12-year-old Mexican English Learners' Listening Perceptions: Differences Between American Accent or Mexican Accent

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Abstract

Learning about what English learners think about the different accents while speaking English is essential to understand their reactions and ideas towards the use of the Mexican accent while speaking English. By presenting two different audios and asking the participants their perceptions about those, the research investigates what two 12-year-olds think about the use of the Mexican accent.

Keywords: native accent, foreign accent.

1. Introduction

Because of the stereotypes presented by the media and the idealization of native speakers of English, the use of the Mexican accent while speaking English has received negative comments. However, recently, there has been more exposure to this accent in media, and it presents its use as a normal feature and not as a sign of incompetence. Based on this recent exposure and the comments made by the exposition of this accent, I wanted to identify if 12-year-old Mexican learners of English still considered the Mexican accent as a negative aspect. To do so, the participants were exposed to a native English speaker and a Mexican English speaker. After that, they shared the differences found between both audios and what are their perceptions of the Mexican accent.

2. Literature review

2.1 *Accent and pronunciation*

The research focuses on the differences between accents identified by the participants. Therefore, defining accents and establishing the difference with pronunciation is needed. Accents can be defined as "different ways of pronouncing/speaking a language within a community" (Behravan, 2012: 13). Examples of this could be the difference between Spanish from Spain and the ones spoken in Mexico or Chile respectively. Pronunciation, on the other hand, involves features such as phonemes, consonant and vowel sounds, and suprasegmental features:

intonation and stress (Kelly, 2000). The distinction between accent and pronunciation is, then, that an accent is determined by the speaker's place of birth, and pronunciation will be related to how the speaker produces the speech (Amis, 1998). This particular research focuses on two different accents presented in the audio by a native speaker of English and a non-native speaker, more specifically a Mexican English speaker.

2.2 *Native accent and foreign accent*

As it was previously mentioned, this research focuses on two different accents; therefore, it is essential to specify the distinction between native accents and foreign accents. One of the definitions provided for native accent is "the way a group of people speaks their native language. This is determined by where they live and what social groups they belong to" (Birner, 1999: 1). This is the definition considered for this research. In this case, the native accent was presented by the English spoken by an American presented in one of the audios used.

On the other hand, a foreign accent, also called non-native, can be defined as "the patterns of pronunciation features which characterize an individual's speech as belonging to a particular language group" (Arslan & Hansen, 1996: 354). The foreign accent is more noticeable in speakers that acquired the language after the early years of childhood (Hopp & Schmid, 2013). In this case, the non-native accent was presented by the English spoken by a Mexican presented in one of the audios used in the research.

2.3 *Learner expectations*

Because of the ideal of achieving a native-like speaking level (Mbah et al., 2013), learners tend to have high expectations about accents. The idea of achieving the perfect accent is part of what some English learners want to accomplish at the end of learning the language. However, exposure to native English accents is not possible for all learners. The exposure to native accents in the Mexican context, commonly, comes from the audios presented in the textbooks. This means that the audios are created to be mini-dialogues or lectures planned for educational purposes (Mousavi & Iravani, 2012) and they are not used daily inside the classroom. Therefore, the accent that students listen to the most is their teachers' accent. In most cases, teachers have an easily detectable Mexican accent. Even though this Mexican accent is common, it tends to be stigmatized. In other words, accent stereotypes such as it being laughable or the person speaking being incompetent for having said accent (Zentella, 2017) can influence learners' expectations while listening to a Mexican speaking English inside and outside the English classroom.

3. Methodology

3.1 *Research question*

The research focuses on only one research question:

What differences do 12-year-old Mexican English learners identify in their listening comprehension after being exposed to different accents?

To answer the question established, the participant's responses will be compared to identify the differences between the accents found by them. There is a possibility of also finding similarities between the participants' responses; those will also be presented. However, the main focus is on the differences found.

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3.2 *Qualitative approach*

The research presented follows the qualitative approach. This approach "focuses on people's and the meaning they place on the events" (Skinner et al., 2000: 165). The qualitative approach aims to understand the phenomenon by analyzing the participants' interpretations of the phenomenon. It focuses on how people interpret their experiences individually. Because this type of approach deals with individuals and their interpretations, the data can be recollected by using interviews, questionnaires, diaries, journals, and observations (Zohrabi, 2013, as cited in Mohajan, 2018: 2). In this particular case, the participants' reactions and comments towards the two different accents will function as the qualitative data and will be presented as extracts in this research.

3.3 *Case study*

The methodology used for this research is a case study. A case study is "an intensive, systematic investigation of a single individual, group, community or some other unit in which the researcher examines in-depth data relating to several variables" (Heale & Twycross, 2018: 7). This means that the research focuses on a specific group of people. This research focuses on a pair of Mexican English learners and how they react to a phenomenon, the different accents presented by audio. However, the use of this methodology also emphasizes on how the results will vary depending on the contexts and participants' personal reactions towards the phenomenon (Pearson et al., 2015). Therefore, the results can only be applied to the specific group and context in which the research is done.

3.4 *Participants*

Regarding the participants, their selection was based on the following parameters: they must be 12 years old and studying the first level of secondary. They also must have had previous English classes. There was not a specific level of English needed; however, they must have had interaction with the language at previous educational levels. For this research, two participants fit the profile. Their parents also accessed them to be part of. Because the participants are underage, their parents received a consent letter and they could choose to allow them to participate or not. It is also relevant to mention that their identities will be protected through the research. The data presented is what the participants answered in their interviews; however, their names are not mentioned. Each participant had been assigned a number to present their answers.

3.5 *Data collection*

For this particular research, the data collection was done through observations and interviews. The observations were done while the participants listened to the audios. To collect the results of these observations, the researcher took descriptive notes of what was seen (Cowie et al., 2009). By doing this, the researcher focused on reactions toward the different accents that might not have been mentioned in the interviews with the participants. In the case of the interviews, those were done in Spanish at the end of the listening of both audios. The interviews were structured, which means that the researcher had a set of questions to be answered and there was no space to add more questions to the interview (Legard et al., 2003). The questions were focused on what the participants thought of the audio, more specifically of the accents presented and what differences there were between the audios.

3.5.1 *Audios*

Because the research focuses on native and foreign accents and the perceptions participants have about them, the selection of audios was an essential step. In this case, the audios used were authentic material. In other words, those materials are not intended to be teaching materials (Safitri, 2017). For this research, the audios used were audio from interviews online where the speakers were native and non-native speakers. More specifically, the audio for the native accent came from an interview with Hailee Steinfeld, an American actress, and singer. On the other hand, the foreign accent audio came from an interview with Mabel Cadena, a Mexican actress.

The selection of said audios was based on the participants' knowledge of having contact with English outside the school. The audios were selected considering that the focus was not on the content, but rather on what differences the participants found within the audios.

3.6 *Data analysis*

The type of analysis done for this research is thematic analysis. To do so, I focused on meaning through the data recollected "to see and make sense of collective or shared meanings and experiences" (Braun & Clarke, 2012: 57). In other words, I identify themes within the data collected to have a better understanding of the differences identified by the participants. The procedure to do so was the following. After recollecting the data, I focused on identifying the themes presented in the answers. For instance, what audio was more comprehensible according to the participants, and see if they found similarities or differences. The results of the said analysis are presented in the following section.

4. Results and discussion

The following results are presented by answering the questions asked to the participants in the interview. To present the extracts from the interviews, each participant was assigned a number. Because the interviews were done in Spanish, the extracts presented as part of the results are translated from the original to English. There are also descriptions of the observations done.

4.1 *What audio did you understand better? Why?*

After listening to both audios, the participants provide the answers to the questions. In the case of participant number 1, she mentioned that audio B, the Mexican accent, was easier to understand:

> *I could recognize the accent better. Pronunciation... to me is easier reading than listening and the pronunciation was easier to understand. It was closer to the way words are written.*

On the other hand, participant number 2 mentioned that both audios were understandable:

> *To me, both were understandable. I know most of the vocabulary and that helped.*

Throughout the listening, both participants focused and their faces reflected concentration in the audios. However, as it is presented, the audio they found more understandable was based on preference and knowledge. For instance, I can assume that participant 2 feels confident with his knowledge and skills while listening. On the other hand, as she mentioned, participant 1 struggles with pronunciation, and the Mexican accent helped in the

listening comprehension because of the closeness between the pronunciation and the written form.

4.2 *What aspects helped you understand it better? (e. g. speech speed, fluency, articulation)*

The second question was related to what features helped the participants understand one audio better than the other. In the case of participant 1, she mentioned that the rhythm used in the audios and speech speed allowed her to understand one audio better than the other:

> *Audio A (American accent), the rhythm varied from time to time and it made it difficult to understand. Audio B (Mexican accent), it was the same rhythm throughout the audio. The speed made it clearer, words did not overlap.*

For participant 1, the audio that presented the Mexican accent (B) provided time for each one of the words to be understood. On the other hand, the American accent audio (A) might have been faster and that produced the overlapping of words that did not allow the full understanding of the audio.

On the other hand, participant 2 found that audio B was not as fluid as audio A. It might be that for him, the articulation of the words was not as important as it was for participant 1:

> *The tone of voice. I think the speech speed was good in both audios. In audio B it was less fluid, but still understandable.*

Another interesting aspect of this answer is that participant 2 considered the tone of voice. This is interesting because in audio A only one person is speaking; meanwhile in audio B, the person is not alone. This difference might affect the tone of voice while speaking and participant 2 considered that in both cases it was adequate to what was being said.

4.3 *What differences did you find between the audios?*

For the third question, participants needed to mention specific differences found in the audios. In the case of participant 1, speed and pronunciation were the main differences. For her audio A was faster than audio B. This answer supports her previous answer about the words overlapping:

> *Different speeds. Audio A was faster. The pronunciation was different in both. There were different accents.*

On the other hand, participant 2 identified the structure of the audios while mentioning that audio A was structured more as an interview one-on-one, while audio B was a chat with more than two people involved:

> *Audio A was more like a video, just one person presenting something. Audio B was like a chat with others, sharing an experience. It was a different accent, maybe Canadian.*

Another interesting aspect is that both participants mentioned different accents, but only participant 2 mentioned a possible nationality. I believe that this nationality might have only been mentioned randomly. However, it might be that the participant had recent encounters with a Canadian accent and that caused the confusion.

4.4 *Do you think accents are important? Why?*

While answering these questions, participants were free to mention preferences and personal opinions about accents in general. They were not instructed to only talk about native or only about foreign accents. Regarding their answers, they both agree. They believe accents are important; however, their reasons vary:

> *Yes, they are important. Sometimes at school teachers teach just one and you end up only understanding that one. It is easier to understand the one you learn. But, if they put other audios, it is more complicated to understand. An example is that a British accent will be difficult to understand if you have only learned to listen to the American one.*

Participant 1 mentioned that accents are presented in school, but there is a limitation and it might cause problems. I believe in this answer, participant 1 reflected on her own experience. As it was mentioned in her previous answers, the struggle to understand audio A relies on the speed and overlap of words. This issue might come from the non-authentic audios used inside the classroom. Therefore, for her, it is important to be exposed to different accents and ways of speaking.

Contrarily, participant 2 mentioned that accents are important because they can provide an idea of the person speaking:

> *Yes, to know based on the accent who is talking. I think the accent gives you an idea of the person speaking.*

This answer was interesting because participant 2 might have expectations based on the accent that he listens to. As it was mentioned at the beginning of the study, learners' expectations of accents might be influenced by stereotypes presented in different media. For participant 2, it might be that accents allowed him to create an image of the person speaking and put the person into a context that justifies the use of said accent.

Even though both participants mentioned different reasons why accents are important, how they help in the understanding of the message and create an idea of the person speaking, they both had a positive reaction to audio B. Both participants show positive signs while listening to this audio. They nodded and even showed some smiles while listening to the Mexican accent. I can assume that the ideas created around the accent listened were positive. Perhaps, participants seemed themselves or someone else they know represented in that accent.

4.5 *What is your opinion about the Mexican accent while speaking English?*

Lastly, participants needed to provide their opinion about the Mexican accent while speaking English. Because of the participants' age and their previous encounters with the Mexican accent, while speaking English, I was expecting negative comments as answers to this question. However, the answers provided by the participants were refreshing.

Participant 1 mentioned that the Mexican accent allows other Mexicans to understand English better:

> *I think it is easier to understand for Mexicans learning the language. It is easier to understand. I think it is fine to use it, but it is judged by others. I think it is better to use the accent you feel most comfortable using. I like the accent.*

Based on the answer provided and the reactions that were seen, I believe that participant 1 considers the Mexican accent used to be correct. She might also feel encouraged to use it after reflecting on its use.

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Contrary to participant 1, participant 2's answer supports the idea of having expectations towards the accents used while speaking English:

In some people, it is more noticeable, maybe because they are not competent enough in the language. I don't think it is noticeable in all people. Maybe it is noticeable because the person needs to practice more.

Participant 2 mentioned that the Mexican accent is not noticeable in all Mexican English speakers, but he also implies that the speakers can eliminate it with practice. Perhaps, for him, accents still present stereotypes of the people speaking, and to avoid negative reactions, the best would be to remove the Mexican accent from the speech.

Even though participants might infer different opinions about the Mexican accent while speaking English, they both agree that it is not a negative aspect while speaking the language. It might be that the foreign accent is more understandable for some learners because of the speed at which words are said and how they are said.

5. Conclusion

After doing the research and learning about the participants' comments about the use of the Mexican accent while speaking English, I could identify that those perceptions are not negative. Because of the participants' age and what I have previously heard as a student, I expected the perceptions towards the use of the Mexican accent to be negative. Even though I am aware of the scale of this case study and that the results might not be the same with different participants, I think what I found shows an improvement in the Mexican accent perception. I can conclude that participants do not feel its use is incorrect, nor would they react in a way that will make the person using it uncomfortable. However, as I already mentioned, these results might be different for other participants. I consider that doing this research on a larger scale might show clearer data that can help in the discovery of English learners' perceptions of the Mexican accent.

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