



## University Students' Perceptions on Assessing Levels of Intelligibility and Comprehensibility of the Pronunciation of Native English Teachers' (NETs) as Compared to the Pronunciation of Non-native English Teachers' (NNETs): A Case-Study with Freshmen Undergraduate Students at Woosong University, South Korea

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### Abstract

At large, the following research study investigates the relationship between students' levels of understanding (comprehension) of various English accents and their attitudes to their desired pronunciation models in the future. The following study established that from students' perspectives, the accents of native English teachers (NETs) are both more *intelligible* and comprehensible than the accents of non-native English teachers (NNETs). This study also revealed that intelligibility and comprehensibility could indeed be looked at interchangeably and they both complement each other. The findings also strongly suggest that the majority of the participants expressed preference for native speaker (NS) accents and, in particular, American English (AE) accent(s) as their desired pronunciation models because of their high levels of familiarity with that particular accent. Yet, the findings suggest that students were mostly informed about two pronunciation models of English amongst all: AE and South Korean English (SKE). Thus, despite the fact that they expressed preference for NS accents versus non-native speaker (NNS) accents, they seemed to be in favour and/or aware of precisely AE and SKE accents the most again because of issues of familiarity. These findings thus reveal that to a large extent, learners of English are not aware of the many other varieties of English that are existent in the world, no matter whether they are NS accents or NNS accents. In light of this, a conclusion could be drawn from this particular study that the study of English and, especially the area of pronunciation, should be viewed through its pluralistic prism and students should be informed about the many varieties of English that exist in the world.

### Introduction

The distinction between NETs and NNETs has long been at the core of debate within the field of applied linguistics and, in particular, English language teaching

(ELT). This distinction has been primarily made with reference to the advantages that each type possesses when it comes to teaching skills and strategies; pedagogical skills; linguistic competence, teaching listening and

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speaking; teaching grammar and other areas. This particular study is an attempt to provide some insights into the role learners' perceptions play in determining the strengths of NETs versus NNETs with regard to a particular area concerned: that of pronunciation and accent.

## Objectives

This study aims to shed a light on how students perceive levels of understanding of the accents of NSs and NNSs of English by conducting a single case-study. In determining the degree of understanding, Smith (1992, 2009) proposed a three-dimensional approach to understanding inter-cultural communication. The first approach or level is intelligibility, which measures a listener's ability to identify and recognize words or utterances. The second level is comprehensibility which measures a listener's ability to understand the meanings of words or utterances in their given context. The third level is interpretability that measures a listener's ability to perceive and understand the intention of the speaker (Natiladdanon & Thanavisuth, 2014).

At large, this present study attempts to provide contribution to the body of work on the NS-NNS dichotomy. In particular, this study aims to investigate university students' perceptions as far as correct pronunciation/accent is concerned when learning English with a NET or a NNET.

In light of this, a research study concerned with the controversy surrounding the NS-NNS polemic could prove very insightful and influential as far as the status of English is concerned, both locally and internationally. On the one hand, this study could re-confirm or challenge the old paradigm of ELT, according to which the NS model is the standard model of English that all NNSs should mimic and copy.

Moreover, this study could provide the framework or lead the path to subsequent research that could investigate whether other varieties of English should be considered valuable and appropriate models for learning and use in the English language classroom, especially in a local South Korean context. Thus, students' responses could provide insights and pedagogical implications as to whether English should be taught and learnt in South Korea based on the NS model or ELT should be rather viewed in its pluralistic sense, thus considering other models and varieties of English worth understanding and learning in terms of accents and pronunciation.

Furthermore, this research study could shed a

light on how students' levels of understanding (comprehension) might influence their perceptions of acceptable accents/pronunciation models and, moreover, their attitudes to language and language learning as a whole.

Lastly, evaluating and being aware of students' perceptions could be a valuable tool to determine how perceived comprehension could affect learning outcome and successful inter-cultural communication. As Smith and Nelson (1985) state, intelligibility is not speaker or listener-centred, but rather a co-constructed experience or interactional between speaker and listener (Pickering, 2006).

In light of this, this research study will address three main research questions (RQs) set out to guide the general direction of the research:

1. From students' perspective, what are the levels of intelligibility and comprehensibility when studying with a particular NET as compared to studying with a particular NNET as far as pronunciation/accent is concerned? (RQ 1)

2. Is there a relationship between the levels of intelligibility and comprehensibility and thus, should they be looked at interchangeably or separately as seen through students' eyes? (RQ 2)

3. Overall, which type of accent/pronunciation would students like to mimic and copy in their future communication in English? (RQ 3)

4. Overall, what are students' attitudes to pronunciation (or their perceptions) on what constitutes correct pronunciation in English? (RQ 4)

## Conceptual Framework

For quite a while, the practice of ELT has been driven by the belief that as far as teaching pronunciation and accent is concerned, the NS model is the one that learners should learn and imitate. In this regard, Phillipson (1992) argues that there is a given assumption that a NS is considered "the best embodiment" of the norm and target for learners considering factors, such as pronunciation and the production of fluent and correct language forms. Todd (2006) adds that, especially in Thailand, NSs are considered "somehow better" than NNSs, because their vocabulary is more accurate and appropriate, they do not make grammatical errors, and their pronunciation meets commonly accepted standards. It seems therefore that NETs would be preferred as far as teaching pronunciation/accent is concerned.

Nevertheless, not all studies point out in favour

of NETs as far as teaching oral production and correct pronunciation/accents is concerned. Proponents of the English as an International Language (EIL) paradigm, for example, believe that students should instead be exposed to a variety of English accents as students' future interlocutors might not be solely NSs.

In this regard, Kongkerd (2013) believes that learners in Thailand should be exposed to a variety of accents, especially the accents of people who would be students' interlocutors in the future, such as people from the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and/or other Asian countries. For that reason, Thai English teachers need to teach and navigate students to "reach the goal of intelligibility" rather than developing Thai students' accuracy or emphasizing too much on NS norms when teaching speaking and pronunciation (Kongkerd, 2013). Similarly, Todd (2006) establishes that the ultimate goal of teaching English in Thailand should be EIL rather than following any NS norms of English. Standard NS norms of English, respectively, should be regarded as "possible varieties of EIL among a plethora of other possibilities" (Todd, 2006).

In light of this, in a research study conducted in local, South Korean context, Charles (2015) examined native South Korean speakers' attitudes towards the use of Korean-style English (Konglish) outside of the South Korean context or within an international context. Konglish is the mixture of English and Korean words that occurs on a semantic level or a phonological level, or at times both. The findings suggest that even though most participants exhibited preferences towards standardized varieties of English for the purpose of international communication, still a decent number showed positive attitudes towards the use of Konglish not only among Koreans but also among Koreans and non-Koreans, i.e. in international settings. Similarly, in another study, Shim and Choe (2017) found that Korean graduate TESOL students recognized the importance of Korean English or Konglish as a legitimate variety of English, which, from their perspective, could also be used as a communication tool in an international context.

These findings largely go in line with the findings of Ahn & Kang (2017) who suggest that as a result of students' familiarity with Korean-accented speech within their own environment, the Korean university students have developed "an overall positive attitude" towards Korean-accented speech and have recognized its importance for purposes of inter-cultural communication. The results here also support the findings of Kim (2007)

who established that Korean adults recognized the importance of EIL in terms of communicating not only with NSs but also with NNSs and, thus, held positive attitudes to non-native varieties of English.

These trends indeed raise questions as to which pronunciation model students should learn, mimic and be exposed to. Despite the fact that the EIL trend seems to illustrate convincingly how English functions differently in various social contexts and the emergence of various English accents, it is worth re-examining first how the NS accent is being perceived as it has been considered for a long time the desired model as far as pronunciation/accents is concerned. Furthermore, it is worth re-examining students' perceptions on this issue as their reflections could provide some insightful pedagogical implications for the future. As Jenkins (2007) puts it, in order to "assess the feasibility" of EIL, one needs, therefore, to find more about this attachment by eliciting the attitudes of learners towards both NS and NNS varieties of English that underpin them.

Examining the levels of understanding of a particular accent from students' point of view could not only provide insights and implications for pronunciation instruction, but it could also reveal how perceived comprehension might influence students' attitudes and beliefs about language learning and language as a whole. Moreover, students' contribution on the issue of perceived comprehension might illustrate how attitudes and perceptions could influence motivation for learning and learning outcome at large.

## Research methodology

### 1. Sampling design

Subjects for the purpose of this study were undergraduate university level students and, in particular, students at Woosong University (WSU), located in Daejeon, South Korea. The students were enrolled in a 15-week Freshmen English language course focused on Listening and Speaking, taught by a NNET, the researcher himself-Assistant Professor, Valentin Valentinov Tashev. In total, 69 students responded and participated in the study.

However, it should be noted here that few of the respondents variously provided insufficient, contradictory or irrelevant answers. Thus, some of them answered very few questions and did not elaborate further; others seemed not to have understood the questions or the differences between NETs and NNETs, for example. It might be due to the fact that they had not understood the instructions and/or the questions or had

been confused with the questions. Despite that, their answers, in whatever way/form and extent to which they had been given, were still taken into account when analysing the findings.

This research was being conducted around the last few weeks (Week 14 and Week 15) of the course (semester/term) with the idea in mind that by then the subjects would have already built their perceptions regarding the levels of intelligibility and comprehensibility. Two variables that were taken into consideration and are crucial for the nature and direction of the research study were time and exposure to NETs and NNETs prior to the actual university undergraduate course and during the course. In other words, both students' previous exposure to both NETs and NNETs as teachers/instructors of English, such as during high-school for example, and later on during the actual Freshmen English language course at WSU, were being taken into consideration.

## 2. Measurement and data collection design

A single type of research instrument was used. This study employed the use of a questionnaire. The first part of the questionnaire collected information about the participants' backgrounds and personal language abilities (i.e. their first language/nationality and level of study; how long they have studied English at WSU and, in particular, English). Their exposure to English accents in general was still considered when analysing the findings even though it was not being questioned directly. Thus, the issue of familiarity was still being considered as a variable when analysing the data and later on when discussing the findings based on the students' responses as they were given.

The second part of the questionnaire asked students to determine the levels of intelligibility and comprehensibility on a 4-point Likert scale (strongly agree; agree; disagree and strongly disagree). This part was followed by two more open-ended questions related to each variable, where students were asked to provide any extra information concerned with those two levels/variables in their own words.

## 3. Analysis design

The findings are presented numerically via percentages and frequencies. With regards to the open-ended questions, the findings are categorised whenever there are consistencies, recurring patterns and similarities among students' responses whenever they justified their answers. In other words, the procedure that was adopted was a 'key word' analysis, generating categories from the statements made by the respondents.

## Results

### 1. Results regarding RQ 1

With regard to RQ 1, among all respondents, 44 participants (about 64%) agreed to various extents that they found the accents of NETs more intelligible than the accents of NNETs. 34 participants ticked the category agree and 10 participants ticked the category strongly agree on the 4-point Likert scale.

Regarding comprehensibility, 46 participants (about 67%) found the accents of NETs more comprehensible than the accents of NNETs. 34 participants ticked the category agree and 12 participants ticked the category strongly agree on the 4-point Likert scale.

20 participants (about 29%) remained neutral as to the issue of intelligibility and 17 participants (about 25%) remained neutral as to the issue of comprehensibility. Only 2 participants (about 3%) disagreed that the accents of NETs were more intelligible and 5 participants (about 4%) disagreed that the accents of NETs were more comprehensible.

### 2. Results regarding RQ 2

Concerning the relationship between the levels of intelligibility and comprehensibility as from students' perspectives, out of those 44-46 participants who respectively found the accents of NETs either more intelligible or more comprehensible than the accents of NNETs, 40 participants (between about 87%-91% out of those) indicated that the accents of NETs were both more intelligible and more comprehensible.

Only 10 participants justified their answers and provided elaborate answers as to the causes of what their preferences were. They also belonged to the group of participants, who indicated that the accents of NSs were both more intelligible and more comprehensible than the accents of NNS. When giving their answers, some of the participants variously stated that they had been exposed or mostly "learned" NS accents by the time the research study was being conducted. The various answers given were as follows:

"They're native." "Because they're better than Korean." (Participant 1)

"Because NETs' spoken language is English. It is easier to understand than NNETs' pronunciation/accents." (Participant 2)

"Because the language that I always learned and used is the language of NETs." (Participant 3)

"Because it is the accent/pronunciation I heard from my childhood." "Because I met a lot of NETs." (Participant 4)

“Because since I was young, I learned American pronunciation.” (Participant 5)

“I can hear American pronunciation more easily because I learned English with American pronunciation since I was in elementary school.” “NETs are easily understood.” (Participant 6)

“Very funny.” “Ver funny.” (Participant 7)

“Very funny.” (Participant 8)

“I agree with the question, because native speakers have been more natural since they have been using English since they were born.” “I agree with the question because native English speakers speak English softer.” (Participant 9)

“This is because the accent/speech of the NET is mostly written by people and the pronunciation/flavor of NNET is used only by certain people.” “Because NETs’ intonation has been heard, received and written more than NNETs’ pronunciation adversely.” (Participant 10)

Out of those 17-20 participants who were neutral as to whether the accents of NETs were either more comprehensible or more intelligible than the accents of NNETs respectively, 15 participants (between about 75%-88%) indicated they were neutral as to whether the accents of NETs were both more comprehensible and more intelligible than the accents of NNETs.

Out of those 2-5 participants who disagreed that the accents of NETs were either more intelligible or more comprehensible than the accents of NNETs respectively, only 1 participant (between about 20%-50%) stated that they disagreed that the accents of NETs were both more intelligible and more comprehensible.

It should be noted here that only the answers of those 10 participants, who indicated that the accents of NSs were both more intelligible and more comprehensible than the accents of NNS, were being quoted here as only they proved significant for the findings of this research study. As the other answers had not provided any sufficient data, they were, therefore, excluded and not quoted here.

### 3. Results regarding RQ 3 and RQ 4

With regard to RQ 3 and RQ 4 among all respondents, 41 participants (about 60%) in total stated that they would like to mimic and copy NS accents/ pronunciation in their future communication in English. 33 participants expressed preference for American English (AE) only; 7 participants expressed preference for British English (BE) only and 1 participant expressed preferences for both. Out of those 41 participants, 24 participants justified their answers.

Among the 7 participants who expressed preference for BE only, 4 participants elaborated on their answers (Participant 20-Participant 23 including). The 1 participant who expressed preferences for both justified his or her answer (Participant 24).

Among the 33 participants who expressed preference for AE only, 19 participants elaborated on their answers (Participant 1-Participant 19 including). When giving their answers, some of the participants variously referred to AE as “popular” and/or “common” or they stated that they had mostly “learnt” and/or used AE by the time the research study was being conducted. The various answers given were as follows:

“Since most people use an American accent, they will use an American accent to communicate in English in the future” (Participant 1)

“I have always learnt and used American accents and pronunciation. I think I will use American English in the future.” (Participant 2)

“...because it’s commonly used internationally.” (Participant 3)

“...most popular.” (Participant 6)

“When I first learnt English, I learnt with an American accent.” (Participant 7)

“...because in modern society, American pronunciation is more common and widely known to people.” (Participant 8)

“Since I was young, I learnt English with American pronunciation.” (Participant 10)

“Since people generally learn English with American pronunciation, communication is likely to work better.” (Participant 11)

“American is popular and feels closer to me than other things.” (Participant 15)

“I like American pronunciation.” (Participant 16)

“...because I have only learnt American pronunciation. So far, I am familiar with American English pronunciation.” (Participant 17)

“I’ve learnt intonation and pronunciation the American way so far and I’m going to keep using.” (Participant 18)

“When I learn English, I learn American English and use American pronunciation. But I prefer British English pronunciation.” (Participant 19)

“My usual pronunciation is American but I want to learn (British) English pronunciation that I have not always used.” (Participant 20)

“I like (British) English accent. I think it’s attractive.” (Participant 21)

“(British) English pronunciation is hard to hear but very cool.” (Participant 22)

“...just I want to learn a new accent.” (Participant 23)

“...because they’re better than Korean”. (Participant 24)

Moreover, regarding RQ 3 and RQ 4, 18 participants (about 26%) in total stated that they would prefer to mimic and copy other NNS accents in their future communication in English or were neutral again with regard to their future accent preferences. 9 of those participants elaborated on their answers.

15 participants stated that they would prefer to have or preserve their South Korean English (SKE) accent in their future communication in English. 7 of those participants who expressed preference for SKE accent justified their answers (Participant 3-Participant 9 including). Only 1 participant (Participant 1) remained neutral and still justified their answer. 2 participants expressed preference for Japanese English (JE) accent, but only 1 participant justified their answer in support of the JE accent (Participant 2). The various answers given were as follows:

“I want to listen to many peoples’ intonations.” (Participant 1)

“I love Japanese” (Participant 2)

“I can’t imitate British or American.” (Participant 3)

“My English level is limited.” (Participant 4)

“Because I learn English very young and Korean people are teaching me. So, I choose.” (Participant 5)

“Just South Korea and easy Korean accent.” (Participant 6)

“I’ve heard it all along.” (Participant 7)

“I’m Korean...” (Participant 8)

“I want people from other countries to understand my accent.” (Participant 9)

## Discussion

### 1. The influence of familiarity on both levels of intelligibility and comprehensibility

With regard to RQ 1, among all respondents, 44 participants (about 64%) agreed to various extents that they found the accents of NETs more intelligible than the accents of NNETs. 20 participants (about 29%) remained neutral as to the issue of intelligibility. Only 2 participants (about 3%) disagreed that the accents of NETs were more intelligible. Table 1 below reveals all those results.

**Table 1** Perceptions regarding intelligibility

NS accents- more intelligible	Percentage
Agree	64%
Disagree	3%
Neutral	29%

Regarding comprehensibility, 46 participants (about 67%) found to various extents the accents of NETs more comprehensible than the accents of NNETs. 17 participants (about 25%) remained neutral as to the issue of comprehensibility. 5 participants (about 4%) disagreed that the accents of NETs were more comprehensible. Table 2 below reveals the results.

**Table 2** Perceptions regarding comprehensibility

NS Accents-more comprehensible	Percentage
Agree	67%
Disagree	4%
Neutral	25%

These figures strongly suggest that from students’ perspectives, NS accents are more intelligible than NNS accents. They also reveal that NS accents are more comprehensible than NNS accents. In addition, these results indicate very little preference for NNS accents. Hereby, it is worth investigating and elaborating on the underlying causes behind students’ preferences or the explanations they gave themselves as to their own choices and preferences.

Only 10 participants justified their answers and provided elaborate answers as to causes of what their preferences were. They also belonged to the group of participants, who indicated that the accents of NSs were both more intelligible and more comprehensible than the accents of NNS. As mentioned earlier, when giving their answers, some of the participants variously stated that they had been exposed or mostly “learned” NS accents by the time the research study was being conducted.

Their answers thus reveal the extent to which the issue of familiarity or exposure as being crucial in terms of determining their perceived levels of intelligibility and comprehensibility in favour of NSs. Thus, their answers reveal that their previous experiences in terms of learning English and the environment in which they had learnt English did affect their judgements in terms of their perceived levels of listening comprehension.

These findings indeed correspond to the findings of Ballard, Winke, Isaacs, & Trofimovich (2017) who

investigated the relationship between accent familiarity with levels of intelligibility and comprehensibility. Thus, they found that familiarity with an accent indeed facilitates comprehension as a whole and also the more understandable the accent, the more acceptable the speaker would be perceived as a teacher. The findings of this present study also supports the results of a similar study conducted in Thailand by White, Treenate, Kiatungwalgrai, Somnuk, and Chaloemchatvarakorn (2016), who established that greater familiarity with an English accent leads to higher comprehension levels.

## 2. Relationship between intelligibility and comprehensibility

Regarding RQ 2, the findings suggest a strong correlation between both intelligibility and comprehensibility when interpreting foreign speech as perceived by students.

Thus, out of those 44-46 participants who respectively found the accents of NETs either more intelligible or more comprehensible than the accents of NNETs, 40 participants (between about 87%-91%) indicated that the accents of NETs and, predominantly AE accents, were both more intelligible and more comprehensible. Table 3 below shows the result.

**Table 3** Relationship between intelligibility and comprehensibility (in favor of NETs)

NS accents	Percentage
Both more comprehensible and more intelligible	87%-91%

Moreover, out of those 17-20 participants who were neutral as to whether the accents of NETs were either more comprehensible or more intelligible than the accents of NNETs respectively, 15 participants (between about 75%-88% out of those) indicated they were neutral as to whether the accents of NETs were both more comprehensible and more intelligible than the accents of NNETs. Table 4 below reveals shows the result.

**Table 4** Relationship between intelligibility and comprehensibility (neutral perceptions)

Neutral: NS accents vs. NNS accents	Percentage
Both more comprehensible and more intelligible	75%-88%

The figures in both tables strongly suggest that intelligibility and comprehensibility could indeed be looked at and analysed interchangeably or those two

levels in the process of listening comprehension, in fact, complement each other. In other words, in terms of listening comprehension, pronunciation should not be interpreted as an isolated area alone, but within the context of whether meaning as a whole has been conveyed successfully to the listener. Thus, pronunciation perhaps should be analysed on a more macro-level or rather on a sentence level and interpreted in line and in accordance with other factors, which are still essential and largely contributory to meaning, such as perhaps grammar, voice quality and paralinguistic factors amongst others.

## 3. Relationship between familiarity and preference for the usage of AE

Regarding RQ 3, the findings strongly suggest that the majority of the participants (41 participants or about 60%) expressed preference for NS accents/ pronunciation in their future communication in English. 33 participants (about 48%) expressed preference for AE accent(s) or pronunciation model(s). Despite the fact that only 24 participants among those justified their answers, still their answers reveal the extent to which the issue of familiarity or exposure as being crucial in terms of determining the participants' attitudes to their desired pronunciation model(s). Table 5 below shows the results.

**Table 5** Relationship between familiarity and attitudes to desired pronunciation model (s) in English

Preferences for NS accents-about 60%	Preferences for NNS accents-about 26%
AE-about 48%	SKE-about 22%
BE-about 10%	JE-about 3%
Both AE and BE-about 1.5%	

Thus, their answers reveal that their previous experiences in terms of learning English and the environment in which they had learnt English did affect their choices in terms of their desired future accents/ pronunciation model(s). These findings indeed go in line with the findings of (Kaur & Raman, 2014) who suggest that familiarity with certain accents and herewith NS accents, results in having learners develop more "favourable and positive" attitudes towards those particular accents. As the authors add, as most English language books and materials in Malaysia are NS-centric, as a result, learners develop "deeply entrenched attachment" to those particular pronunciation standards and, moreover, they regard them therefore as more acceptable, pleasant and correct (Kaur & Raman, 2014).

The answers of the respondents in this research

study also reveal their own perceptions or attitudes as to what constitutes correct pronunciation in English. As some of them stated, since AE was more “popular” and/or “common” or they had mostly “learnt” AE, therefore they did consider it important to be able to communicate with their then- and future interlocutors (both NSs and NNSs) in a language that would allow them to be understood better, express themselves better and also understand better.

With regard to RQ 4, therefore, which is closely linked to RQ 3, their answers strongly suggest that participants’ experiences and choices in terms of learning and using English are often highly personalized and serve their communicative goals, whatever those goals might be in the future. In other words, from students’ perspectives, their previous experiences with English, their pre-existing knowledge and the in-built communicative competence of the language that they possess and have built are crucial in terms of driving them and helping them making choices of how to negotiate meaning in a foreign/second language (L2) like English with other NSs and NNSs, whoever they might be in the future. The findings also suggest that the context in which learning and using English take place is extremely crucial in terms of determining students’ choices as to which pronunciation model(s) they would like to mimic, copy and use in the future.

These findings indeed support the belief existing in many countries that the NS model is the one that learners should learn and imitate, especially in terms of pronunciation. As was mentioned earlier, according to Phillipson (1992), there is a given assumption that NS is considered “the best embodiment” of the norm and target for learners considering factors, such as fluency and pronunciation. Furthermore, as Todd (2006) points out, especially in Thailand, NSs are considered “somehow better” than NNSs, because their pronunciation meets commonly accepted standards; they do not make grammatical errors, and their vocabulary is more accurate and appropriate.

#### 4. Relationship between familiarity and preference for the usage of SKE

Yet, as mentioned earlier regarding RQ 3, 18 participants in total (about 26%) stated that they would prefer to mimic and copy other NNS accents in their future communication in English or were neutral again with regard to their future accent preferences. In this regard, 15 participants (about 22%) stated that they would prefer to have or preserve their local or SKE accent in

their future communication in English.

As with the case of participants’ preferences for AE, the answers of those who favour SKE reveal that their previous experiences in terms of learning English and the environment in which they had learnt English did affect to some extent their choices in terms of their desired future accents/pronunciation model(s). These findings indeed go in line with the findings of Ahn & Kang (2017) who suggest that as a result of students’ familiarity with Korean-accented speech within their own environment, the Korean university students have developed “an overall positive attitude” towards Korean-accented speech and have recognized its importance for purposes of inter-cultural communication. The results here also support the findings of Kim (2007) who established that Korean adults recognized the importance of EIL in terms of communicating not only with NSs but also with NNSs and, thus, held positive attitudes to non-native varieties of English.

Regarding RQ 4, which is closely linked to RQ 3, their answers also perhaps suggest that speaking English with a South Korean accent or having SKE accent is an opportunity for them to project their own identity and status when communicating in the L2 with other NNS and NSs, whoever they might be. In light of this, one could assume that in many countries, including South Korea, the status of English has changed tremendously and instead of looking at it simply as L2, one should perhaps look at it from the perspective of EIL and consider its changing role and status with regards to issues of ownership, identity and means of communication.

#### 5. The existing knowledge gap surrounding the complexity of NS vs NNS debate

It is quite interesting that regarding RQ 3, the findings further suggest that participants expressed preferences for mainly two types of accents of pronunciation models in their future communication in English among all other pronunciation models: 41 participants or about 60% expressed preference for AE accent(s) and 15 participants (about 22%) stated that they would prefer to have or preserve their SKE accent. Table 6 below reveals the results.

Table 6 Complexity of NS/NNS dichotomy

Preferences for NS accents-about 60%	Preferences for NNS accents-about 26%
AE- about 48%	SKE-about 22%
BE-about 10%	JE-about 3%
Both AE and BE-about 1.5%	

These findings again reveal the extent to which the issue of familiarity or exposure as is being crucial in terms of determining the participants' attitudes to their desired pronunciation model(s) (RQ 4). As cited earlier, Kaur and Raman (2014) as well as Ahn & Kang (2017) argue, as a result of learners' high levels of familiarity with certain accents of English, they thus develop more positive attitudes towards those specific accents, respectively.

Furthermore, these findings also reveal that the NS vs NNS debate in terms of pronunciation might seem more problematic and complex than people would imagine, as the question should be centred on not whether the desired model of pronunciation is respectively the NS model versus the NNS model, but more specifically on what kind of model it is and why students would like to copy that particular model (again no matter whether it is NS model or a NNS model). As the findings reveal, students were informed mostly about two pronunciation models (AE and SKE) and they variously seemed not to be in favour or aware of other models, such as BE, Australian English, South African English, JE and any other varieties of English, irrespective of whether they are based on the NS model or the NNS model.

In light of this, people overlook a very important issue which is central to the NS/NNS dichotomy. Thus, as this study suggests, to a large extent, learners of English are not aware of the many varieties of English that exist in the world or are not informed enough about how English has evolved in today's globalised world. In light of this, a conclusion could be drawn from this particular study that the study of English, including the area of pronunciation, should be viewed in its pluralistic sense and students should be informed about the many varieties of English that exist in the world; how they have evolved, the communicative goals they serve and above all, the context in which they function. These suggestions indeed go in line with the points raised by Kongkerd (2013) and Todd (2006) earlier who argue that, with reference to Thailand, learners of English should be informed and exposed to a variety of accents and pronunciation models of English, such as the accents of people from the ASEAN and/or other Asian countries, not just with NS norms.

#### **6. Relationship between levels of intelligibility, comprehensibility and attitudes to pronunciation model(s) in English**

Moreover, the findings here suggest no strong correlation between participants' answers on perceived

levels of intelligibility and comprehensibility (RQ 1 and RQ 2) and their preferences with regards to the types of accents they would prefer to mimic and copy in their future communication in English (RQ 3) and, respectively, their attitudes to correct and acceptable pronunciation in English (RQ 4). In this regard, their answers strongly varied and many of the participants either did not justify some of their answers in details or simply did not answer some of the questions.

For example, some of the respondents found NS accents more intelligible and comprehensible, but later on stated that they would prefer to mimic and copy SKE accent in their future communication in English. Others indicated that they were or remained neutral as to perceived levels of intelligibility and comprehensibility when it comes to pronunciation; however, later on they indicated that they would prefer to mimic and copy the accents of NSs in their future communication in English. Thus, correlation could not be established between RQ 1 and RQ 2 (considered as one) with RQ 3 and RQ 4 (considered also as one) based on the participants' responses as they were given.

Nevertheless, as stated earlier, regarding RQ 1 and RQ 2, participants stated that they found NS accents and predominantly AE accents, both more intelligible and comprehensible because of their higher levels of familiarity with those particular accents. Thus, from students' perspective, greater familiarity with an English accent indeed leads to higher levels of comprehension.

Regarding RQ 3, the findings strongly suggest that the majority of the participants (41 participants or about 60%) expressed preference for NS accents/ pronunciation in their future communication in English again because of their higher levels of familiarity with those particular accents. 33 participants (about 48%) expressed preference for AE accent(s) or pronunciation model(s). Regarding RQ 4, therefore, their answers thus reveal that their previous experiences in terms of learning English and the environment in which they had learnt English did affect to some extent their choices in terms of their desired future accents/pronunciation model(s).

Thus, despite the fact that strong relationship could not be established between RQ 1 and RQ 2 (considered as one) with RQ 3 and RQ 4 (considered also as one) considering the participants' responses as they were given, it could still be assumed that familiarity with specific accents does lead to both higher levels of intelligibility and comprehensibility and, furthermore, it does influence on a later stage students'

choices and preferences as to their desired models of pronunciation. Once again, the findings strongly suggest that the context in which learning and using English take place and students' learning experiences and background are extremely crucial in terms of determining students' choices as to which pronunciation model(s) they would like to mimic, copy and use in the future.

## Conclusion

At large, the following research study investigated the relationship between students' levels of understanding (comprehension) of various English accents and their attitudes to their desired pronunciation models and what constitutes correct pronunciation in English.

The following study established that the perspective of students the accents of NETs were both more intelligible and comprehensible than the accents of NNETs. This study also reveals that intelligibility and comprehensibility could be looked at interchangeably and pronunciation perhaps should be analysed on a more macro-level (thus on a sentence level) or in the context of whether overall meaning has been conveyed successfully to the listener.

The findings also strongly suggest that the majority of the participants expressed preference for NS accents and, in particular, AE accent(s) as their desired future pronunciation models. Their answers reveal that the issue of familiarity or exposure to those particular accents as being crucial in terms of determining the participants' attitudes to their future communication in English. Thus, their answers revealed that their previous experiences in terms of learning English and the environment in which they had learnt English did affect their choices in terms of which pronunciation model they believed they would like to mimic, copy and use in the future.

Furthermore, according to the findings, students were informed mostly about two pronunciation models of English: AE and SKE, respectively. Despite the fact that they expressed preference for NS accents, they seemed to be in favour and/or aware of precisely AE and SKE accents the most, again because of issues of familiarity and to a smaller extent issues of identity (when referring to the SKE accent). These findings thus reveal that the NS vs NNS debate in terms of pronunciation might seem more problematic and complex than one would imagine and, as this study suggests, to a large extent, learners of English are not aware of the many varieties of English that exist in the world, irrespective of whether they are NS or NNS accents, and, thus,

students are not informed enough about how English has evolved in today's era of globalisation.

In light of this, a conclusion could be drawn from this particular study that the study of English, including the area of pronunciation, should be viewed in its pluralistic sense and students should be informed about the many varieties of English that are existent in the world—thus both various NS accents and various NNS accents as far as pronunciation is concerned. Furthermore, students should be informed about how these various pronunciation models have developed over time; the communicative goals they serve and, most importantly, the contexts in which they, respectively, function.

## Limitations of the Study and Suggestions for Further Research

The research study did have a number of limitations. For example, as was mentioned earlier, it should be noted here that some of the respondents variously provided insufficient, contradictory or irrelevant answers. It might be due to the fact that they had not understood the instructions and/or the questions or had been confused with the questions, or perhaps had not been able to answer some of the questions with certainty. As a result, the answers of a number of respondents (10 participants or about 15%) were not taken into consideration when analysing the data related specifically to RQ 3 and RQ 4.

In addition, it seems those participants were not informed enough and/or did not have enough experiences learning with both NETs and NNETs as to be able to draw the differences between both groups. As mentioned above, at times some of them provided contradictory answers, which revealed their lack of knowledge and awareness about how both groups differ. This could also be due to the fact that at this particular university, most English instructors are NETs and, in particular, Americans. There are few Korean teachers. This factor thus might explain why students might not be informed enough about the extent to which how NETs and NNETs differ. Moreover, it also seems that the level of the students (Freshmen level) was perhaps generally a bit too low as to allow them to provide sufficient and convincing answers to some of the questions.

In this regard, perhaps a future study should be conducted with students of a higher level of English proficiency, such as second-year students or sophomore students. Moreover, the sample of the study could be limited to a number of students who have had more

learning experiences with both NETs and NNETs and, in particular NETs and NNETs coming from different nationalities, not only Korean teachers of English and American teachers of English. They would probably be better informed about the complexity surrounding the NS vs NNS debate. Lastly, in order to obtain more elaborate answers regarding students' preferences and attitudes when it comes to NETs or NNETs and, respectively, their desired pronunciation model(s), semi-structured interviews could be employed, which perhaps will reveal more in-depth and convincing answers.

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