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# SELF-PERCEIVED ENGLISH ACCENTS OF TERTIARY-LEVEL LEARNERS FOR PROFESSIONAL AND DAILY PURPOSES

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## Abstract
Globalization brings linguistic globalization together into modern life, with a great increase in the use of English as lingua franca (ELF) for various purposes all around the world. In recent years, there has been a rising number of publications focusing on ELF and its components, such as identity, accents, etc. Nevertheless, a question remains whether there is a difference between the use of English accents for daily and professional use of tertiary-level learners, who use English both in daily life and close to using English in their immediate future professional life, and its effects on the communicative competencies of the learners. Hence, the central intention of this study is to determine the self-perceived English accents of tertiary-level learners, and it is of interest to analyze the effect of self-perceived accents on their communicative competence for daily and professional purposes. Data, collected from 105 tertiary-level learners majoring in different departments at a state university in Turkey with a survey and a focus group interview have demonstrated that learners prefer British, followed by American English as ideal accents; however, they also care about the properties of accents, mostly intelligibility, for both language use. Additionally, learners emphasize the importance of a native-like English accent for professional purposes and believe if they have a native-like accent, they will establish effective communication by gain reputation and prestige in their future careers.

Keywords: communicative competence, daily language use, ELF awareness, self-perceived English accent

## Introduction
It is clear that globalization, defined as the expansion, deepening and acceleration of interconnectedness throughout the world in all aspects of modern life by Held and McGrew (2007), leads the way in bringing all nations together in various aspects; such as trade, culture, or language. The effect of globalization on language might be explained by the term *'linguistic globalization'* which is the use of English as a mediator to connect people who have different mother tongues as a lingua franca (Smokotin, Alekseyenko, & Petrova, 2014).

The above term *linguistic globalization* is similar to the English as lingua franca (ELF) definition posited by Seidlhofer (2005, p.339). She defined ELF as the action of communication in English among people with different first

languages. It is obvious from these definitions that English has turned into a prevailing language throughout the world for communication. To be able to understand to a greater degree the issue of ELF, which is a most accepted term to refer to the use of English as a communication tool (House, 2002; Seidlhofer, 2001), there is a need to cover Kachru's (1992) three circles of English. According to the Kachru, the users of English in the world can be illustrated with three concentric circles; the Inner Circle consists of the native English speaker countries such as the UK, the USA, etc., Outer Circle consists of the countries who use English as their second languages such as India, Nigeria, etc. and Expanding Circle consisting of the countries who use English as their foreign language such as Turkey, China, Russia, etc. Albeit the number of users of English in these three circles is reviewed, it is seen that the number of English users in the expanding circle countries outnumber the English users in the inner-circle countries, as a result of globalization. Since the number of English speakers is becoming higher and higher, another aspect related to English language teaching, which is pronunciation, comes into the stage. Jenkins (2008, p.200) claims that the objective of English language learners may not be having a native-like accent, so they may only intend to communicate in an intelligible way, which is important in communication (Wang & Jenkins, 2016). Therefore, Jenkins (2000) came up with a list of pronunciation features, Lingua Franca Core (LFC), to give importance to intelligible communication in her book titled "*The Phonology of English as an International Language*". For years, even if English language education has aimed to make learners have a British accent or American accent (Dauer, 2005), language learners may not necessarily need to have a specific kind of accent, rather they may follow LFC to establish intelligible communication with other speakers in English.

Due to globalization, as mentioned above, the English language has been widely used for communication in different contexts such as professional lives, or daily lives, which are two different concepts in the English language learning process. While daily English language refers to the use of common daily expressions, which do not include technical terms and consist of simple language structures, professional English language refers to a kind of language including technical terms, sector/expertise specific communication, and writing skills. Based on the nature of professional English language use, it might be more stressful or significant for learners to get a better English accent for communication. On the other hand, daily English language use might not be so significant for learners that they may believe in communicating effectively somehow.

Here, it is important to mention the case of English in universities in Turkey. According to the TEPAV report (2015), most of the universities in Turkey are Turkish medium; however, only a few have 30% English medium for some departments such as medicine, economics, engineering, etc. mostly for professional reasons. The report claims that mixed-medium teaching, which consists of English and Turkish together such as 30% English medium programs, is not so effective due to the high preference and transmission of the Turkish language of both students and university staff.

On the other hand, another problem might be related to accent preference, and correspondingly, the awareness of ELF in terms of both English language lecturers and learners. Akçay (2020) carried out a study with 78 non-native English lecturers, and 214 English learners at a state university in Turkey to find out their perceptions

of native and non-native English accents and ELF. The results showed that even if they knew ELF, they already preferred to adopt native-like accents such as British or American rather than non-native accents, and due to this preference, they had hesitations to communicate with their non-native accents. Accent, defined as "the way of speaking that indicates a person's place of origin and/or social class" McArthur, 1992, 9), is one of the most challenging aspects of effective communication in English (Gluszek & Dovidio, 2010). Not having a native-like accent can make learners demotivated or more anxious; nevertheless, to manage to communicate successfully in English, language learners should be less anxious and more motivated (Leong & Ahmadi, 2017). So, the way of feeling less anxious can be paced with ELF awareness.

Therefore, even if university students in Turkey are not exposed to English in their daily lives, they will face English in their immediate future business life. For these students, it is useful to know where the way is to communicate effectively. For effective professional communication, it is necessary to know whether an accent is important to them, or whether a distinctive native-like accent is important to them. In this way, it may become more efficient to prepare tertiary-level learners for their professional life soon. However, not only the English for professional life but also their use of English for daily purposes is worth investigating in terms of communicative competence.

On the grounds of the effect of globalization, the use of English for various purposes has increased, enabling contradictory issues for researchers. As an illustration, the ownership of English has been attracting considerable interest due to the increase in the number of people who speak English. Boonsuk and Ambele (2019) carried out a study to examine the perceptions of Thai English learners in a university on the ownership of English. In the conclusion of this study, the participants reported that all the people who use English for communication could not only hold the right of owning English but also could use English in a way of their preference beyond maintaining the native speaker norms. The result of this study is also in line with other studies proving non-native English speakers creatively use English depending on the context (Widdowson, 2003; Jenkins, 2007; Cogo & Jenkins, 2010; Seidlhofer, 2011; Kaur, 2009; Mauranen, 2012; Wang & Jenkins, 2016).

Since the number of people who are non-native English speakers from the Expanding Circle, according to Kachru's three circles, outnumbers the people who are native English speakers in the modern world, the preferences of people for English accents have become an important issue for researchers (Pilus, 2013; Wang, 2015; Fang, 2016). One of the recent studies on the investigation of English learners' accent preferences has been carried out by Kung and Wang (2019). The participants of this study were Chinese English learners and most of them showed a bias towards the native-speaker norms of British or American English, showing a bias against non-native speaker norms of Chinese English, which is in line with what Jenkins (2003) reports. Another recent study has been conducted by Huang and Hashim (2020) with again Chinese tertiary-level English learners on the topic of examining their perceptions of different English accents and the relationship between these perceptions and their identities. The results of this study, as well, demonstrated a positive incline of learners toward native English norms with a native incline towards non-native English norms. A study administered to

Malaysian English learners also showed a similar result, by indicating the preferences of learners for native accented English (Ahmed, Abdullah & Heng, 2014). On the other hand, the study carried out by Norman (2017) reported a different result. The Swedish participants of this study reported that it was not significant to have a native-like English accent.

To date, emphasis has been placed on the self-perceived accents of learners, with scant attention given to the effects of self-perceived English accents of tertiary-level learners majoring in different departments on their communicative competence in terms of professional and daily language use, especially in Turkey. The analysis of the relationship between self-perceived English accents and the communicative competence for professional and daily language use might be considered important in the sense of training and raising awareness of English as Lingua Franca of the Turkish tertiary-level learners, since if the learners are aware of ELF, they might not be concerned about their accents to communicate with others for both professional and daily purposes. To extent of the aim of this study, it has been seeking to answer the following research questions:

1. What accent do the tertiary level learners aim for when speaking English for professional and daily purposes and why?
2. Is having a native-like English accent important to acquire for professional and daily purposes according to the tertiary level learners?
3. Does self-perceived English accent impact tertiary level learners' communicative competence for professional and daily purposes?

## Method

### *Research Design*

The main purposes of the present study are to identify tertiary-level learners' self-perceived English accents and to explore the impact of their self-perceived English accents on their communicative competence in terms of professional and daily English use. According to the aims of this study, to be able to get a better understanding of the topic, a qualitative research design has been administered by quantifying the data (Creswell, 2012).

### *Research Context and Participants*

The population of the present study consists of all the tertiary level learners in the research site, which is one of the state universities in the southern part of Turkey. The state university is a highly new one and it has only seven faculties (Economics and Administrative Sciences, Aeronautics and Astronautics, Engineering, Health Sciences, Technology, Applied Sciences), and eight departments (Political Science and Public Administration, Management Information Systems, Aerospace Engineering, Energy Systems Engineering, Automotive Engineering, Finance and Banking, International Trade and Logistics, Mechanical Engineering) and in total it has 812 graduate learners (258 female, 554 male). Out of eight departments, three of the graduate programs (Management Information Systems, Aerospace Engineering, and Mechanical Engineering) are 30% English medium instruction programs, and they have one-year English language preparatory education.

The idea behind including different departments for the present study is that all the learners come from various social backgrounds with different points of view

on English and its importance. Additionally, some of the graduate learners are in the 30% English medium programs, which means they study or will study their departments somehow in English. Hence, it is believed that selecting participants from different departments with different backgrounds will be accurate representatives in pursuance of the aims of the present study.

The participants are chosen by convenience sampling design due to their accessibility, availability, and their voluntariness to participate in the study (Dörnyei, 2007). Since the present study has been carried out under the Covid-19 Pandemic conditions, it is hard to reach the participants. Hence, out of 812 graduate learners enrolled in the research site, only 105 of them completed the online survey and were considered participants in the study. Table 1 and Table 2 demonstrate the demographic information of participants. The focus group interview was carried out with five volunteer learners from three different departments on Google Meet, lasting approximately 30 minutes long.

Table 1. Departments of the Participants

| Department | N | % |
|---|---|---|
| Political Science and Public Administration | 4 | 3.81 |
| Management Information Systems* | 27 | 25.71 |
| Aerospace Engineering* | 34 | 32.38 |
| Energy Systems Engineering | 0 | 0.00 |
| Automotive Engineering | 3 | 2.86 |
| Finance and Banking | 18 | 17.14 |
| International Trade and Logistics | 14 | 13.33 |
| Mechanical Engineering* | 5 | 4.76 |
| Total Participants | 105 | |

***30% EMI Departments*

Table 2. Gender of the Participants

| Gender | N | % |
|---|---|---|
| Male | 64 | 60.96 |
| Female | 42 | 40.00 |
| Total Participants | 105 | |

### *Data Collection Procedures*

As a data collection tool "English Accent for Professional and Daily Purposes Survey" [modified version of Norman's (2017) survey] is administered to the participants by an online document. In the modified version of the survey; the mother tongue has been changed according to the Turkey situation, and it has been added some open-ended questions related to the topic. Additionally, unlike the original survey, the questions related to speaking confidence have been eliminated for the present study, since it is focused on only communicative competence. The survey has included two questions related to demographic information of learners (gender and departments); nine questions are related to accent perceptions of learners, and the others are related to the communicative competence of learners.

As qualitative data collection, a small-scale focus group interview has been carried out on an online meeting platform with volunteer participants. All the interview questions are to get more detailed answers to the open-ended questions

on the pre-administered survey, so the interview was semi-structured. The Focus group interview lasted about 40 minutes.

As part of the data collection procedure, the first step was to modify the available survey under the research site, and it was transferred into an online form document to be able to send to the population. The modified version of the survey has been sent to two language experts for translation in terms of inter-reliability of it, which is a necessary way to measure the level of agreement between raters. According to Cohen's Kappa value for interrater reliability, the agreement was 95%, so it showed a great agreement between language experts. Then the survey has been sent to the university's ethics committee for approval, and after getting the approval, the survey has been sent to all tertiary-level university learners who are majoring in different disciplines. The survey was both in English and Turkish, to be sure that learners could understand all the statements clearly.

When the quantitative results have been collected via the online survey, the volunteer participants have gotten into contact with the researcher, and the volunteer participants created a focus group and have been administered an online interview to be able to get a deeper understanding of the present topic.

### *Data Analysis*

The analysis of survey results has been carried out with the calculations of descriptive analysis and frequencies. The answers to open-ended questions and interviews (which are recorded and transcribed) are analyzed by content analysis following a bottom-up approach by noting the themes that occurred. The findings of the study will be handled based on research questions.

## Findings and Discussion

The purpose of this study was to find out the self-perceived English accents of tertiary-level learners and their effects on their communicative competence in terms of daily and professional English language use. To be able to find the answers to research questions, the present study used descriptive analysis, including frequencies of the answers to survey questions. At the beginning of the survey, tertiary level learners were asked to specify their gender, departments and proficiency in English. Gender and departments were shown in Table 1 and Table 2 in the Participants section. On the other hand, out of 105 learners, 80 of them (76.19%) reported their English was average level, 17 of them (16.19%) reported not being good, and only 13 of them (12.38%) reported having a good level of English. It shows that the majority of learners find themselves adequate to communicate in English. All the other results will be explained comprehensively under the title of related research questions in the following section.

*What accent do the tertiary level learners aim for when speaking English for professional and daily purposes and why?*

The first research question of the present study aimed to find out the English accent preferences of tertiary-level learners while speaking English for both professional and daily purposes, and the reasons for these preferences. As the first step, learners were asked to identify their ideas on the ideal English accent, so 30% of them claimed that English speaking should sound like a British accent, 23,68% of them preferred the American accent, while 5,27% preferred other accents

including Turkish, Australian, or Indian, etc. This result is in line with the study carried out by Jenkins (2007), Rindal and Piercy (2013), Kung and Wang (2019), Huang and Hashim (2020), and Akçay (2020) in terms of non-native English speakers' accent preferences; non-native learners mostly prefer British and American English accents due to their reputation. On the other hand, 40,78% of learners did not report any English accent, rather they claimed how English accent/speaking should be. Therefore, the results showed that 23,68% of the learners would prefer intelligibility which is significant for language speakers (Wang & Jenkins, 2016), and this result may also be supported by other studies (Ren, Chen, & Lin, 2016; Norman, 2017; Boonskuk & Ambele, 2019). Additionally, other learners claimed that fluency was important in English (5,26%), English speaking/accent should be at B2 or C1 level (7,89%), and the words should be easy to pronounce, etc. (3,95%). The results, so far, have shown that the learners not only prefer an ideal accent for themselves (British, American, etc.) but also care about the properties of accent (intelligibility) and the level of proficiency in English. Table 3 demonstrates the learners' ideal English accent preferences in detail.

Table 3. Ideal English accent preference of learners

| Preferences | N | % |
|---|---|---|
| *Accents* | | |
| American | 18 | 23.68 |
| British | 23 | 30.26 |
| Turkish | 1 | 1.32 |
| Others (Australian, Indian, etc.) | 3 | 3.95 |
| *Accents' Sounds* | | |
| Intelligible | 18 | 23.68 |
| Fluent | 4 | 5.26 |
| B2/C1 Level | 6 | 7.89 |
| Others (Perfect, easy to pronounce, etc.) | 3 | 3.95 |
| Total Participants | 76 | 100 |

Since the present study focuses on both aspects of English language use; daily and professional, other questions, as well, were asked to the learners to be able to shed more light on the handled issue. When asked their aim for an accent for daily English language use, 25.96% of them aimed for a British accent, and 19.23% aimed for an American accent, 8.65% aimed for Turkish, while 25.96% of them did not aim to sound a certain accent. The rest of the learners (19.23%) claimed they just harmonized the accents they heard from their connections. On the other hand, when asked their aim of accent for professional language use, 25.96% of them aimed British accent, 17.31% aimed American accent, 7.96% aimed Turkish accent, and 29.81% did not aim for a certain accent, while 18.27% of them mixed the accents. The results show that in both aspects, non-native tertiary level English speakers mostly aim to sound like British, followed by American, while speaking English. The probable reason for this preference, according to the learners who were in the focus group interview, is the reputation of these two accents around the world, the belief towards the owners of English, the standard idea of the ones who use British or American English knows better English (Kung & Wang, 2019).

The learners were also asked to report their way of choosing English accents while communicating, and 24.27% reported that they adopted the accent from the

interaction with TV series, movies or online games (mostly British and American English), 22.33% reported they chose the accent that they thought sounded just like them, 16.50% adopted the accent of their teachers, 10.68% adopted the accent they were exposed by social media, 4.85% adopted the accent with the interaction of different sources such as expert opinions, books, etc. On the other hand, 21.36% did not report any way for choosing an accent, since they did not have a certain accent. Similarly, some studies, as well, show that learners are under the influence of TV programs, teachers, and social media while adopting a certain accent (Kung & Wang, 2019).

*Is having a native-like English accent important to acquire for professional and daily purposes according to the tertiary level learners?*

The second research question focused on whether acquiring a native-like English accent is important for professional and daily purposes according to tertiary level learners. Therefore, the tertiary level learners were asked whether English for daily and professional use is different from each other. 96,85% of them reported that they were different from each other. They claimed that while English for daily use should be easy to understand, simple, and short, English for professional use should be certain, detailed and have no room for error. On the other hand, according to the learners, the professional language includes more technical terms and more rules; however, daily language use has few rules and if a mistake has occurred, it might be compensated easily in daily language. For the rest of the learners, 3.15% claimed there was no difference between daily and professional English use; they claimed if they could speak English for daily use, they could also speak for professional purposes as well.

50% of the participants of the present study speak English with a non-native Turkish speaker only less than once a month, while 13.46% a few times a week, 10.58% once a week, 15.38% a few times a month, and 10.58% once a month. It shows that these learners are not exposed to and do not use English so much. On the other hand, for daily English use, 55.24% of them cared a little, 24.76% did not care at all, and 20% of them cared a lot about how they sounded or what accent they use. These frequencies differ in the case of professional language use; 46.15% cared a little, 28.85% did not care at all, and 25% cared a lot about how they sound or what accent they use. According to 53.92% of the learners, a native-like English accent was not important for daily language use; while 46.08% of them put importance on it. The learners believed that not accent but intelligibility is important for daily English use. Nevertheless, according to 69.31% of the learners, a native-like English accent was important for professional language use to be able to establish effective communication, prestige, seriousness, and mastery; while 30.69% did not consider an accent as important for professional language use. Due to globalization and the increase in immigration, contact among different nations has increased so far, and English is used as a lingua franca between native English speakers and non-native English speakers (Gluszek, Newheiser, & Dovidio, 2011). Therefore, the learners will be in contact with other nations for their professional purposes. The learners who are aware of this situation believe that having a native-like English accent will be beneficial for them in terms of better communication (Wasserman, 2008), and feeling more professional and sophisticated (Kung & Wang, 2019).

The learners were also asked to report which part of English (vocabulary, grammar, accent, etc.) was necessary for both daily and professional language use. For daily language use, 75.25% of them reported vocabulary, 6.93% accent, 11.88% grammar, and 5.94% others (practice, grammar plus vocabulary, all of them, etc.) are significant in terms of establishing better communication. On the other hand, for professional language use, 52.48% of them reported vocabulary, 25.74% grammar, 14.85% accent, 6.93% others ("professional language includes lots of parameters", grammar plus vocabulary plus accent altogether, practice, etc.) are significant in terms of effective professional communication. The participants in the focus group claimed that it was useless to choose one aspect for both communication types since language use did not consist of only one aspect, rather they believed the combination of all parts of language enables speakers to carry out effective communication.

*Does self-perceived English accent impact tertiary level learners' communicative competence for professional and daily purposes?*

The last research question focused on the effect of self-perceived English accents on tertiary level learners' communicative competence for professional and daily purposes. In terms of daily language use, most of the learners are not exposed to or do not need to speak English. They only face English speaking in English courses or games. On the other hand, in terms of future professional life, almost all of them were aware that they would need English a lot since it is necessary for their profession, and they would be in touch with foreigners in the future while running their businesses. To be able to illuminate this research question, the learners were asked some questions such as "If someone with a native accent of English, a non-Turkish, or someone you spoke English with abroad would understand that you do not have English as your first language because of your accent, would you care?". In conclusion, 52.04% of the learners reported they did not care how they sound claiming no oddity of having a Turkish accent while communicating, 29.59% of them reported they did not care at all, while 13.27% of them reported they care about a little, and 5.10% care a lot. A similar result was found by Norman (2017), the learners claimed no worry about how they sounded, they only cared about what they said was transferred.

When the learners were asked whether the people who are native English speakers or non-native English speakers could understand them better if they had a native-like accent, 75.51% of them claimed yes, while 24.49% of them reported no. The ones who said yes reported that they could express themselves better, they might sound more intelligible, and they could have a clear pronunciation when they have a native-like accent; hence, the other individuals who are native English speakers or other people who use English as a foreign or second language could understand them better. On the other hand, the ones who said no reported that it depends on people; however, there was no relationship between native-like English accents and intelligibility, so the accent did not matter in terms of understanding by others.

70.10% of the learners believed that no matter whether you have a native-like accent, it is more important to be able to express yourself with ease, while 29.90% put more importance on sounding like a native speaker, no matter if you have some problems while expressing yourself. 58.76% of the learners claimed if they had a

certain accent, they would have more advantages while communicating with a native or non-native English speaker, due to the intelligibility of their accent and having better communication skills. On the other hand, 19.59% of them claimed if they had a certain accent, they would have some disadvantages due to the confusion of accents and differences in pronunciations. 21.65% of them believed accent did not influence communication.

When all the answers to the survey questions have been taken into consideration, it is believed that more than half of the learners do not care about how they sound while communicating in English for daily and professional purposes; however, some of them care about it and they believe that if they speak English with British or American accent, they will establish effective communication. This caring is more important in professional language use since they claim that having a native-like accent will give more benefit to them in terms of gaining prestige from other businesses.

## Conclusion

As a result of globalization, the use of English as a lingua franca has gained acceleration, so people around the world are exposed to and use English more than before. In parallel with this, the tertiary level learners are the ones who may use English for daily purposes and are close to using English for professional purposes in near future. The present study aimed to find out the tertiary level learners' own English accent perceptions, and their influence on communicative competence in terms of both daily and professional language use. The study focused on three research questions; accent preferences of tertiary-level learners, the importance of having a native-like English accent for professional and daily language use, and the effect of accent on communicative competencies of tertiary-level learners in both aspects. The data was obtained by a survey and focus group interview and analyzed with frequencies.

The results of the study showed that the majority of the learners preferred British, followed by American English for both daily and professional language use. They believed that if they had a British or American English accent, they would sound better to the other speakers. On the other hand, the other majority of the learners did not aim to sound like a certain accent, instead, they focused on intelligibility, which means they only cared about expressing themselves in any way without putting any importance on accent. According to the learners, daily and professional English use differed from each other, for instance, daily language might be simpler and shorter, while professional language might be error-free and more detailed. The learners put more emphasis on the importance of a native-like English accent for professional purposes and they believed that if they had a native-like English accent, they would have more benefits in terms of professional life since they could show mastery, gain prestige, and sound more sophisticated. All in all, they elaborated on the importance of intelligibility rather than a certain accent.

Just like the other studies, the present study has some limitations such as the number of participants. Since the study was carried out during the Covid-19 pandemic, it was hard to collect online data from the participants. Nevertheless, even if they may not be generalized due to the limitation, the present results might be important to researchers interested in ELF, ELF awareness, English accents and English teachers. Further studies may be carried out to shed more light on the

reasons for these preferences and it may be beneficial to conduct some comparison analysis between daily language speakers and professional language speakers.

On the other hand, as a result of the focus group interview, it was understood that the learners had the benefit of exposing different English accents in terms of understanding these accents better. So, it might be more useful to expose English language learners to the different accents and apply the LFC offered by Jenkins (2000) to make them more aware of various English accents. With the help of this awareness, they may have a better self-perceived accent and their communicative competence may not be influenced by the accent at all, since they will know the importance of intelligibility rather than the accent while communicating, and they will follow the basic rules of pronunciation rather than the rules of certain English accents, such as British or American.

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