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EXPOSURE TO ENGLISH ACCENTS IN UNDERGRADUATE SETTINGS:

GENDERED RESPONSES?

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Abstract

Educators in the Brunei Darussalam's education system are predominantly locals, and are many have received their education from local universities. In addition, the first language of most of the population is one of the seven indigenous languages including Brunei Malay. Therefore, it is not uncommon to hear educators speaking in English with a local accent. This, however, is seen to come with a preconceived notion of *status* and *competence* to the interlocutor. Being in a setting where both attributes are expected to be high in educators to bridge trust between students and teachers, and assimilate knowledge transfer, it is interesting to see if the local students' preconceived notions are reflective of the low status-low competence attributed to non-native-like accents abroad. Furthermore, gender is also a vital variable in investigating the current study as Brunei is a patriarchal society, but women are lavishly pampered with equal opportunities as men. The current study suggests that male speakers of Received-Pronunciation and Brunei accents are the anchors for *status* and *competence* traits, and thus, gender may very well be a factor that determines the *status* and *competence* of the accented English-speakers in the patriarchal Sultanate.

Keywords

Accents, status, competence, gender, English as a Second Language (ESL), education.

1. Introduction

In Brunei, a variety of accents can be heard including British, American, and Malay. This is partly due to the fact that the bilingual education system that is part of the SPN21 (National Education System of the 21st Century) curriculum implemented nationwide allows the interaction between the local indigenous languages of Malay, predominantly Brunei Malay and the English language. This constant contact has caused a rise in a saliently distinct Bruneian variety of English with 'nativised' features such as hybrid lexical constructions ('they are attending the *memapat jambul* ceremony') and 'englishised' ones such as the use of assimilated loanwords (the use of *organisasi* instead of *pertubuhan* for 'organisation') in speeches of Bruneians (Hajah Rosnah, Noor-Azam and McLellan, 2002, pp. 95-112). Furthermore, English has an importance in the country. The establishment of the Brunei-US English Language Enrichment Program launched on 7th September, 2012 encourages the learning and usage of English both inside and outside the country. This enabled participants from other regions to be in contact with the English variety spoken locally.

This exposure for direct contact to the local variety of spoken English brings great importance in the exploration of 'perceptual dialectology' (Meyerhoff, 2006). This means that the respondents for this study are not experts in the fields of language and linguistics. This selection criterion is crucial because accents are such salient linguistic identity markers that is often used by every social group in a society, including linguists and non-linguists to create stereotypes (Wardhaugh, 1986) and ideologies (Garrett, 2010) of particular groups in a society. Even when it does not impede cross-cultural communication (Bloch and Starks, 1999), members of the society constantly have subjective views about different discourse communities based on their accents which can be advantageous, disadvantageous or neutral in effect.

Therefore, the significance of this study lies in the implication of accents employed by educators, the respondents' probable preconceived perception on the educators due to the accents employed the gender of the educators with accented speeches. These notions may enhance or impede knowledge transfer between an educator and their students.

2. Literature

2.1. Responses to accents and the role of gender

There are three basic responses to accents; positive, negative and neutral. Pishghadam and Sabouri (2011) revealed that American English was most preferred by the respondents in Iran according to criteria such as *gentle, trustworthy, sincere* and *patient*. Thus, speakers with an American English accent are advantaged in the Iranian society where the respondents belong to. The same cannot be said for all variations of accents. Hosoda, Nguyen and Stone-Romero (2012) found that some accents are clearly stigmatised such as speakers with Mexican-Spanish accents. Speakers of these accents were seen as less suitable for jobs such as software engineer, are less likely to be hired, are less likely to be promoted and are less competent whereas, applicants who have American English accents were perceived to be more suited for the job applied. Furthermore, there are also accents that do not trigger any reaction from the surrounding society such as the Mandarin-Chinese accent in certain parts of the USA, because the 'considerable economic and occupational success [of this ethnic group] in the US' rendered the Mandarin-Chinese-accented speakers neutral to stereotypes (Cargile, 2000, p.173).

On another note, gender is also an important factor to consider in the study of accents. One of the most recent theories developed for attitude study is the Social Constructionist Theory which claims that individuals in a society are 'gendered through [their] interactions' (Baxter, 2011, p. 335). This basically means how one judges an accent, what linguistic variables one uses and with whom these variables are used altogether shape one's gender.

There are studies which support Baxter's Social Constructionist Theory such as McKenzie's (2008) study, which show that genders of the respondents have a significant effect on the speakers' ratings on accented speeches. In that study, 558 female undergraduates and postgraduates in Japan rated speakers from the Inner Circle more positively than their male counterparts overall. Inner Circle countries refer to countries where English is spoken as either the first language or the mother tongue by its citizens (Kachru, 1986). Said (2001), on the other hand, found that his female respondents from the 71 undergraduates in the USA rated accents found in the non-Inner Circle to be significantly more positive than their male peers.

In the current research, in light with the findings from previous studies and Social Constructionist Theory, the gender of both participants and speakers was investigated to explore its effect on attitude ratings. Since Brunei is a patriarchal society, gender may affect the responses to accents in the study. Thus, the first research question reads, 'does gender play a role in determining the responses of participants toward English accents?'

2.2. Accent as a mark for *status* and *competence*

The study of attitudes has proliferated over the years due to the spread of English as a means of communication, information transfer and, of course, knowledge dissemination. Due to the diverse function of English, speakers of accented English are often welcomed with a preconceived notion of their *status* and *competence*. *Status* include traits that indicates how well a speaker is fairing in their state of being. Indicators for *status* include the speaker's supposed level of intelligence, their success and ambitious nature. *Competence*, on the other hand, include traits that are used to forecast the probability of success for the speaker. Some measures of *competence* include how likely the speaker is to be hired, and how likely will they be promoted once they are hired.

In terms of *status*, Lindemann (2003) found that 39 native speakers of English undergraduates from the University of Michigan rated native speakers of Koreans negatively on status-related traits. Not surprisingly, speakers with native-like accents were rated favourably on the same measure. These traits included the positive qualities (intelligent, successful, ambitious), and negative ones (lazy, uneducated, incompetent). It was interesting that Lindemann also found that the respondents were not necessarily familiar with Korean-accented speech to identify the ethnicity of the speakers correctly before they passed their judgments on their accents.

Cargile, Takai and Rodriguez (2006) also found that speakers with native-like accents were rated positively than the speakers with less-native-like proficiency. In fact, the Mainstream US English (MUSE) accent was rated significantly more positively than speakers with African-American Vernacular English accent. Interestingly, unlike Lindemann (2003), Cargile et al.'s study was done on 113 undergraduates from two Japanese Universities. So, the perception that native-like accent was much preferred and was perceived to have a high status is not confined to the inner circle countries.

In terms of *competence*, Dailey, Giles and Jansma (2004) investigated the trait using four different qualities, including lazy, ambitious, smart and educated on a Likert 7-point scale anchored by

‘definitely yes’ and ‘definitely no’. Considering the fact that Anglos were the dominant group in the society and Hispanics were the minority, it was interesting to find the Hispanics themselves rated the Hispanics-accented speakers less positively when compared to the rating given by the Anglos to the Hispanics-accented speakers. These findings suggest that the minority-status of the population may even reflect the perceived competence of the population on themselves without the pressure from the dominant population.

Furthermore, Pishghadam and Sabouri (2011) also use a range of qualities to test the judgment of listeners on the *competence* of speakers with accented-English. Even when the study was done in the expanding circle country of Iran, American-accented speakers were rated the most positively on attributes pertaining to high competence. Such attribute included being intelligent, educated, professional, and a good teacher. The speakers were followed by British-accented speakers, Persian-accented and finally, Arabic-accented speaker.

These studies demonstrate that native-like accents still hold preference in the minds of Nonnative Speakers (NNS), and native speakers (NS) of English in their judgment of *the status* and *competence* of the speakers with accents. However, it is worth noting that three factors may have affected the results in these studies. First, the accents used in the study and the country in which the study was conducted (i.e. Lindemann (2003) studied Korean accent, Cargile and colleagues (2006) conducted their study in Japan) primarily belong to the Expanding Circle. In this circle, English is regarded as a Foreign Language. This means that the speakers from these countries may use English, if it is used at all, but it does not have a formal function to play in the society (Kachru, 1986). Second, the group that uses the accent were heavily stigmatised in the society under study (i.e. AAVE by African American in the United States). Third, the speakers from whom the accents belonged to were simply dominated by another larger group in the society (i.e. Pishghadam and colleague’s (2001) studied-accents were Anglo-Hispanics, which have dominant-minority relations).

It will be interesting to observe differences should the conditions of the study are changed. In the current study, three conditions were changed which makes it different from previously conducted research in accents. First, instead of conducting the study of accents in the expanding circle, the current research is carried out in an outer circle country. Outer Circle countries uses English as the citizens’ second language, and the language often have a formal function to play in the society such as in education and administration settings (Kachru, 1986). Second, accents that are under study

(Brunei and British accents) are not stigmatised accents, unlike the accent of AAVE in Cargile et al.'s study (2006). Third, there is no social group domination between the Brunei and British society in Brunei Darussalam that may affect the responses made by the participants in the study, unlike the status of Hispanics who are dominated by the Anglo society in Pishghadam et al.'s study (2001). In the light of the three difference in conditions, the second research question reads, 'will speakers with non-native accents still be seen as having lower *status* and lower *competence* when compared to speakers with native accents?'

There has been some research done on accents in Brunei which dealt with native and non-native accents. Cane and Hjh Rosnah (1996) found that their 36 participants of TESL major/minor undergraduates mostly preferred non-native speaker accents with accompanying native-standard grammar and vocabulary, and find the former desirable as an accent that they will adopt themselves. However, non-native accents with non-native grammar and vocabulary was seen to be the variant that has the lowest prestige prescribed by the respondents. This study reflected the notion that standard grammar and vocabulary carries higher importance than the standard (i.e. native) accent itself. The result is similar to the findings of Nurliyana (2011) whereby respondents favoured non-native accents over native ones when they had to choose one that they would adopt themselves. Nurliyana (2011) also found native speakers to have high status (by being rated higher for intelligence trait when compared to the rating given to Brunei accent) and friendlier.

The two research questions which guide the current study leads the researcher to decide to investigate two of the accents that is seen to play vital roles in Brunei. These include British accent (due to the British-based education system in the country) and Brunei accent (the accent variant which is perceived to be the most widely spoken variety in the country). The former is a variant from the Inner Circle of Kachru's three-circle model of World Englishes while the latter is from the Outer Circle in the same model (Jenkins, 2003, p. 15). The current study will shed light specifically on how undergraduates rate the *status* and *competence* of English speakers with either British or Brunei accents.

3. Methodology:

Participants

A total of 13 undergraduates was included in this study, 7 males and 6 females. During the time of study, they were all reading English-medium undergraduate degrees. They have rated themselves as at least good in the English Language (12 rated themselves as good, and 1 as excellent in the language in the questionnaire). This selection criterion enabled participants to comprehend instructions given and reason their responses to maximise the data collection procedure.

Instruments

The first instrument in the study is audio recordings. A modified verbal-guise technique was used in the study. Speakers did not read the same text, but care has been taken to ensure that the content read by speakers was free from cultural biases. Table 1 contained the list of verbatim transcripts of the recordings. All these recordings were taken from youtube.com and are of good quality. The Brunei and British accents recordings were taken from Radio Television Brunei (RTB) and British Broadcasting Cooperation (BBC) respectively. All speakers were native speakers of their spoken accents.

Table 1: Verbatim transcripts of the recordings used in the current study.

Speaker's gender and accent	Speakers' 10-second speech transcripts
Male British accent	Meet the new waste mountain; electronics. No longer as shiny as they were in the showroom, now chucked onto the scrapheap. The numbers involved in this are staggering.
Female Brunei accent	Such leaders are not only those with high academic qualifications, but possess virtuous values and has high commitment to serve their king, religion, nation and community.
Female British accent	But the Burmese armed forces can still put on an impressive display. Thousands of troops marched in perfect step before their recursive leader, General Tan Shwei to mark Armed forces day.

Male Brunei accent	To discuss preparations for the non-ally movement summit to be held in Egypt in July. The meeting also provides an opportunity for member countries to coordinate activities on current matters of common concern.
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The second instrument is the use of reduced vowels in recordings. Reduced vowels are features that distinguishes the two accents under study. Brunei accented English often contain function words which does not contain reduced vowels. Tokens such as ‘are’ are enunciated as /ɑ/ (in full vowel sound) in Brunei accented speech as opposed to the British accented speech of /ə/ (in reduced vowel sound). This allows salient differences to seep through the entire audio recordings between the two accents. Further examples of tokens for reduced vowels is shown in table 2.

Table 2: Reduced vowels in the recordings used in the current study.

Recording order	Speaker	Tokens	Realisation	Reduced vowels
1	Male with British accent	As shiny as In are	/əs...əs/ /ən/ /ə/	3/3
2	Female with Brunei accent	Are And And(2)	/ɑ/ /æən/ /æən/	0/3
3	Female with British accent	Can Of To	/kən/ /əv/ /tə/	3/3
4	Male with Brunei accent	To An of	/tu/ /æən/ /of/	0/3

Both speakers with British accents reduced their vowels in the selected tokens. Meanwhile, both speakers of Brunei accents used full vowels in function words. This is judged to be salient feature in differentiating the speakers of both accents.

The third material used was attitude rating questionnaires. The four attributes measured were ‘rich/poor’, ‘educated/uneducated’, ‘enthusiastic/hesitant’, and ‘leader/follower. These traits were aligned on a 6-point Likert scale, anchored by positive and negative characteristics. The absence of a

neutral point forces respondents to choose one end of the attribute investigated. The attributes which was used to suggest *status* rating were 'rich/poor' and 'leader/follower', and those used to suggest *competence* rating were 'educated/uneducated' and 'enthusiastic/hesitant'. Table 3 is a sample of the table that is presented to all respondents to rate all accented English.

Table 3: Sample of rating questionnaire table for accent-rating.

Speaker 1							
Positive Attributes	1	2	3	4	5	6	Negative Attributes
Rich							Poor
Educated							Uneducated
Enthusiastic							Hesitant
Leader							Follower
Friendly							Unfriendly
Honest							Dishonest

The recordings containing reduced vowels were played to the participants immediately before they gave their ratings for different speakers. For instance, the British male accent was played first and then the respondents were given 10 seconds to rate the speaker according to the attributes listed in the questionnaire. Then, the recording for Brunei female was played and another 10-second delay allowed the respondents to give their ratings of the particular speaker. This process was repeated until all four speakers in the recording were rated.

The fourth material used was a focus group interview. It is conducted after the completion of the questionnaire in a semi-structured manner with the researcher as the moderator. The queries made were saliently related to the attributes found in the questionnaire. This lasted for less than 30 minutes and were conducted in three small groups of 4-5 people (4 for both Female and Mixed group and 5 for Male group). The questions asked were as follows:

1. Which of the four speakers do you think have the highest status? Why?
2. Which of the four speakers do you think have the most competence in the language? Why?
3. Which accent do you prefer? Why?

Data analysis

Two kinds of data analysis were carried out for the data obtained. First, the average ratings of the speakers from a range of attributes were carried out. This method allowed varying degrees of positivity/negativity of the same attribute. The scale that was used in the questionnaire was 1 to 6 so, the higher the average scores given, the more negative the attribute for an accent. Secondly, the compilation of preferred accents and the reasons for these preferences were collected and recorded.

Results

Table 4 shows the compilation of the average ratings given to different accents and gender of the speakers regardless of the gender of the respondents. The important values in this table would be the highest (highlighted in Grey) and the lowest average ratings (written in **bold**). The higher the average ratings, the more negative the attribute given to the speaker. Also, since the Likert-scale used was a 1 to 6, positive attributes ranges from 1.00-3.00 points and the negative ones from 4.00-6.00 points.

Table 4: Average ratings of speakers by attributes regardless of gender of respondents.

Speaker	Gender of participants	Attributes			
		Traits to measure <i>status</i>		Traits to measure <i>competence</i>	
		Rich / Poor	Leader / Follower	Educated / Uneducated	Enthusiastic / Hesitant
British male	Male	2.43	3.14	2.43	2.71
	Female	2.17	1.5	1.67	2.17
Brunei female	Male	2.43	2.71	1.43	3.14
	Female	2.67	2.67	1.83	2.33
British female	Male	2.43	4.14	2.14	3.43
	Female	2.33	3	1.67	2.67
Brunei male	Male	2.86	4	2	4
	Female	3.5	3.83	2.67	3.33

Overall, regardless of the gender of the respondents, Brunei male was perceived likely to be *poor*, British female was perceived likely to be a *follower*, while British male was perceived as likely to be *rich* and a *leader*. This indicated that that in terms of *status*, British male had the highest *status* while the British female and Brunei male has the lowest *status*.

Further, regardless of the gender of the respondents, Brunei female was perceived as likely to be *educated*, while Brunei male was perceived as likely to be *uneducated*. British male was perceived to be *enthusiastic* and British female was perceived to likely be *unenthusiastic*. In this case, while there were discrepancies in the trait for *competence*, Brunei male and British female were vaguely

suggested to be the least *competent* while British male and Brunei female were equally vaguely suggested to be most *competent*.

When the genders of the respondents were taken into consideration, the outcome was slightly different. Table 5 shows the outcome of such comparison.

Table 5: Average ratings of speakers by attributes regardless of gender of respondents.

Speaker	Gender of participants	Attributes			
		Traits to measure <i>status</i>		Traits to measure <i>competence</i>	
		Rich / Poor	Leader / Follower	Educated / Uneducated	Enthusiastic / Hesitant
RP male	Male	2.43	3.14	2.43	2.71
Br female		2.43	2.71	1.43	3.14
RP female		2.43	4.14	2.14	3.43
Br male		2.86	4	2	4
RP male	Female	2.17	1.5	1.67	2.17
Br female		2.67	2.67	1.83	2.33
RP female		2.33	3	1.67	2.67
Br male		3.5	3.83	2.67	3.33

Male participants perceived British male, British female and Brunei female as being the *richest* and Brunei male was rated as the *poorest* by both male and female respondents. Females rated British male the *richest*. Male respondents further rated Brunei female to be the most *leader*-like while British male was rated as *leader*-like by female respondents. This outcome suggests that, as far as *status*-trait is concerned, British male has the highest *status*, followed by Brunei female and Brunei male has the lowest *status*.

In measuring the *competence* trait, Brunei female and British male was suggested to be the most *educated* and the most *enthusiastic* respectively by male respondents, while British male was seen to be the most *educated* and *enthusiastic* in accordance to the female respondents. Further, Brunei male was seen to be the most *uneducated* and least *enthusiastic* according to female respondents.

This suggests that Brunei male was perceived to be the most *competent* and Brunei male was seen to be the least so.

In sum, these results can be compressed to suggest that there is an overlap in the results when gender is and is not taken into consideration in the interpretation of the results. In terms of *status*, British male was rated most favourably while Brunei male was rated the least favourably amongst the respondents. Meanwhile, in terms of *competence*, British male was seen to be the most *competent* and Brunei male was rated to be the least *competent*.

Based on the responses from the questionnaires, respondents were encouraged to reason the ratings that they have awarded to the speakers of the Brunei and British accents in the recordings. Their responses have been summarised in table 5.

Table 5: Inter-gender comparison of deciding factors that influenced the process of awarding attributes.

Trait	Males	Females
Highest <i>status</i> (from attributes <i>rich</i> and <i>leader</i>)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>Speed of delivery</u> • <u>Personality portrayed</u> • <u>Voice quality and tone</u> • Enunciation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>Speed of delivery</u> • <u>Personality portrayed</u> • <u>Voice quality and tone</u> • Gender • Familiarity
Most <i>competence</i> (from attributes <i>educated</i> and <i>enthusiastic</i>)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>Speed of delivery</u> • <u>Gender</u> • Assumption of first language • Voice quality and tone 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>Speed of delivery</u> • <u>Gender</u> • Personality portrayed

The male and female participants differ only slightly in the deciding factors that enabled them to judge the recorded speaker's accent. One of the two most used cues was 'personality portrayed' as can be implied from the following extracts:

(F1) "The first speaker sounded very expressive and very convincing...like a businessman or a lecturer..."

(M1) "RP Male sounded like Chinese speaker trying to sound Anglo...like me..."

'Voice quality and tone' was also found to be another common deciding factor used in all attribute ratings, and used by both gender in all focus groups as demonstrated below:

(F2) "His tone is attractive...he has this deep voice..."

(M2) "He sounded very British, very posh...beautiful tone of voice he has..."

Transcript extracts for 'speed of delivery' being important cues in awarding ratings are found below:

(F3) "Smooth, slow...therefore she is confident and thus, competent..."

(M3) "She read with no feelings...very careful...thinks about her speech..."

'Gender' was the determining factor that was used by both genders as can be seen from these extracts:

(F4) "But she is a female...she cannot have the highest status..."

(M6) "She is a lady...she sounded friendly..."

The focus group then shifted in focus to determine the accent preferences of the respondents. Table 6 is a compilation of the results along with the reason for their preferences.

Table 6: Accent preference by participants and their reasons gathered from focus group interviews.

Respondents	Accent preference(s)	Reason(s)
F1	British male and Brunei male	"Friendly and posh at the same time"
F2		
F3		
F4		
F5		"Gentle and not too much of an authoritative figure"
M1		"Environmentally friendly, someone you would want to hang out with"
M5		"Not too thick but enough to make an impression, and is understandable"
M6		
M3	British male	"Clear and sound intelligent"
M4		
F6	British male and British female	"Sounds educated"
M2		"Confident and can be role a model"
M7	Brunei female and British female	"Soothing, can be understood and sounded intelligent"

Even after focus group interviews were conducted it was suggested that British male still dominated the preferences of most of the respondents (12 out of 13). Most of the preferences were also noted to be from male with accented speeches (regardless of whether they are Brunei or Brunei accents) with 12 out of 13 preferences.

Discussion

Overall, the results of this study suggests that gender is a key factor in determining attitudes towards English accents. This is reflected in all the categories investigated where male speakers with accents (Brunei or British) were dominantly preferred (from focus group results) and British male was seen as having high *status* and *competence* according to the participants in the study (in questionnaires).

In the *status* category, local Brunei male accent was seen to have lower *status* when compared to the high *status*-rated British male accent. This is reflective of other studies which investigates *status* (Lindemann, 2003; Cargile et al., 2006) where non-native accents were rated considerably low on the *status* trait. Furthermore, the accents in Lindemann's (2003) and Cargile et al.'s (2006) study was on stigmatised accents. It is interesting to see that the findings in the current study seems to suggest that even when local languages such as Brunei Malay which enjoys proliferated usage in the Sultanate, does not necessarily exempt itself from being related to low-*status* perception. This is possibly due to the function of the language itself that is primarily rooted to domestic settings. Local languages such as Brunei Malay which give rise to Brunei accented speech may as well a common accent in the country, but do not have a *status*-leveraging potential, in accordance to the participants in the study.

Competence is the next category to be discussed. In previous research such as Pishghadam et al.'s (2010) study, speakers with native accents (specifically American accent) were often upgraded in this classification. This seemed to be true for the responses in the current study as well because both male and female participants rated male British speakers as being the most *competent*, and Brunei male as being the least. This further instigated the fact that British accents are still seen to be highly regarded by the respondents who are probably well-versed with the British education system practised in the sultanate. Although the speakers were proficient enough in the English language, they too feel that *competency* inherently comes with having a British accent.

It is interesting to note that the two anchors of the *status* and *competence* scale were males, both highs for British male and lows for Brunei male. This finding is reflective of Nurliyana's (20011) study but the opposite to Cane and Hjh Rosnah's (1996) accent-research. Being a patriarchal society, it seems, does have an impact on the perception of the respondents. Female accented speeches, regardless of whether it is Brunei or British, were seen to be averagely rated in the designated traits.

The respondents may perceive that in order to be regarded as having high *status* and high *competence*, it is most important to have British accents so as to adhere to the standard and only then will these local male accented-speakers can be considered as having higher *status* and *competence* than the current stance. The same cannot be said about females with accented speech as they may not be seen as having to be subjected to the same expectation and pressure as their male counterparts.

Furthermore, all the cues represented subjectively-held beliefs of the participants either as a focus group or alone. For instance, some quotations consist of comparing the recording that the participants heard with their own accents (e.g. M1) or familiar figures (e.g. F1). Others are simply reflections of the participants' preferences (e.g. F2, F3, M2, and M3). There are others still who based their judgements on societal beliefs of different gender and their roles (e.g. F4 and M6). It can be inferred that personality portrayed, voice quality and tone and speed of delivery were used as a platform for judging attributes of a speaker of an accent by all the informants. The subjectivity of the responses can hardly be used as a reliable indication because of the small number of sample in the current study. However, it must be noted that there are bound to be subjectivity in the study of accents and the reactions to them as these kinds of studies are perceptual in nature.

Another deciding factor was gender, specifically the mention of females not being able to be in high status positions claimed by both male and female respondents. So this deciding factor limited the ranks possible for female speakers to occupy. This echoes what has been said earlier when males (RP and Br accented) were seen to anchor the status-competence rating scales. This is interesting as it is highly reflective of the male dominant society that is perceived to be present in Brunei and this traditional societal hierarchy idea is still present in the minds of local youths even when women are presented with the same opportunity as men and many women are already occupying high ranked positions in the Sultanate.

Even after focus group interviews were conducted it was suggested that RP male still dominated the preferences of most of the respondents (12 out of 13). Most of the preferences were also noted to be from male with accented speeches (regardless of whether they are RP or Br accents) with 12 out of 13 preferences.

Furthermore, accent preferences were considered where gender again was seen to be an influential factor as most participants preferred male-produced accented-speech (be it RP or Br). A combination of local and Brit accents was the popular choice made by the respondents to suggest that although the respondents wanted to suggest that they prefer the high status- competence accent, they would also like to be identified with the local community and thus, also preferred the Br version of the male accented speech. The balance between high prestige and solidarity resulted in the blending of accent preferences.

Gender plays a key role in determining the participants' ideologies toward speakers of an accent. Brunei Darussalam, being a patriarchal society, subjected males to a high threshold level in the status-competence scale where males were expected to have native-like proficiency in order to be considered as high status and high competence. This was speculated to also be due to the role of English in the Sultanate where the British education system is closely adhered to as the standard system of education. Thus, in response to the first research question that reads 'does gender play a role in determining the responses of participants toward English accents?', it seems that the gender of the speaker with accented speech does indeed have a significant impact on the responses made by the participants in the study. When the speakers of the accented English are male, they are automatically subjected to the expectation of having to produce native-like accents in order to be seen as having high-*status* and high-*competence*.

In response to the second research question that reads, 'will speakers with non-native-like accents still be seen as having lower *status* and lower *competence* when compared to speakers with native-like accents. Even in a society where English is a Second Language, and the use of English has primarily dominated the formal education setting, while the use of Brunei Malay as one of the indigenous languages which give rise to the Brunei-accented English is ubiquitous in the Sultanate, speakers with non-native-like proficiency was still stigmatised to a certain extent. As was previously speculated, it may be because of the patriarchal nature of the society where males were subjected to more pressure than females to obtain native-like proficiencies in order to be deemed high *status* and high *competence*.

Implication for the current study rests mostly in pedagogical relevance of language classes. Firstly, considering the fact that Brunei Malay is one of the local languages that is very widely spoken in the Sultanate, students need to be realistic in their expectation and placement of judgement especially in

terms of *status* and *competence*. These two traits are important in building trust between students and educators, which translates to the smooth exchange of knowledge between the two parties. Students need to realise, via exposure, that the English language is no longer spoken only by speakers from the Inner Circle such as Britain, and having non-native accent do not necessarily translate to low *status* or *competence*. Enough exposure to the variation in accents will develop a more accepting attitude toward local accented English speeches, and perhaps retract the mentality of students that there are elements that are more important in pedagogy such as intelligibility, grammar and vocabulary.

Second, students need to realise that they do not have to impose unnecessary pressure on themselves in obtaining native-like accents in order to render themselves high-*status* or high-*competence*. Language educators have the utmost responsibility to emphasise intelligibility, grammar and vocabulary rather than accents in English language classes. With less burden in trying to obtain native-like accents will create a more conducive environment for the learning of English.

Conclusion

In conclusion, in the current study it was suggested that British male was perceived to have higher ratings in *status* and *competence* than their Brunei counterparts. It suggests that the undergraduates in the study still do have preconceived notion that accents from Inner Circle countries (Britain) have higher prestige than the accents from the Outer Circle countries (Brunei). Furthermore, males were subjected to more pressure in 'bettering' their accents in accordance with native-like accents in order to be highly regarded, especially in *status* and *competence*. However, subjectivity infested the preferences of accents and further studies with larger audiences are called upon in order to verify the current findings. Finally, increased exposure may as well be the best way forward in improving students' receptivity of accent variations for pedagogical improvement.

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