comprehension has had mixed results and has been inconclusive, mainly because listening is a complex component of language learning, and it consists of many factors such as 'familiarity and degree of exposure, attitude, and stereotyping' (Major et al., 2002).

There have been a couple of studies conducted on the topic of the relationship between the speaker's accent and listening. One of the most recent studies belongs to Matsuura et al. (2014), who investigated whether English spoken with an accent less familiar to learners is less comprehensible. He worked with two groups of students, who listened to the same text, with some time break in between, from one familiar and one unfamiliar speaker (Canadian and Indian speakers respectively). The results showed that the students scored higher when they listened to the Canadian speaker, which suggests that familiarity with the accent facilitates listening comprehension. A similar study was conducted by Harding (2011), who aimed to find out whether listeners who share the speaker's L1 perform better on listening tests. He found that a shared-L1 effect in listening comprehension is at the very least possible, and in certain circumstances, clear.

In another study on the effects of accents on students' comprehension, Major et al. (2005) worked with 240 students divided into 12 groups, in which students listened to lectures from different speakers. The results showed that students scored lower with

non-native speakers, which means that students found it easier to follow the native speakers. In a similar study, Major et al. (2002) worked with speakers from different languages, and they tested their comprehension with different speakers. Their study revealed interesting results in that there were significant differences among the groups who listened to different speakers, but there was no systematic divergence to be able to generalise the results. For instance, Spanish speakers scored higher with Spanish speakers, but Chinese speakers scored lower with Chinese speakers, which may suggest that it is hard to come to a conclusion about the speaker effect on the comprehension of listening texts.

Not all studies found significant differences between the accents when the listening scores were examined. For instance, Barlow (2009) carried out a study in which he implemented a listening task along with giving out a questionnaire to students to find out their perceptions. According to the results of the study, majority of the participants considered native speakers of English easier to understand; however, there were no significant differences between the six groups of students who had listened to six different speaker accents.

Examining the studies on the effects of accents on listening comprehension, it can be said that the results are mixed, and there seems to be a need for further research to be able to arrive at a more sensible conclusion.

1.3. Aims and significance of the study

The current study aims to find out whether or not students' listening comprehension is affected by the speaker's accent, and how they perceive listening to different accents, whether they are willing to be exposed to both native and non-native accents and whether they have any specific preference towards certain accents.

Today, there is more tendency towards the inclusion of more varieties and World Englishes in to EFL materials and curricula; however, most of the students still do not have access or exposure to hearing those varieties, which are sometimes ignored or underestimated. On the other hand, it is really important to expose the students to these varieties to help them get accustomed to the accents spoken outside the classroom and to help them embrace diversity. In this aspect, it is important not only to include cultural materials to awaken their interest and tolerance towards differences, but also to create familiarity with World Englishes and break their any potential prejudices. Therefore, introducing materials and tests involving multilingualism and multiculturalism is of utmost importance when EFL classrooms are concerned, since "in a context where we have to constantly shuttle between different varieties and communities, proficiency becomes complex. To be really proficient in English today, one has to be multidialectal... So we need multidialectal testing in English" (Canagarajah, 2006).

In addition to the materials that require the involvement of more varieties, tests should also contain items which necessitate the understanding of different accents. According to Brown (2014), differences in the accents used in listening passages appear to produce important differences in scores. Nonetheless, with more research, this repertoire of Englishes approach to language teaching can be applied responsibly and fairly when developing standardized proficiency tests (Brown, 2014).

In this regard, this study is expected to shed light on the field of enhancing listening comprehensibility by involving World Englishes into it in order to create a more diverse and global learning environment for students, aiming to answer the following research questions:

1. Does the speaker's accent affect students' performance on listening comprehension tests?

2. If yes, which accent (native speaker's or non-native speaker's) leads to a higher (or lower) level of comprehension?

3. What are students' perceptions about accentedness?

2. Method

2.1. Setting

The present study was conducted at the Department of Basic English, School of Foreign Languages at Middle East Technical University (METU), Ankara, Turkey. The Department of Basic English aims to provide the students whose level of English is below proficiency level with basic language skills so that they can pursue their undergraduate studies at university without major difficulties. To achieve this aim, the department runs a two-semester intensive program placing emphasis on reading, writing, listening and speaking. When the students are registered at the university, they take a placement exam to determine their level of English proficiency. They are then placed in five groups according to their levels of English and have 15, 20, 25 or 30 class hours per week all through the academic year. To be a freshman, they are required not only to reach a certain level of yearly achievement but also to be successful in the English Proficiency Exam at the end of the year. Every year, the department hosts about 3000 students, most of whom are placed at the Beginner and Elementary levels.

Listening skill is an important component of the curriculum at the Department of Basic English. All the listening parts in the main course book, which is the New Language Leader by Pearson Longman Publishing, are carefully handled in all levels, and students are sometimes presented with extra exercises prepared on the materials in the book. Furthermore, listening is a part of the proficiency test the students are required to pass at the end of the year, which motivates the students more to pay attention to listening activities. There are also extra listening handouts prepared by the

testing office for each level, and these exercises are usually allocated two or three class hours every week. With the help of these handouts, the students are trained on how to answer while-listening questions, how to take notes, and how to use those notes to answer some post-listening questions. There are different types of questions in the handouts, such as multiple choice, fill-in-the-blanks and open-ended ones. These are also the types of questions that the students answer in the quizzes and mid-term exams. Finally, the students are often encouraged to practise listening by using the Self Access Centre Online Application (SAC Online), listening to some English songs and watching series, which all contribute to their proficiency.

The students at the department are exposed to listening exercises quite a lot, but this does not mean that they are used to hearing different accents and dialects of English during those exercises. The listening exercises in the course book mainly voice British speakers of English, although there seem to be non-native speakers as well in some recordings, though very limited. On the other hand, the texts in the listening handouts are usually recorded by both native and non-native speakers of English working in the institution. There are currently two American, one Australian and three British speakers of English language, and they contribute to the making of these materials by either recording the texts themselves or proofreading the texts to be recorded by other Turkish colleagues.

It is both conventional and expedient to divide the Method section into labeled subsections. These usually include a section with descriptions of the participants or subjects and a section describing the procedures used in the study. The latter section often includes description of (a) any experimental manipulations or interventions used and how they were delivered-for example, any mechanical apparatus used to deliver them; (b) sampling procedures and sample size and precision; (c) measurement approaches (including the psychometric properties of the instruments used); and (d) the research design. If the design of the study is complex or the stimuli require detailed description, additional subsections or subheadings to divide the subsections may be warranted to help readers find specific information.

Include in these subsections the information essential to comprehend and replicate the study. Insufficient detail leaves the reader with questions; too much detail burdens the reader with irrelevant information. Consider using appendices and/or a supplemental website for more detailed information.

2.2. Participants

The participants of this study were six English teachers, both native and non-native speakers, and 107 EFL students with intermediate level of English proficiency.

In order to be able to see whether the speaker's accent plays a role in the comprehension of texts and hinder (or facilitate) students' answering related questions, it was necessary to involve speakers with various accents, both familiar and unfamiliar ones to the students in the study. For this reason, the researcher contacted many English teachers working in different parts of the world and asked for their help with a short recording. The reason why the researcher got in touch with teachers abroad is that there are not many non-native English teachers, except Turkish ones, working in the current context. Also, including the native speakers working in the institution would not be appropriate since the students are already used to hearing their voices, and this familiarity could have affected their test performance. For these reasons, the researcher asked nine NNES teachers to do the recording, and seven of them responded positively. After an initial evaluation, the speakers with the most distinctive accents were determined by a jury of two teachers (one Turkish and one British), and three NNES teachers were included in the study. As for the NES teachers, two teachers working in other institution in Ankara were approached, and one speaker sent the recording from the UK. Therefore, there were three NES teachers agreeing to help with the recordings (one American, one Australian and one British), and there were three NNES teachers (one Turkish, one Russian and one African).

As for the students participating in the study, there were 107 students with an intermediate level of English. The average age of the students was 18.2, and they were learning English for 9.1 years on average. The students were selected based on the class average on the listening score of their last mid-term exam (Av: 17.9 out of 20), so that their proficiency levels would not have an important effect on the test performance. Therefore, six classes were determined with close test scores in the exam, and they were asked whether they would like to take part in a research study, and the experiment was carried out with the ones who agreed and were present in class at the time of the listening exercise. A summary of the participants' characteristics can be found in Tables 1 and 2 below:

Table 1. A summary of information on participating students

		Number (N)	Percent (%)	Age (on average)	Duration of learning English (in years)
	male	62	57.9		
Valid	female	45	42.1		
	Total	107	100.0	18.2	9.1

Table 2. A summary of students' learning English background

		Have you ever had a NES teacher?		Have you ever had NNES teacher (except Turkish)?		Have you ever studied abroad?	
		N	%	N	%	N	%
	yes	41	38.3	24	22.4	9	8.4
Valid	no	66	61.7	83	77.6	98	91.6
	Total	107	100.0	107	100.0	107	100.0

2.3. Data collection instruments

In order to find out whether the students' comprehension is affected positively or negatively by the speaker's accent, six NES and NNES teachers agreed to record the texts provided by the researcher. The selection of the texts was performed taking many factors into account, such as the students' level of English proficiency, the familiarity of the test type, the reliability of the tests and the length of the texts. In addition, it was important that answering the questions would not require any background knowledge nor the questions would be self-revealing in order to get reliable results. Considering these factors, the researcher decided to make use of TOEIC (Test of English for International Communication) tests, as the items were targeted for international communication rather than testing too specific details, which is something worth considering for the present study. Many TOEIC preparation materials were examined, and finally Longman Preparation Series for the New TOEIC Test (for Intermediate Course) (2007) was selected, since it included quite a big number of test items and it was suitable for the level of the participants. The TOEIC test consists of four parts, which are photos, question-response, conversations and talks. For this study, only the talks part was utilised, and 12 short texts with three multiple-choice type questions each were selected from various exercises. The texts were advertisements, weather reports, news, recorded announcements, special announcements and business announcements; therefore, they all required international communication skills to grasp the idea. The texts were relatively short (the shortest was 29 seconds and the longest was 54 seconds on average), so the possibility of losing interest or concentration during the listening test was reduced to minimum.

The second data collection instrument for this study was a questionnaire, which was given to the students once the listening test was over. The questionnaire was prepared by the researcher with the purpose of investigating students' opinions on hearing different accents, whether they thought their comprehension was affected by it, and what their preferences were as to hearing native and non-native accents. The questionnaire consisted of 30 items in total, 13 items with a 5-point Likert scale, 3 open-ended questions and 14 background questions. The questionnaire was given to the students in

English as the sentences were simple enough for their level to understand the items. It took about 15 minutes for the students to answer all the questions.

2.4. Data collection procedure

The data for this study were collected in three steps: Preparation of the voice recordings, implementing the listening tests and filling in the questionnaires.

First, the texts from the TOEIC preparation book were rewritten and sent to the English teachers via e-mail, and they were requested to record the texts separately by using a mobile application or a web tool. They were recommended to use some good applications to facilitate their recording process (e.g. Audacity, Voice Record and Smart Voice Recorder), but they were told that they would be free to use whichever recorder they preferred as long as the sound quality was high. It took about a month to get the recordings back from the teachers as all of them were working at the time and some of them had to rerecord them due to the low sound quality. When the recordings were received, they were checked in terms of sound quality, pace and comprehensibility, and they were arranged in terms of the speaker. Each speaker recorded the 12 texts and saved them separately, and these recordings were filed as groups by the researcher. The next step was to prepare the CDs to be used by the class teachers for the listening task. The research design was as follows: Each class was going to listen to the same texts in the same order by a different speaker. In order to do that, a different CD was prepared for each class. To exemplify, the first class would listen to the first weather report from the African speaker, the second class would listen to the same text from the American speaker, the third class would listen to it from the Australian speaker, and so on. Therefore, the interfering factors were aimed to be minimised and only the effect of the speaker's accent could be identified.

Once the recordings were ready to be used in classes, the class teachers, whose permissions had been taken beforehand, were contacted again to determine the best time for the implementation of the test. It was important to agree on a specific time with all six classes in order not to affect the test results. The time was agreed upon, and the tests were given to the students in the first-class hour, when the students were more enthusiastic and not very tired yet. The listening task took about 15 minutes. Then, the answer sheets were collected and the students' answers were entered into SPSS 20 (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) for statistical analyses.

Following the listening task, the students were given the questionnaire prepared to find out their perspectives about the accentedness issue. It took about 15 minutes to answer the questions. Once the questionnaires were filled in, they were collected and the information was entered into SPSS 20 for further analyses.

2.5. Data analysis

In order to find out whether or not speaker's accent plays a role in students' comprehension of the texts and their test scores, two research questions were formed. To answer these questions, quantitative analysis was carried out, and a One-Way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was conducted. Since there are six groups in this study with a total of 107 participants, and the data were observed to be normally distributed after conducting the tests of normality, the researcher decided to use ANOVA, which would also reveal the differences between groups with the post hoc tests. To answer the third research questions, which was about the perceptions of the students regarding accentedness, descriptive statistics were used to find out the frequency of the answers. Moreover, qualitative data analysis method was also made use of so as to analyse the students' answers for the open-ended questions at the end of the questionnaire.

3. Results

3.1. RQa. Does the speaker's accent affect students' performance on listening comprehension tests?

The first question sought an answer to the question of whether or not the speaker's accent plays a role in students' comprehension of the texts and their test scores. Before carrying out the analyses to get an answer to this question, a preliminary analysis was done to confirm that there was no significant difference between the test scores of the classes. The mean scores of the groups can be seen in Table 3 below.

Table 3. The mean scores of the groups in the listening test

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval for Mean		Min	Max
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound		
Group 1	18	29.67	2.931	.691	28.21	31.12	24	34
Group 2	17	28.71	2.779	.674	27.28	30.13	24	33
Group 3	18	29.22	2.981	.703	27.74	30.70	24	34
Group 4	18	30.28	2.866	.675	28.85	31.70	23	34
Group 5	18	30.33	3.049	.719	28.82	31.85	23	35
Group 6	18	28.06	2.508	.591	26.81	29.30	24	33
Total	107	29.38	2.909	.281	28.83	29.94	23	35

The result of the ANOVA revealed no significant difference between the six groups involved in the study, which confirms that the students' competency in listening skill was almost the same (F (5, 106) =1.765, p=.12). Therefore, any difference occurring between the groups' test scores could be more easily linked to the effects of the accents, though still approached with reservation. The ANOVA results are revealed in Table 4.

Table 4. ANOVA results of group differences

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	72.094	5	14.419	1.765	.127
Within Groups	825.196	101	8.170		
Total	897.290	106			

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Once the preliminary analyses were completed and the classes were found to have no significant differences in mean scores, the second step was conducted, which was to test whether the speaker's accent played an important role in the comprehension. In order to carry out the analyses, a new variable was created on SPSS for every participant by computing together the test items recorded by the same speaker. Therefore, there were six new variables to be used for analyses. Each variable represented the test score earned by the student by listening to that specific speaker. Another series of ANOVA was conducted at this point between six groups. To facilitate the interpretation of the effect of each speaker separately on the listening test scores, a separate analysis for each factor was conducted. There was a total of six speakers, so the significance level was adjusted to .008 (0.05 / 6) to address the potential problem of Type 1 error. The dependent variable was the speakers, and the factor was the class.

When the classes were compared in terms of the speaker for each text, the results revealed significant differences between some groups, but not in all of them. This means that the speaker's accent played a role in the comprehension of some texts only. The results can be seen in Table 5 below.

Table 5. The ANOVA analyses of group differences

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Texts 1-7 (speaker 1)	Between Groups	13.999	5	2.800	6.244	.000
	Within Groups	45.291	101	.448		
	Total	59.290	106			
Texts 2-8 (speaker 2)	Between Groups	3.492	5	.698	.913	.476
	Within Groups	77.275	101	.765		
	Total	80.766	106			
Texts 3-9 (speaker 3)	Between Groups	28.257	5	5.651	6.723	.000
	Within Groups	84.902	101	.841		
	Total	113.159	106			
Texts 4-10 (speaker 4)	Between Groups	18.193	5	3.639	2.328	.048
	Within Groups	157.863	101	1.563		
	Total	176.056	106			
Texts 5-11 (speaker 5)	Between Groups	22.308	5	4.462	5.203	.000
	Within Groups	86.608	101	.858		
	Total	108.916	106			
Texts 6-12 (speaker 6)	Between Groups	2.995	5	.599	.784	.564
	Within Groups	77.173	101	.764		
	Total	80.168	106			

In order to find out which groups were different in terms of the test scores, the post hoc tests were conducted with a Bonferroni correction, with an adjusted significance level of .008. When the first set of test scores were analysed, which were recorded by the same speaker, it was seen that there was a significant difference between the test scores of students who listened to the same texts from the African speaker (M=5.83, SD=.38) and the British speaker (M=4.66, SD=1.13), p=.000. This shows that, when the test scores of the first text were considered among all the groups, the only difference was found to be between these two groups who listened to the African and British speakers, and the other groups did not show any significant difference. Similarly, when the third text was taken into consideration, it was found out that there was a significant difference between Group 3, who listened to the Russian speaker, (M=4.00, SD=1.13), and Group 4, who listened to the Turkish speaker, (M=5.33, SD=.76), p=.000, and Group 5, who listened to the African speaker (M=5.44, SD=.85) on the same text, p=.000. Finally, the last significant difference was observed in the fifth text between Group 1 (with Russian speaker) (M=4.33, SD=1.08) and Group 4 (with American speaker) (M=5.66, SD=.48), p=.001. When the second, fourth and the sixth texts were considered, there was no statistically significant difference in terms of students' test scores.

The results suggest that there appear to be some differences between the scores of students who listened to the native and non-native speakers, but it does not mean that one speaker facilitated or hindered the comprehension over the others, as the differences

seem to occur between different groups each time. Therefore, it is difficult to say that there is a direct relationship between certain speaker accents and students' listening comprehension.

In the Results section, summarize the collected data and the analysis performed on those data relevant to the discourse that is to follow. Report the data in sufficient detail to justify your conclusions. Mention all relevant results, including those that run counter to expectation; be sure to include small effect sizes (or statistically nonsignificant findings) when theory predicts large (or statistically significant) ones. Do not hide uncomfortable results by omission. Do not include individual scores or raw data with the exception, for example, of single-case designs or illustrative examples. In the spirit of data sharing (encouraged by APA and other professional associations and sometimes required by funding agencies), raw data, including study characteristics and individual effect sizes used in a meta -analysis, can be made available on supplemental online archives. Discussing the implications of the results should be reserved for presentation in the Discussion section.

3.2. RQb. If yes, which accent (native speaker's or non-native speaker's) leads to a higher (or lower) level of comprehension?

Since some of the test scores seem to have differed between groups, it can be said that the speaker's accent might have played a role in students' comprehension, but it is hard to say certain accents directly facilitate or hinder students' understanding of the texts and answering some related questions. Table 6 below displays the summary of the group mean scores and significance level between groups for each text.

Table 6. The summary of the group means and significance levels between groups

	Class 1	Class 2	Class 3	Class 4	Class 5	Class 6	Sig.
Text 1	African (M=5.83)	American (M=5.47)	Australian (M=5.33)	British (M=4.66)	Russian (M=5.61)	Turkish (M=5.38)	p=.000
Text 2	American (M=5.11)	Australian (M=5.05)	British (M=5.16)	Russian (M=4.94)	Turkish (M=4.66)	African (M=4.77)	p=.476
Text 3	Australian (M=4.88)	British (M=4.47)	Russian (M=4.00)	Turkish (M=5.33)	African (M=5.44)	American (M=4.44)	p=.000
Text 4	British (M=4.44)	Russian (M=3.70)	Turkish (M=4.50)	African (M=4.55)	American (M=4.50)	Australian (M=3.55)	p=.048
Text 5	Russian (M=4.33)	Turkish (M=4.94)	African (M=5.38)	American (M=5.66)	Australian (M=5.22)	British (M=4.61)	p=.000
Text 6	Turkish (M=5.05)	African (M=5.41)	American (M=5.05)	Australian (M=5.27)	British (M=4.88)	Russian (M=5.11)	p=.564

As can be seen from the table above, in the first, third and the fifth texts, there are some significant differences between the groups. In the first text, for instance, the scored differed greatly between the African speaker and the British speaker, whereas different scores were observed between Russian, Turkish and African speakers in the third text, and finally differences took place between Russian and American speakers in the fifth text. As can be clearly understood from these results, there is no systematic change between group scores, which suggests that it would be too premature to generalise these findings to say that certain accents facilitate or hinder comprehension.

3.3. RQc. What are students' perceptions about accentedness?

In order to understand how the students perceived the accentedness and how they regarded hearing different accents, they were asked 16 multiple-choice and three open-ended questions in the questionnaire, which was given to them right after the listening task. The items in the questionnaire revealed interesting results as to students' perceptions.

When they were asked whether or not they thought their comprehension was affected by the speaker's accent, 83.2% of the students said that it was affected negatively, 11.2% said that it did not affect their performance, and 6% said that it was affected only a little. When asked about the reason for this effect, some students said that it was very difficult to understand some speakers (without stating which ones), and some of them stated that it was easier to understand the accents which they were already familiar with (meaning the native speakers). When the students were asked what made them understand whether the speaker was a native or non-native speaker, the most common answers were related to the pronunciation, tone and stress of the speaker, suggesting that native speakers were more comprehensible in this respect. Moreover, some students stated that it was possible to differentiate between the native and non-native speaker because 'native speakers were more relaxed while talking' and 'the flow of their talk was unhesitating and unbroken'.

The students' sympathy for native speakers was also revealed in the analysis of the open-ended question as to their preference for NES or NNES teacher. 41.1% of the students stated that they would prefer to have a NES teacher, whereas only 5% preferred a NNES teacher. Interestingly, the percentage of students who did not specifically chose one over another was the highest (54.2%). As for the reasons for their preferences, the students gave various answers to support their opinions. Figure 1 below shows reasons given by the students.

NES teachers	NNES teachers	Doesn't matter
S/he can help with my pronunciation / teaches the 'ideal' pronunciation.	It's better if the teacher speaks my native language.	The teacher should be good at his/her job.
If I make a mistake, a native speaker understands me easily.	Sometimes I need explanation in my native language.	It doesn't matter as long as their speech is clear and understandable.
I can learn English better this way / in a more appropriate way.		The best teacher is the one who wants to teach and help her students.
It allows me to speak like a native speaker, too.		If the teacher speaks like a native speaker, no problem.
I can learn something wrong from a non-native speaker.		One way or other, we are going to learn it.
S/he can know more vocabulary and idioms.		In real life, I'll hear both of them, so I need to get used to hearing different accents.
I can learn his/her culture, too.		
It is more acceptable.		

Figure 1. Reasons given by students as to their teacher preferences

The analyses of the multiple-choice items also support the students' perceptions about NES / NNES teacher issue. When the two items were analysed regarding the comprehensibility of native and non-native speakers of English, it was found out in Item 15 that 86 students (80.3%) thought it was easier to understand native speakers of English, whereas only 24 students (22.5%) said it was easier to understand a non-native speaker of English in Item 22, which shows a positive bias towards native speakers. However, when the students were asked whether all speakers should have an accent like that of native speakers, the answers showed a fair distribution. The result of the analysis can be seen in Table 7.

Table 7. All English speakers should speak like a native speaker

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	strongly disagree	11	10.3	10.3	10.3
	disagree	29	27.1	27.1	37.4
	not sure	37	34.6	34.6	72.0
	agree	24	22.4	22.4	94.4
	strongly agree	6	5.6	5.6	100.0
	Total	107	100.0	100.0	

Another important item in the questionnaire aimed to find out students' opinions about including more variety into textbooks and class materials in terms of World

Englishes. As for including more non-native speakers and accents in the materials, 35.5% of the students agreed with the suggestion. On the other hand, when they were asked about the inclusion of more native speakers, 57.9% said they would prefer it. Hence, it can be said that the preference for native speakers is quite dominant among this group of English learners.

4. Discussion

The present research aimed to find an answer to three questions: Does the speaker's accent play an important role in the comprehension of listening texts? If yes, which accent (native speaker's or non-native speaker's) leads to a higher (or lower) level of comprehension? Finally, what are students' perceptions about accentedness?

The statistical analyses showed that the speaker's accent seems to play a role in students' comprehension of listening texts and may affect their test scores, but it is not possible to generalise these findings to say that native or non-native speakers facilitate or hinder the students' understanding of what they hear. With some texts in this study, students performed better while listening to native speakers, and with others the test scores were higher when the speaker was a non-native speaker of English. Similarly, when the listener's familiarity with the speaker's accent was examined, it was found out that the speaker's Turkish accent did not play a significantly facilitating role for the students. Therefore, it can be said that students' familiarity with the accent does not have an important effect on their comprehension. These findings are in line with the findings of some other studies. For instance, Munro et al. (2006) did a study with speakers of different languages, and post hoc analyses did not reveal any systematic effect of certain speakers on certain listeners. He concludes that this provides only weak evidence of shared L1 effect, which is so small that it can be 'outweighed by other factors' (p. 127). Another study by Stibbard and Lee (2006) suggests that the shared L1 effect may only be available when listeners hear lower proficiency speaker, which paves the way for the questionability of familiarity effects. On the other hand, there are some studies, the results of which do not correlate with the findings of the present study (Tauroza & Luk, 1997; Gass & Veronis, 1984; Pihko, 1997), which all argued that familiarity with a certain accent is what aids listening comprehension. In the present study, neither the Turkish accent nor the comparatively more familiar American and British accents affected comprehension positively. Therefore, it would be too premature to come to a conclusion regarding the accentedness of the speaker and its reflection on the test scores. In the light of this finding, it can be concluded that more research is needed considering the familiarity of speaker's accent and its facilitating role on the listening comprehension, as the results of the studies in the field seem to be inconsistent.

As for the third research questions, which aimed to find out what students think about hearing different accents and their preference for NES or NNES teacher, there are

important conclusions to be made. The analyses of the questionnaires revealed that students are more inclined to hearing native speaker accents and having NES teachers, as they believe they can contribute more to their language improvement as well as providing them with socio-cultural input about the target community. Most of the students thought that their comprehension was affected negatively because of hearing 'unfamiliar' accents, which they stated to be the non-native accents in this case. However, the close examination of the test scores proved to be contrasting with the students' perceptions. Although the students stated that they were able to understand and follow the native speakers more easily, the results suggested that there was no significant difference, and even in some cases the students performed better when they were listening to the non-native speakers. To illustrate, when the test scores with significant differences were examined (e.g. Test 3), it can be seen that the highest scores were taken by the students who listened to the African speaker, which was the most 'unfamiliar' accent for their case, and they got the second lowest scores on the British speaker, which they believed to be 'the most comprehensible' accent (see Figure 2). Therefore, it can be concluded that although students' preferences should be taken into consideration to some extent, they should not be given the full credit as they may have misperceptions and prejudices against certain components, such as NES / NNES teacher issue in this case. This paper does not concentrate on students' preferences on having NES or NNES teachers, but it does touch upon this subject as students regard 'comprehensibility' as an important criterion for a teacher, and they trust in NES teachers more in this regard. However, the results of this study show that students can comprehend native and non-native speakers equally when the other factors are appropriate for their understanding, such as the proficiency level of the students, the difficulty level of the texts and the speech rate of the speakers.

4.1. Pedagogical implications

   The results of the present study present important implications for pedagogy. First of all, since the results reveal that the speaker's accent does not play a significant role in students' comprehension of listening texts, unlike what students believe, the students should be more exposed to the varieties of English in and outside the class. Although a native speaker fallacy, the belief that native speakers are ideal teachers (Phillipson, 1992), promotes native speakers as target models and ideal teachers (Selvi, 2014), students should be made more aware of World Englishes and different accents and dialects, so that they can grow a more interest in and build more tolerance towards differences and varieties. In contexts where multiculturalism is limited, students and teachers can make use of CALL (Computer-Assisted Language Learning) in order to bring a variety into the classroom. Today, it is quite easy to reach information through the use of technology; therefore, educators are highly recommended to benefit from what

it offers in order to open a new window for the students to look through to get better for the real world.

4.2. Limitations of the study

The present study has some limitations, which should be considered for further research into the topic. First of all, the number of the participants could be taken as a limitation. In this study, there were 107 participants, but because they were divided into six groups for the implementation of the test, each group consisted of 17-18 students. A larger population might have revealed different results; therefore, more research should be conducted with more participants. Secondly, the present study was conducted with intermediate level students, as it would be easier to test the effect of accent with this group as other factors were more minimal when compared to other groups. Therefore, a similar study with different proficiency level groups might reveal different results. Finally, since the speakers were not professional in voice recording, their tone of voice or the quality of the recording might have had an effect on the comprehension, although students did not report any hindering effect on these issues.

5. Conclusion

This study aimed to find a possible relationship between the speaker's accent and listening comprehension, and students' perceptions about this issue. The results suggest that although speaker's accent seems to pose an effect on some test scores, the difference is not very significant and generalizable. This finding does not correlate with what the students think, as they believe that some accents cause a breakdown in their comprehension, especially non-native speakers. In the light of these two findings, it can be concluded that different varieties of English should be introduced to EFL learners in order to inform them about World Englishes and to break their potential bias against certain accents. Exclusion of this diversity can negatively affect students by allowing stereotypes to persist and increase alienation.

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