



Malian EFL Learners' Attitudes Towards Listening Materials Featuring Nonnative English Speaker Models

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the attitudes of Malian EFL learners toward the use of nonnative speaker models in listening activities, focusing on their evaluations of three TED speakers with varying pronunciation skills: near-native, moderately accented, and strongly accented. Utilizing a direct investigation methodology, participants provided responses through a structured questionnaire assessing their perceptions of each speaker. The findings reveal a pronounced preference for native-like accents among the learners, with a significant majority expressing a rejection of accented nonnative models in listening exercises. This outcome underscores the presence of negative attitudes toward nonnative English accents among the participants. In light of these results, the study recommends that educators adopt a gradual approach to introducing nonnative accents in listening curricula. By doing so, teachers can alleviate learner discomfort associated with native and near-native speaker models while simultaneously promoting positive attitudes toward nonnative English varieties.

Keywords: Malian EFL learners, Nonnative speaker models, Listening activities, Accent evaluation, Learner attitudes

İngilizceyi Yabancı Dil Olarak Malili Öğrenenlerin, Anadili İngilizce Olmayan Konuşmacıların Yer Aldığı Dinleme Materyallerine Yönelik Tutumları

ÖZET

Bu çalışma, Malili İngilizceyi yabancı dil olarak öğrenen öğrencilerin dinleme etkinliklerinde anadili İngilizce olmayan konuşmacı modellerine yönelik tutumlarını incelemektedir. Araştırmada, telaffuz yeterlilikleri bakımından farklılık gösteren üç TED konuşmacısına (ana dili seviyesine yakın, orta düzeyde aksanlı ve belirgin aksanlı) ilişkin değerlendirmeler odağa alınmıştır. Doğrudan veri toplama yöntemine dayalı olarak yapılandırılmış bir anket aracılığıyla katılımcıların her bir konuşmacıya dair algıları ölçülmüştür. Bulgular, öğrenciler arasında ana dili seviyesindeki aksanlara yönelik güçlü bir tercihin bulunduğunu, belirgin aksanlı konuşmacıların ise büyük ölçüde reddedildiğini ortaya koymaktadır. Bu durum, katılımcılar arasında anadili İngilizce olmayan aksanlara yönelik olumsuz tutumların yaygın olduğunu göstermektedir. Araştırma bulguları doğrultusunda, öğretmenlere dinleme materyallerinde anadili olmayan konuşmacı modellerinin kademeli olarak tanıtılmasını önerilmektedir. Bu yaklaşım, öğrencilerin yalnızca anadili veya ana dili benzeri aksanlara maruz kalma konusundaki rahatsızlıklarını azaltırken, aynı zamanda İngilizcenin farklı çeşitlerine yönelik olumlu tutumların gelişimine katkı sağlayabilir.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Malili İngilizce öğrenenler, Anadili olmayan konuşmacı modelleri, Dinleme etkinlikleri, Aksan değerlendirmesi, Öğrenci tutumları

INTRODUCTION

Listening is a key part of learning a language. It is one of the main ways learners receive language input and absorb new language structures (Brown, 2007). Effective listening not only improves comprehension but also helps in developing other skills like speaking and reading. Despite its importance, Malian EFL learners are usually introduced to listening as a formal subject only when they reach university. At this point, listening activities often feature native English speakers almost exclusively. While these models aim to expose students to real language use, they can be challenging. Native speakers often speak quickly, use idiomatic language, and include colloquial expressions that Malian learners, who do not have had much prior exposure, find hard to follow. This can lead to frustration with listening tasks.

To overcome these challenges, starting with non-native English speakers may offer a better introduction to listening practice. Gradually increasing exposure to native speakers, after learners gain confidence by listening to non-native speakers, can help improve comprehension and lower anxiety. This step-by-step approach allows learners to build their listening skills more effectively and get used to different English accents over time. Moreover, exposing students to various types of English, including non-native versions, better reflects how English is used in global communication today. English is now a global language used by people from many linguistic backgrounds (Matsuda, 2012), so it is important for students to become familiar with this diversity.

However, an important factor in this approach is the learners' attitude towards non-native English. How students feel about the language models they hear can affect their motivation and engagement. Research has shown that learners have mixed views on the use of non-native English in classrooms. Some students prefer native English varieties, such as American or British accents, seeing them as the 'standard' or 'authentic' forms of the language (McKenzie, 2010; Jenkins, 2000). Others recognize the need to understand different English accents, including those spoken by non-native speakers, because English is now a global language (Seidlhofer, 2011; Mousavi, 2012; Dalton-Puffer et al., 2018). These differing opinions show how complex learner attitudes toward non-native English can be.

In Mali, there is little research on learners' attitudes towards different types of English. Most previous studies have focused on local languages and their role in education, especially in primary schools (Minkailou, 2017; 2020). So far, there has been no significant research on how Malian EFL learners feel about using non-native English models in listening activities. Since English is becoming more important for academic and professional purposes in Mali, understanding these attitudes is important for developing effective listening teaching methods.

The goal of this study is to explore how Malian EFL learners feel about using non-native English speakers in listening activities. By investigating their attitudes, the study hopes to add to the conversation on the benefits of using a variety of English accents in EFL classrooms. The study will focus on two main questions:

- How do Malian EFL learners view the use of non-native English speakers in listening classes?
- What are the teaching implications of these views for selecting listening materials in Malian EFL classrooms?

By answering these questions, this study aims to offer insights that can improve teaching practices and support more inclusive and effective listening instruction for Malian EFL learners.

METHOD

As mentioned earlier, this study aims to explore the attitudes of Malian EFL learners towards using nonnative English speakers as models in listening classes. To do this, the study used speeches from three

African TED speakers, each representing different levels of accented English. TED Talks are well-known for featuring speakers from a variety of linguistic backgrounds, making them a great source of authentic, understandable, and context-rich spoken English. The selected speeches were evaluated by a group of Malian university students to collect information on their perceptions and attitudes towards these different English accents in the context of language learning.

The methodology of this study is based on two key theories: Language Attitude Theory and Perceptual Dialectology. According to Garrett (2010), Language Attitude Theory explains that people form opinions about different ways of speaking by evaluating factors such as status, solidarity, and how easy the speech is to understand (Ryan, Giles, & Sebastian, 1982). These attitudes play a significant role in shaping learners' preferences for certain language models in the classroom. Additionally, Perceptual Dialectology, as described by Preston (1989), suggests that individuals develop beliefs about different language varieties based on how “pleasant” or “difficult to understand” they find them. These perceptions are important when evaluating non-native English speakers. This framework helps us understand how learners' thoughts and feelings about different accents might affect their ability to comprehend and engage with the listening materials.

Study Design and Materials

This study used direct methods to measure the learners' attitudes. Unlike indirect methods, which try to guess attitudes from behaviors, direct methods ask respondents to share their views openly (Dörnyei, 2003). In this study, a structured questionnaire was used to capture the learners' opinions on the speakers' attractiveness, how easy the speakers were to understand, and their preferences for using nonnative speakers in listening classes.

To avoid bias and ensure consistency, three TED speakers from Africa were chosen, each with different pronunciation styles: near-native, moderately accented, and strongly accented. TED Talks are known for providing clear, high-quality presentations. However, as Cargile et al. (1994) and Wilson & Bayard (1992) point out, fluency and clarity are not the only factors in listener comprehension. The listener's own skills, attitudes, and experiences also play a big role in how well they understand a speaker. This study focuses on how pleasant and easy-to-understand the nonnative speakers are, rather than traditional measures like clarity or confidence, since all TED speakers are already skilled in delivering their talks.

Short 5-minute video clips from TED Talks were played for the students, instead of the full-length videos, to prevent fatigue or loss of interest. The learners rated each speaker's pleasantness and ease of understanding on a scale of 1 to 3, where they could choose from “very pleasant,” “pleasant,” or “unpleasant.”

Participants and Sampling

The study involved first-year students, as this is when listening is formally introduced as a subject. A total of 120 students, both male and female, aged between 18 and 20 participated. They were divided into five groups of 24. The participants were selected from the larger group of first-year English students at the university. From each of the 14 groups, 10 students were randomly chosen, though more students had shown interest in participating. Limiting the number of participants ensured the sample was manageable and still represented the larger student population.

The sampling method was non-probability purposive sampling, which focused on capturing a broad cross-section of first-year EFL students in Mali. This was done to specifically target students who were just beginning formal listening training, making their exposure to both native and nonnative English speakers particularly relevant.

Data Collection Procedures

The data was collected during regular university classroom sessions to ensure students felt comfortable and familiar with the environment. The researcher facilitated the sessions to maintain consistency in the evaluation process. During each session, students listened to 5-minute clips from the selected TED speakers, played through a loudspeaker. After each clip, they completed a structured questionnaire designed to assess two primary aspects:

Pleasantness:

Students rated the speaker's voice on a 3-point scale:

- unpleasant: The voice is not enjoyable to listen to.
- pleasant: The voice is acceptable but not exceptional.
- very pleasant: The voice is highly enjoyable and engaging.

Difficulty of Understanding

Students evaluated how hard it was to understand the speaker compared to the native speakers they typically hear in class. This was also rated on a 3-point scale:

- more difficult: The speaker's accent made comprehension significantly harder.
- similar difficulty: The speaker's accent posed a challenge comparable to that of native speakers.
- easier to understand: The speaker's accent was easier to understand than the native speakers.

The 1–3 scale was chosen for its simplicity and clarity, ensuring accessibility for first-year students who may lack experience with more complex rating systems. A concise scale also minimizes cognitive overload, allowing students to focus on their immediate impressions rather than overthinking their responses.

Additionally, the limited scale reduces ambiguity and ensures clear differentiation between levels of perception, avoiding the "neutral" middle point found in broader scales (e.g., a 1–5 scale). This clarity is particularly important for analyzing trends in students' attitudes, as it forces participants to lean toward positive or negative judgments.

To encourage honest feedback, the questionnaire was designed to be anonymous, with no identifying information collected. This approach aimed to reduce any anxiety or bias that might arise from fear of judgment or repercussions.

At the end of the questionnaire, students were asked an open-ended question:

"Would you prefer to have more nonnative English speakers as models in your listening classes? Why or why not?" This question provided qualitative insights into the broader preferences and attitudes of the participants, complementing the quantitative data from the rating scales.

The data was collected in regular university classrooms during several sessions. The researcher led the sessions to keep the evaluation process consistent and controlled. The classroom setting, familiar to the students, helped reduce distractions and allowed them to feel more comfortable, leading to more honest responses.

To avoid bias, university teachers were not used as the speakers in the recordings. While using teachers might have been more familiar for the students, it could have led to biased responses based on the students' pre-existing feelings toward their teachers (Schuman & Presser, 1996). Instead, TED speakers

were chosen, as they are public figures with some degree of familiarity but no personal connection to the students. Even though the TEDTalks are publicly available, details about the speakers were not shared with the students to respect privacy and reduce potential bias.

Data Analysis

The data collected from the questionnaires were analyzed manually using descriptive statistics. Responses were categorized based on the participants' ratings of both the pleasantness and difficulty of understanding the speakers. Descriptive measures such as frequencies, percentages, and trends were calculated manually to provide an overview of the distribution of responses. This approach allowed the researcher to identify patterns in the students' attitudes toward the different nonnative English speakers.

The analysis aimed to classify the learners' attitudes as predominantly positive, neutral, or negative, and to evaluate how these attitudes influenced their overall preferences for nonnative speaker models in their listening activities. By examining the relationships between the pleasantness and difficulty ratings, the study sought to understand the extent to which these factors shaped the learners' acceptance or rejection of nonnative English varieties. This manual analysis offers insights into the pedagogical implications of using nonnative speaker models in EFL listening classrooms.

FINDINGS

In the first section of the research, participants were asked to provide some basic information about themselves, including their gender, self-rated listening ability, and any previous experience living in English-speaking countries. This information was important to help explore whether spending time in native English-speaking environments had any effect on the participants' listening skills and their attitudes toward nonnative English speakers. By collecting data on how long they had spent in these countries, the study aimed to find out if such exposure had a significant impact on their ability to understand English and their preferences for native versus nonnative accents. Tables 1 and 2 below give a full summary of the participants' demographic information and background details.

Table 1:

Demographic Distribution of Participants by Sex and Age

Sex	Number	%	Age range	Stays in Native English-Speaking Countries
Male	71	59%	17-20	0
Female	49	41%	18-19	0
Total	120	100%		

Table 2:

Self-Perceived Listening Skills of Participants by Gender

Self-perceived listening skills	Male (N: 71)	%	Female (N: 49)	
Very good	0	0%	1	2%
Good	2	3%	0	0%
A little good	46	65%	25	51%
Poor	23	32%	23	47%

The study included 120 first-year English students, aged 17 to 20. There was a slight gender imbalance, with 59% of the participants being male, which is 9% more than the female participants. Only 2% of the students mentioned having visited Ghana, but none had been to a native English-speaking country. This lack of exposure means that most of the students have not had the chance to fully immerse themselves in environments where English is spoken as a native language, which could limit their listening skills and familiarity with different English accents.

To understand how they viewed their listening abilities, the students were asked to rate their own listening skills based on their experiences in regular listening classes, ranging from “poor” to “very good.” Table 2 shows that most students were honest in their self-assessments, and their ratings matched their teachers’ evaluations. A notable 98% of the students admitted they do not have strong listening skills, with only one female student rating herself as “very good.”

This brings up an important question about the students’ ability to understand nonnative English speakers. As mentioned earlier, difficulty in understanding spoken English is not just about the speaker’s accent but also relates to the listener’s own skills. This highlights the need for teaching methods that focus on improving listening skills, especially when using nonnative English speakers as models.

Table3:

Perceived Comprehensibility of English Speakers with Varying Accents

Comprehensibility of Different Accented English Speakers	Near native (N: 120)	%	Strongly accented (N: 120)	%	Moderately accented (N: 120)	%
Very easy to understand	8	7%	59	49%	14	12%
Easy to understand	19	16%	48	40%	69	57%
Difficult to understand	93	77%	13	11%	37	31%

It is important to clarify that the purpose of this question was not to formally test the participants’ listening comprehension. Instead, they were asked to rate how well they felt they could understand each speaker. Before taking part in the study, the participants did not go through a standardized listening test, but it is reasonable to assume that their listening abilities varied.

As expected, participants had different levels of ease in understanding the speakers. The results showed an interesting pattern: participants found that more heavily accented pronunciations were easier to understand. For instance, 89% of the participants said the strongly accented speaker was easy or very easy to understand, while 77% said they had a hard time understanding the near-native speaker. This contrasts with previous research, which found that learners often struggle with non-native accents (Galloway & Rose, 2015).

Table 4:

Evaluation of the speakers’ attractiveness

Evaluation of Speakers’ Attractiveness	Near-Native (n=120)	%	Strongly Accented (n=120)	%	Moderately Accented (n=120)	%
Very pleasant	82	68%	4	3%	17	14%
Pleasant	34	29%	23	19%	45	38%
Unpleasant	4	3%	93	78%	58	48%

The findings on how participants perceive the attractiveness of different speakers show an important trend: they have negative attitudes toward nonnative English speakers with strong accents. The data

indicate that the speaker with a strongly accented English received lower ratings compared to the other speakers in the study. In fact, nearly half of the participants (48%) found the moderately accented speaker unpleasant to listen to.

This observation is particularly interesting because it suggests that, even though Malian learners face challenges with English pronunciation themselves (Maiga, 2021), they can recognize accented English and show a strong dislike for it. This intolerance may reflect broader attitudes toward language variation and accents, which could affect how engaged they are with different English varieties.

In contrast, the near-native speaker received much better ratings than the accented speakers, indicating a clear preference among participants for this type of speech. This strong preference raises important questions about the suitability of using non-authentic English in teaching materials. The learners' preferences suggest that relying on heavily accented English may not be helpful in improving their listening skills and overall language proficiency.

In the last part of the research instrument, participants were asked to share their opinions on the occasional use of non-authentic English in their classroom. Their level of agreement or disagreement with this practice is shown in Table 5 below.

Table 5:

Occasional use of non-authentic materials in listening classes

Participants' Attitudes Towards the Use of Non-Authentic English	Near-Native (n=120)		Strongly Accented (n=120)		Moderately Accented (n=120)	
		%		%		%
I agree totally	92	77%	1	1%	4	3%
I agree partly	21	17%	32	27%	51	42%
I disagree partly	7	6%	66	54%	62	52%
I disagree totally	0	0%	21	18%	3	3%

The responses from participants show a clear reluctance to accept accented nonnative English in their listening materials. Although they found it difficult to understand the near-native speaker, more than 90% described him as pleasant to listen to and expressed a desire to include this speaker in their classes. This positive feedback is strikingly different from their views on accented English, as only 4% of participants agreed with using either strongly or moderately accented English in their listening sessions. This preference underscores the challenges educators may face when trying to include nonnative English varieties in the curriculum. Such preferences suggest the need for instructional design that balances authentic language exposure with the students' comfort and comprehension needs.

DISCUSSION

The participants in this study faced significant challenges in understanding native or near-native English speakers. These difficulties stem from several related factors. First, the learners have limited exposure to native or fluent speakers in their daily lives, which hampers their listening comprehension. Many do not have opportunities to engage with natural conversations, which are crucial for developing listening skills in real-life situations. Additionally, the influence of their nonnative teachers, who often speak with accented English, complicates their ability to understand native or near-native accents. This lack of exposure makes it hard for learners to process native pronunciations. Furthermore, many learners lack confidence, which can worsen these challenges; even students with reasonable listening skills may doubt their abilities and feel inadequate.

On the other hand, participants found accented pronunciations to be significantly easier to understand. This can be explained by their familiarity with speakers who face similar linguistic challenges. The learners are used to the speaking patterns of accented English because many of their teachers, from high school to university, use a similar form of English. Also, the slower speaking pace of accented speakers gives learners more time to process the information, helping them engage more effectively with the material.

Interestingly, despite the differences in perceived difficulty, the participants' evaluations of the speakers' attractiveness did not suffer. The data show a strong preference for the near-native speaker, indicating that Malian learners are aware of pronunciation nuances. Their favorable view of this speaker aligns with Maiga's (2021) findings that many learners feel self-conscious about their own pronunciation challenges, which can make them hesitant to participate actively in English conversations.

In contrast, the moderately and strongly accented speakers were seen as less pleasant. This negative attitude toward accented English may be linked to the learners' associations with Nigerian Pidgin, which, while common in West Africa, is often not seen as a suitable model for learning English. Moreover, the learners' positive assessment of the near-native speaker may be influenced by stereotypes that view native English as the ideal standard. However, it is important to note that exposure to accented English can offer valuable opportunities for learners to connect with diverse cultures. As Kramsch (1993) points out, using language is a cultural act, and engaging with different English accents can enhance cultural understanding.

When it comes to integrating nonnative speakers in listening activities, it is clear that learners are primarily motivated when the speaker closely resembles a native model. Their lack of engagement with accented speakers may negatively affect their overall participation in class. In contrast, they seem to enjoy the challenges posed by native English pronunciation and its fast pace. This preference aligns with the findings of Wang and Jenkins (2016), who noted that EFL learners favored native speaker models for assessment, believing these models reflect global standards of "correct" English.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the attitudes of Malian EFL learners toward using nonnative speaker models in listening activities. The data show a strong preference among participants for native or near-native speakers, with the near-native model receiving particularly positive evaluations. However, it is important to recognize the challenges that native or near-native accents present for these learners.

In light of these findings, we recommend a phased approach to exposure in listening curricula, starting with nonnative speaker models. This initial focus can create a supportive environment for learners to develop their listening skills before gradually introducing native speaker recordings as their proficiency improves. Such a strategy not only provides a more manageable learning path but also encourages a greater appreciation for the diversity of English accents. We believe that promoting the use of nonnative English can help reduce negative attitudes and foster a broader understanding of global communication. Nonetheless, it remains essential to include native English speakers in listening activities, as exposure to authentic native pronunciation is crucial for learners aiming to achieve advanced language comprehension.

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