Attitudes to English teachers' accents in the Gulf

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While the spread of English as a lingua franca has led to calls for multidialectal competence, EFL learners often still consider inner circle native English speaker (NES) pronunciation as their learning goal, and may profess a preference for particular teachers based on their NES or non-native English speaker (NNES) status. This study investigates whether a teacher's NES/ NNES status may affect Omani students' level of confidence towards the teacher. Using an adapted matched-guise technique with almost 350 students, the study reveals a preference for speakers and accents students understand to be from the UK, although students also responded favourably to Arabic native speakers. Where the NES/NNES variable remained constant, no significant difference in student's ratings of the teacher was found.

Keywords: language attitudes, accents, pronunciation, Gulf countries, English as a lingua franca

ملخص

فيما أدى انتشار الانجليزية كلغة تفاهم الى الدعوة للمعرفة المتعددة اللهجات فان متعلمي الانجليزية كلغة أجنبية (EFL) غالبا ما يعتبرون نطق متحدث الانجليزية الاصلي(NES) في دوائرها المركزية هو هدف تعليمهم ويمكن ان يعلنوا عن تفضيلهم لمدرسين بعينهم طبقا لحالة المتحدث الاصلي(NES) او لمتحدث غير الاصلي (NNES). ان هذه الدراسة تبحث فيما اذا كانت حالة المتحدث الاصلي او غير الاصلي قد تؤثر على مستوى ثقة الطلبة العمانيين نحو معلميهم. ومن خلال استخدام اسلوب موائمة المظهر التطابقي مع نحو 350 طالب فان الدراسة كشفت عن تفضيل متكلمي المملكة المتحدة ولكنتها حيث يمكن فهمها. الا أنهم يفضلون أيضا متكلمي العربية. وحيثما بقي المتغير ثابتا للمتكلم الاصلي(NES) وغير الاصلي (NNES), لم يظهر هنالك فرق كبير في تقييمات الطالب لمعلمه.

الكلمات الرئيسية: المواقف اللغوية, اللكنات, النطق, الدول الخليجية, الانجليزية كلغة تفاهم.

Introduction

Situated between South Asia and East Africa, Oman, the second largest Gulf state, is home to considerable numbers of expatriate workers from outer circle countries (to use the Kachruvian paradigm), as well as the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). Analogous to other Gulf states (Boyle 2012), English is used commonly as the lingua franca in many work-related contexts between Omanis and the non-Arab expatriate labour force. English

is the medium of instruction for most degree programmes in the tertiary sector, a policy intended to bolster the country's national modernisation project and facilitate Omani students' access to international educational opportunities (Al-Shmeli 2009; Al-Issa and Al Bulushi 2012).[1] The policy also facilitates the employment of ethnically and linguistically highly diverse teaching staff. Omani students are usually required to complete one year of intensive English language training at a foundation institute (a preparatory school attached to the university providing intensive language training) before enrolling in a tertiary degree. Typically, teachers at such institutes come from different inner and outer circle countries, and the wide range of accents in English students are exposed to here and on their degree programmes contrasts with the (primarily) standard UK or US accent used in imported EFL materials.

Despite the multinational composition of academic staff at foundation institutes, hiring policies endeavour to give preference to inner circle native English-speaking teachers (NESTs), a practice evidenced by the wording of job descriptions posted on many institutions' online recruitment sites. In gatekeeping contexts, perceptions that some speakers use the language more 'correctly' than others may influence decisions concerning the recruitment and contract renewal of non-native English-speaking teachers (NNESTs) English teachers (Anya, Avineri, Mason Carris, and Valencia 2011). This may lead to the prioritisation of native English-speaker (NES) status over professional criteria such as relevant qualifications and work experience due to the psychological salience of particular NES varieties (standard US and UK dialects in particular), which are often believed to be more 'correct' and prestigious (Dalton-Puffer, Kaltenboeck, and Smit 1997; Kubota 1998; Luk 1998; Lasagabaster and Sierra 2002; 2005; Marr 2005; Callahan 2006; Jeon and Lee 2006; Ladegaard and Sachdev 2006; McKenzie 2008; Li 2009; Evans and Imai 2011). Private institutions reliant on fee-paying students may claim that preference given to NESTs responded to 'market demand', that is, students expect to be taught a foreign language by NESTs. Previous research has suggested, however, that while EFL learners may claim to prefer NESTs, they may have trouble recognising NES accents from an audio cue alone, particularly accents which do not conform to the idealised UK or US standard (Yook and Lindemann 2013).

Social information such as nationality or ethnic group (Al-Kahtany 1995; Ladegaard 1998), age (Hay, Warren, and Drager 2006) educational background and economic status (Ryan and Bulik 1982) attributed (correctly or incorrectly) to the speaker may mediate how a speaker's accent is perceived (Lindemann and Subtirelu 2013). Such attributions and the resulting perceptions of a speaker's accent have social outcomes. Speakers with particular accents may be judged less suitable for certain jobs (Hosoda and Stone-Romero 2010; Hosoda, Nguyen, and Stone-Romero 2012). Results from a survey of the 27 European Union members reveal that 30% of Europeans felt that 'the candidate's way of speaking, his or her accent' would potentially put job

seekers at a disadvantage in their own country (European Commission 2012: 87). According to Collins and Clément (2012) and Lippi-Green (2012), discrimination based on language and accent is one of the few forms of prejudice practised openly that does not carry a strong social stigma. Previous research has documented how in educational contexts certain social and status values may be attached to particular (typically NNES) dialects or accents in English and that perceptions of a teacher's NS status and degree of foreign-accented speech may influence students' confidence in the person's teaching competence (Kelch and Santana-Williamson 2002; Boyd 2003). This practice may have significant repercussions on a teacher's professional opportunities (Kang and Rubin 2009). While previous work has addressed the unequal status of NES and NNES teachers in East Asian (Kubota 1998; Jeon and Lee 2006) and North American (Mahboob, Uhrig, Newman, and Hartford 2004) contexts, such issues are equally relevant in the Gulf countries (Karmani 2005; Ali 2009).

While similar findings may emerge from this study in the Gulf environment, students may ascribe more positive social traits to speakers they perceive as originating from other Arabic speaking countries (motivated by cultural solidarity) or the neighbouring outer circle countries of South Asia and East Africa due to centuries of extensive contact between Oman and these two regions (Peterson 2004).

This study investigates the degree of confidence Omani students display towards English teachers of different nationalities and with different accents. It employs an adaptation of the matched-guise technique to uncover covertly-held beliefs about 'correctness' and values attributed to the use of English by particular ethnic groups in the Gulf context. Unlike traditional uses of the matched-guise technique which involve speakers imitating a given accent in addition to their own (e.g. Cargile 1997), in this study speakers were recorded twice speaking with what they considered their usual classroom voice. The construct of 'confidence' is operationalised by a selection of characteristics covering perceived professional suitability, language competence, social and status values. The following research questions are addressed:

1. To what extent does knowing an English teacher's NES/ NNES status influence students' level of confidence towards this teacher upon listening to his voice?
2. If the NES/ NNES variable is held constant (i.e. if the speaker is labelled a NNEST in each recording), will there be any significance difference between student's level of confidence towards a teacher upon listening to his voice?

As secondary research questions, the study also enquires into Omani students' pronunciation learning goals and their professed preferences for particular accents.

Socio-psychological responses to accents

The use of the term 'accent' is often misleading; while it is often reserved for those whose pronunciation differs from the listener's or differs from an abstract standard, in reality everyone speaks with an accent (Gluszek and Dovidio 2010; Lippi-Green 2012). When used in reference to foreign language speakers, it usually refers to a manner of pronunciation that is influenced by the speakers' first language (or another previously learned language). While the relative strength of an accent is not necessarily related to level of language competence, the former is often used as an indicator of the latter (Boyd 2003; Gluszek and Dovidio 2010). In Boyd (2003), judgements by both Swedish school administrators and pupils of foreign teachers' accented speech influenced their evaluations of the teachers' general language and even professional competence.

Attitudes reveal implicit belief systems held to varying degrees by individuals or a particular social group in relation to another. They entail cognitive, affective and behavioural dimensions insofar as they encompass beliefs, and emotive responses and behavioural outcomes (Cargile, Giles, Ryan, and Bradac 1994). Statements claiming certain accents to be more 'correct' or 'nicer' than others or acts such as enrolling in a particular course because of the teacher's accent are manifestations of attitudes towards language use. While attitudes may be socially shared, as Cargile et al. (1994: 223) point out, 'individuated information', dependent on the hearer's life history, also contribute to the formulation of attitudes; thus students who experience particular regional accents in the UK or US during a study abroad semester may be more likely to have positive attitudes towards such non-standard accents.

Since Lambert's early work in the 1960s (e.g. Lambert, Anisfeld, and Yeni-Kosmshian 1965) which employed the matched-guise technique to examine the social significance of accents and languages, numerous studies have identified the ease with which speakers form judgements of speakers, whether they be the condition of being a native or non-native speaker or by indexing certain abilities, behaviours or traits that are associated with particular accents (see Cargile et al. 1994 for an overview). While much work has been conducted on English speakers, the attribution of social values to different accents has been documented in the case of Danish (Ladegaard 1998; Jørgensen and Quist 2001), Galician (Loureiro-Rodriguez, Boggess, and Goldsmith 2013), German (Klink and Wagner 1999) and Spanish (Tsalikis, Ortiz-Buonafina, and LaTour 1992).

The ability to distinguish between in and out-group speakers emerges early (Nesdale and Rooney 1996; Girard, Floccia, and Goslin 2008). Young children tend to respond preferentially to speakers with whom they share the same language and accent (Kinzler, Shutts, DeJesus, and Spelke 2009; Kinzler, Corriveau, and Harris 2011), and attitudes develop towards different accents and languages concomitant with an individual's acculturation. Young

people's identification with local sociolinguistic values appears to increase through their teenage years (Lambert, Giles, and Picard 1975). Thus in Nesdale and Rooney (1996), the level of intercultural contact experienced by children studied influenced the solidarity ratings assigned to particular accents of the slightly older group, but not of the younger group.

Adults tend to continue to give preferential social ratings to their own native accent (Lambert et al. 1965; Tsurutani 2012); this can mean distinguishing between localised varieties of the same language. For instance, in Abrams and Hogg's (1987) study investigating listeners' attribution of social and status values to two Scottish and one RP-accented speaker, Scottish listeners rated the in-group accent (Dundee) more highly in opposition to a Glasgow accent, but this in turn received higher ratings when compared to the RP-accented speaker. Adults may also, however, defer to other accents perceived to be more prestigious by downgrading their own. In Bayard, Weatherall, Gallois, and Pittam (2001), for example, New Zealanders (and to a lesser extent Australians) downgraded their own accent *vis-à-vis* US-accented speakers for some traits such as solidarity. In-group accents are thus not invariably preferred to those signalling out-group status, rather attitudes may depend on contextual factors.

Contextual information may also influence NES' perception of NNES accents. Similar to results from studies using different social varieties of a NES accent (Seggie, Smith, and Hodgins 1986), some NNES accents may evoke associations of low social prestige and competence. Thus in Kalin and Rayko (1978), NES listeners downgraded foreign-accented job seekers compared with Canadian-English accented speakers for high status jobs, but not for low status jobs. Some NNES accents may evoke positive associations in the context of specific high status professions. In Cargile's (1997) matched-guise study, a Chinese-accented English speaker received the same ratings as a US-accented English speaker by Anglo-American listeners (but not Asian Americans), who were informed that the speaker was applying for job (different positions of varying status were given); the same speaker received lower ratings when the listeners understood the speaker was an English professor in an educational setting, however. This discrepancy may be explained in terms of listeners' indexing particular social values; in some contexts (but not all), Chinese speakers evoke associations of competence and competitiveness to Anglo-American listeners. Not all NNES accents are perceived to be equally foreign; accents of European languages such as French or German may be perceived as 'less' foreign to Anglo-American listeners than many Asian accents (Cargile et al. 2010). In Hosoda and Stone-Romero (2010), Japanese-accented speakers were rated as less suitable than French and standard US-accented speakers for positions with high communication demands, while French speaker ratings were comparable to the US-accented speaker.

Such contextual information may also affect listener comprehension. Rubin's (1992) study on accent perception using the matched-guise technique demonstrated that American undergraduate students perceived a foreign

accent and attained lower scores on the listening comprehension task when informed that the speaker was an Asian and presented an Asian (Chinese) visage than when they were informed that the speaker was a White American with the corresponding visual. In both cases the speaker's accent conformed to standard American English, leading the author to conclude that discrepancies in students' performance and professed perceptions of accent were attributable to socio-psychological factors.

NNES students have also been shown to express different attitudes to teachers depending on their perceived NES status. In McKenzie's (2008) verbal guise study, Japanese students assigned higher status evaluations to teachers they perceived to be US and UK NESs. Butler's (2007) matched-guise study examining Korean primary school children's comprehension of and attitudes towards US and Korean-accented English revealed that although comprehension was not affected by the two accents, children judged the pronunciation of the US-accented guise more positively. It is not unusual for EFL students to perceive NESTs as better models of 'correct' accent (Luk 1998; Lasagabaster and Sierra 2002; 2005; Callahan 2006; Li 2009), although EFL students may not always recognise NES accents, especially when they diverge from the standard US or UK varieties (Kelch and Santana-Williamson 2002; Scales, Wennerstrom, Richard, and Wu 2006; McKenzie 2008).

While EFL students may also downgrade their own accent in comparison to standard US and UK accents (Dalton-Puffer et al. 1997; Luk 1998), students may nevertheless assign high solidarity ratings to speakers with their own accent (McKenzie 2008; Sasayama 2013) or may rate their own accent more highly than other NNES accents (Chiba Matsuura, and Yamamoto 1995).

In the Gulf country like Oman, where a plethora of accents in English co-exist in the educational sector due to the reliance on expatriate workers, no work has yet been done on the attitudes students may have towards accents in English in their own environment. Although both the institutional gatekeepers and the students themselves profess to preferring NESTs for English language tuition, nothing is yet known about how students perceive the accents of NNESTs and to what extent the NES criterion influences judgements of teacher competence or whether, analogous to previous findings (McKenzie 2008), Omani students may rate speakers with their own accent more highly than other NNES accents.

Methods

To identify to what extent knowledge of a teacher's NES/NNES status influences students' confidence in the teacher, a questionnaire was used to elicit students' judgements of the speaker while listening to a recorded text. For the listening exercise, five different speakers were used, with two recordings made of each. In the first recording, the speaker was labelled a NNEST and in the second, a NEST; for one recording this variable remained

constant (i.e. the speaker was a NNEST in both recordings), but the nationality changed.

Context of study

This study takes place in Oman's second largest university; a private institution founded almost 10 years ago, it currently has an enrolment of around 7,000 students spread across four different colleges. All courses, excepting specific courses relating to Arabic, education and culture, are taught in English and students spend one year prior to beginning their degrees in an intensive English language training programme run by the foundation institute. During their school years, students received eight years of English tuition, usually taught by teachers from MENA countries (Al-Shmeli 2009), although gradually these are being replaced by Omanis.

Teachers in the foundation institute come from a wide variety of countries. While job postings express a preference for NESTs from inner circle countries, the majority of teachers over the two-year duration this research was conducted were from the outer and expanding circle, including a small but increasing number of Omanis. Once they begin their degree programmes, students are taught mostly in English primarily by lecturers from South Asia, the Philippines and the MENA countries. NESTs are a rarity outside of the English department.

Participants

Students

The students in this study were enrolled in a one-semester course entitled 'English 2', taught by faculty members of the English department. This course was chosen as it is an obligatory course for all degree programmes (taken at any time from the second year of study onwards) and it is the final university-wide EFL course students take before graduating. At the time of data collection, 405 students were enrolled in this course and it was divided into nine different sections. Instructors of English 2 during this semester came from the following countries: Bangladesh, Britain, Iraq, Jordan, Sudan and Syria.

Table 1 displays students' biographic data for the 373 students participating in this study. The gender discrepancy was expected as females comprise around 85% of university enrolment.[2] As gender was not directly relevant to this study, this discrepancy is not considered important. A proficiency test score is provided as an indication of students' language competence. The 'in-house' test, while modelled on the commercial TOEFL test, excludes writing and speaking components. Students sit the test fairly

Table 1. Students' profile (N=347)

Gender	Female 309 (89%)	Male 38 (11%)	
In-house 'TOEFL' score	(400–449) 228 (65%)	(450–479) 101 (29%)	(> 480) 18 (5%)
English major	Yes 62 (18%)	No 285 (82%)	

Table 2. Students' pronunciation learning goals and beliefs

Pronunciation learning goal	(a) Good pronunciation is not very important for me. 5 (1%)
	(b) I will be satisfied if I have good, clear pronunciation of English with an accent typical for Arabic native speakers. 119 (34%)
	(c) I want to sound like a native speaker. 223 (64%)

If you want to sound like a native speaker, which accent would you like to acquire? (Total number of answers to this question = 257)

UK 195 (76%)   US/Canada 54 (21%)   Australia/NZ 5 (2%)   South Africa 3 (1%)

If students want to improve their pronunciation, they should have a native speaker teacher.

Yes 250 (72%)	No 60 (17%)	Don't know 37 (11%)

regularly, as the result is used to determine their maximum credit load. Just under 20% of students are English language majors.

Table 2 presents results regarding students' pronunciation goals and their beliefs regarding the importance of a NES teacher as a model to improve pronunciation. The vast majority of students profess to aspiring to NES pronunciation, while an even higher number believe that NES teachers are required if students wish to improve their pronunciation. This suggests that even some students whose learning goal is 'clear pronunciation with an Arab accent' believe in the need of a NES to improve pronunciation.

Students who designated a 'native speaker accent' (response 'c') as their learning goal were asked a follow up question inquiring about the accent they wished to acquire. Results showed an overwhelming preference for a UK accent. (In contravention to instructions, not only students who chose response 'c' answered this question.)

Students' major does not seem to be an important factor in determining the students' pronunciation goal or their preference for a NES teacher. In the former case, 64% of non-English major students and 68% of English-major students professed to aspiring to NES pronunciation, while in the latter case, 72% of non-English major students and 73% of English-major students believed that having a NES teacher was desirable.

Speakers

For the recordings to be used in this study, five qualified male NNES English teachers from the foundation institute were required with nationalities (or from regions) commonly found among teaching staff at the foundation institute and English department (South Asia, the MENA countries, East Africa), as these were accents which students were likely to have been exposed to through contact with the large expatriate labour force in the education sector. I initially made recordings of eight teachers to enable me to narrow the final selection to accents judged to be recognisable as coming from a certain country or region and to speakers who were judged as having a 'good classroom voice'. This was done in order to ensure speakers possessed accents commonly heard in the Gulf region and to ensure speakers with an unusual voice quality were not included in the study, as this might negatively influence students' responses. One nationality less commonly found in educational contexts in Oman was recorded, an Iranian, in order to include a non-Arabic NS from the MENA region in the study.

These teachers were recorded reading short, emotionally neutral and grammatically non-complex texts (between 114 and 160 words) about well-known locations in Oman. Recordings were made in a recording studio with sound padding using the software Sound Forge. The speakers were given time to familiarise themselves with the paragraphs before being recorded, and were instructed to read the text as though they were speaking to their students in class. Recordings were subsequently edited for disfluencies and the volume of each was increased. The recordings lasted between 56 and 127 seconds.

To select the final group, I requested six teachers from the English department to evaluate their perception of the suitability of each teacher's voice for the EFL classroom, and to identify his origin (region or country). On the basis of their answers, I selected teachers from the following countries: Iran, Kenya, Oman, Pakistan and Syria. A sixth teacher from South Africa (NEST) was included as a distractor. This teacher was only recorded once, while the other five teachers were recorded twice reading two different texts. Table 3 displays the biographical information relating to each of the speaker's two guises; for instance, the speaker in recording 1a ('Fazal') was the same speaker as recording 1b ('Frank').

When assigning the fictitious nationality, I took into account the presence of particular features in the speaker's pronunciation that reflected either a standard US or UK. For example, Speaker 2 (Amir/Mark) tended towards a rhotic accent and greater nasalisation of vowels before nasal consonants; he was assigned a US guise in his second recording. Speaker 1 (Fazal/Frank) and 4 (Ahmed/Paul) had non-rhotic accents, produced /ɑ:/ and /ɒ/ in words such as 'pass' and 'modern' respectively, pronounced the letter 't' as an alveolar plosive in contexts where the US accent would be a tap; these speakers were assigned a UK guise in their second recording. Speaker 3

Table 3. Speakers' identity

Pseudonym 1	Provenance and L1 (true)	Pseudonym 2 and fictitious nationality
1a. 'Fazal'	Pakistan (Urdu)	1b. 'Frank' England
2a. 'Amir'	Iran (Azeri/Farsi)	2b. 'Mark' USA
3a. 'Jimmy'	Kenya (Luo/Swahili)	3b. 'Robert' Canada
4a. 'Ahmed'	Syria (Arabic)	4b. 'Paul' England
5a. 'Mohammed'	Oman (Arabic)	5b. 'Gary' Philippines
6. 'Andrew'	South Africa (English)	

(Jimmy/Robert) had a non-rhotic accent, pronounced alveolar plosives rather than taps, but tended to produce shorter vowels would be normal in standard UK and US accents, such as /ɔ/ rather than /əʊ/ in words such as 'coast' and 'road', /ɔ/ in place of /ɔ:/ in 'fort', and /e/ rather than /ei/ in 'day' and 'trade'. His assigned nationality in the second recording (Canadian) was one to which students have little exposure within the university.

When played to students, the two recordings by the same speaker were interspersed with numerous others, for instance: 1a, 2a, 3a, 4a, 5a, 6, 1b, 2b, 3b, 4b, 5b. The sequence was varied, however, to control for order effects. For each speaker, the 'a' recording was labelled as being produced by a "NNEST" on the students' questionnaire and the 'b' recording was labelled as "NEST". Recordings 5a and 5b were an exception; here students were told for each recording that the speaker was a NNEST (recording 5a: Omani; recording 5b: Filipino).

The topic 'locations in Oman' was selected as it would likely invoke positive associations and students would be familiar with the content. Previous studies have suggested that the topic of the listening text may influence listeners' attitude towards the speaker (Giles, Williams, Mackie, and Rosselli 1995; Heaton and Nygaard 2011). As students could not see the text while listening, to avoid comprehension difficulties the texts for each location contained very similar information, such as distance from the capital, geographical location, tourist attractions (for instance, souks, date plantations, fortresses and museums) and basic historical references (see Appendix).

Data collection instrument

A questionnaire was developed to compile descriptive data and measure students' level of confidence in the recorded speakers. The first section of the questionnaire elicited biographical data, students' pronunciation learning goals and their beliefs concerning the importance of a NES teacher. The main section inquired into students' perceptions of 11 teachers' voices. Students

Table 4. Questionnaire statements

Use of English:
Item1. This person will be a good model for correct English pronunciation.
Item 2. This person uses grammatically correct English.
Item 3. This person will be good at explaining the English language in class.

Status values
Item 4. This person is a very experienced English teacher.
Item 5. This person is well educated.

Social values
Item 6. This person is very intelligent.
Item 7. This person is very friendly.

Suitability as teacher
Item 8. The university should hire this person to teach English in the Foundation Institute.
Item 9. If this person taught English 2, I would enrol in his class.

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were informed that each of these teachers had applied to work at the university and the department was interested in students' evaluation of these candidates. Before each listening exercise, the teacher was introduced by a pseudonym followed by his (true) nationality and his NES/NNES status.

This was followed by nine questions inquiring into status values (well educated, an experienced teacher) and social values (friendly, intelligent), the perception of the speaker's pronunciation and use of English, and the perceived suitability of this speaker for particular courses at the university: at the foundation institute and the current course they were taking, English 2 (see Table 4). These items were chosen in consultation with colleagues of the education department at the location where this study was undertaken; over all, they were considered to contribute to the construct of 'confidence' in an English teacher within this cultural context. Responses were provided in the form of a five-point Likert scale ([0] strongly disagree; [1] mostly disagree; [2] don't know; [3] mostly agree; [4] strongly agree). The questionnaire (including instructions) was translated into Arabic by an NS of Arabic and the translation was checked by a second Arabic NS faculty member.

Validity and reliability

This questionnaire and the recordings were piloted using a 200-level class of 35 English major students; the results confirmed that the questionnaire was understandable and students did not appear to recognise that they had listened to only six rather than eleven different teachers. No alterations were made to the instrument or procedure.

The score reliability was estimated with Cronbach's α coefficient for each scale and they were at an acceptable level: 1a Fazal (0.62), 1b Frank (0.77), 2a Amir (0.71), 2b Mark (0.74), 3a Jimmy (0.69), 3b Robert (0.67), 4a Ahmed (0.73), 4b Paul (0.75), 5a Mohammed (0.79), 5b Gary (0.77). The corrected item total correlations were checked and they were at a satisfactory level (Pallant 2001).

Data collection procedure

I visited each section of English 2 during February 2013 to administer the listening exercise. Students were told by an Arabic NS that their participation was voluntary (they had the option of leaving the class for the duration of the study) and anonymous. As the class teacher had previously announced that a listening exercise would be held that day, some students may have chosen to be absent.

Students received the questionnaire and were given time to complete the first page (eliciting biographical data, students' learning goals and their beliefs), and to read the first listening exercise. The names, provenance and NES/NNES status attributed to each speaker appeared on the whiteboard at the front of the class. Students listened to each text, completing the exercise during and after each recording. To counter boredom and the effects of attention loss, between each recording I gave students encouraging feedback and briefly asked them about the city the subsequent speaker would talk about. Upon the completion of all recordings, I played the first 30 seconds of each recording again, in order that students might verify their answers. I then gave students the option of listening to one again if they so desired. Completing the questionnaires took around 40 minutes.

In an attempt to gauge whether any students had perceived voices to be similar, I undertook two additional steps before ending the session. I initiated a brief feedback session on the recordings by using the names of teachers in the recordings on the whiteboard as a prompt to elicit students' preferences for particular voices. Upon finishing, I told students I would wait behind in the class to take questions or comments about the exercise. While some students approached me upon leaving with a comment related to the exercise, no students queried any perceived anomalies.

Results

A total of 373 students completed the questionnaires; 26 were completed incorrectly and were discarded, leaving a total of 347 questionnaires. This section begins with the descriptive results from students' perceptions of the

10 different recordings followed by an examination of the degree of significant difference between students' judgements of each speaker.

Descriptive data

The results from students' evaluations of the five speakers (10 recordings) are presented as item-level results in Table 5.

I added the responses for each of the nine items on the questionnaire in a five-point Likert scale to create interval-scaled continuous variables (range 0–36): 1a/1b confidence; 2a/2b confidence; 3a/3b confidence; 4a/4b confidence; 5a/5b confidence. Table 6 displays the mean scores (and standard deviation) for each recording.

Except in the case of speaker 5, recording (b) received more favourable ratings than recording (a). This difference appeared to be most pronounced in the case of recordings 1a and 1b. Overall, the UK guise (1b and 4b) received the highest confidence ratings, while speaker 3, a Kenyan (also introduced as a Canadian), received the lowest confidence ratings regardless of his NES/NNES status.

Inferential findings

Independent t-tests were undertaken to ascertain whether the difference between students' ratings of each speaker's recording was statistically significant ($p < 0.05$). The equality of variance was checked with Levene's test. The analysis was performed with an alpha of 0.05 for: 1a/1b, 2a/2b, 3a/3b, 4a/4b, 5a/5b. To answer the first research question, I looked at the ratings for the NES/NNES difference for each of the first four speakers. In the following cases, a significant difference was found in the confidence ratings of the NNES (a) and the NES (b) in favour of the NES: 1a/1b (Fazal/Frank) $t(692) = -8.175$, $p < 0.05$; 2a/2b (Amir/Mark) $t(688.36) = -4.772$, $p < 0.05$, and 4a/4b (Ahmed/Paul) $t(690.74) = -2.718$, $p < 0.05$. Results for speaker 3a/3b (Jimmy/Robert), however, displayed no significance difference: $t(690.69) = -0.485$, $p > 0.05$. In order to answer the second research question (if the NNES variable were kept constant, would students' ratings of a speaker's two recordings differ significantly?), I examined the results for speaker 5a/5b (Mohammed/Gary); these showed no significant difference: $t(688.39) = 1.443$, $p > 0.05$. Alternatively, these results may be represented visually. Confidence intervals are given in Figure 1 for the five speakers.

Discussion

While the present study has confirmed the importance to students of a NES English accent as a learning goal (evident also in Timmis 2002; Li 2009), it has

Table 5. Item-based results

	Item 1: Model for pronunciation				Item 2: Uses correct grammar				Item 3: Good at explaining			
	SD	D	A	SA	SD	D	A	SA	SD	D	A	SA
1a Fazal NNEST, Pakistan	6.6	23.1	47.8	11.8	3.7	16.1	41.8	17	6.1	19.3	39.8	14.1
1b Frank NEST, UK	1.2	11	40.9	40.1	2	6.1	44.4	36.9	1.7	6.6	46.1	29.1
2a Amir NNEST, Iran	14.4	30.5	31.4	15.9	7.8	18.7	38.9	13.3	21.4	19.3	30.8	8.4
2b Mark NEST, US	6.3	23.2	40.3	20.2	5.8	17	37.5	21.9	6.3	17.3	39.5	13.3
3a Jimmy NNEST, Kenya	25.6	33.4	26.5	5.2	15	30.8	28	8.4	18.4	33.1	19.9	4.3
3b Robert NEST, Canada	15.6	27.7	30.3	14.7	9.8	23.3	32.3	13.3	15.3	29.4	21.6	7.2
4a Ahmed NNEST, Syria	4	12.4	54.5	21.3	2	9.8	52.2	20.2	2	11	51	15.3
4b Paul NEST, UK	3.2	8.1	50.1	30.8	2.9	8.1	46.4	30.3	2.6	7.5	45.8	28.2
5a Mohammed NNEST, Oman	6.1	17.9	45.2	22.5	4	14.4	43.5	19.6	5.5	15.6	39.5	17.9
5b Gary NNEST, Philippines	8.4	19.6	48.4	14.7	5.5	15.3	50.4	13.3	4.3	17.6	44.7	12.1

	Item 4: An experienced teacher				Item 5: Is well educated			
	SD	D	A	SA	SD	D	A	SA
1a Fazal NNEST, Pakistan	6.6	21.6	27.4	7.5	3.5	14.4	40.9	14.1
1b Frank NEST, UK	1.2	5.8	43.8	24.2	1.7	6.6	41.5	25.1
2a Amir NNEST, Iran	6.9	20.7	21.9	7.2	4.3	12.4	37.2	12.1
2b Mark NEST, US	5.2	18.2	30.3	13.3	2.6	10.4	39.8	15
3a Jimmy NNEST, Kenya	14.7	32.6	14.7	4.6	6.3	19.6	25.1	5.5
3b Robert NEST, Canada	10.7	26.8	18.4	5.4	7.8	13.8	29.7	5.5
4a Ahmed NNEST, Syria	1.7	12.4	36.9	11.5	2.3	6.3	47.6	15.3
4b Paul NEST, UK	2	9.2	34.6	26.2	2.3	3.5	44.7	23.9
5a Mohammed NNEST, Oman	5.2	15	27.4	15	4	8.4	42.1	15.3
5b Gary NNEST, Philippines	4.9	18.7	34.6	10.4	3.5	10.1	42.1	13.3

Table 5. Continued

	Item 6: Is very intelligent				Item 7: Is friendly			
	SD	D	A	SA	SD	D	A	SA
1a Fazal NNEST, Pakistan	2.9	11.5	22.2	6.6	4.3	8.9	28.8	11.8
1b Frank NEST, UK	0.9	6.3	24.2	16.4	0.6	7.5	27.4	15.6
2a Amir NNEST, Iran	4.6	8.4	20.2	7.8	6.1	13.5	18.7	7.5
2b Mark NEST, US	2.9	9.8	28.2	8.9	3.7	10.1	29.7	10.4
3a Jimmy NNEST, Kenya	5.5	14.4	16.1	3.7	4.9	11.8	24.5	8.6
3b Robert NEST, Canada	7.5	11	16.4	5.5	5.2	9.2	21.6	11
4a Ahmed NNEST, Syria	0.9	4.9	31.1	10.7	3.7	5.2	34.3	13.8
4b Paul NEST, UK	1.7	4.6	32.6	12.1	1.4	4.3	29.7	13.3
5a Mohammed NNEST, Oman	1.7	7.8	25.1	13	2.6	4.6	30.5	17.4
5b Gary NNEST, Philippines	3.2	6.3	27.1	10.1	3.7	3.5	33.7	13.8

	Item 8: Should be hired for FI				Item 9: I would take English 2			
	SD	D	A	SA	SD	D	A	SA
1a Fazal NNEST, Pakistan	12.1	14.7	34	13.5	16.4	20.7	20.5	9.5
1b Frank NEST, UK	3.2	9.8	39.2	29.1	4.9	12.1	33.7	21.3
2a Amir NNEST, Iran	16.1	22.2	25.6	6.3	23.9	26.5	15.9	7.5
2b Mark NEST, US	9.5	18.2	34.3	11.5	12.4	28.2	23.9	7.9
3a Jimmy NNEST, Kenya	26.5	30.5	16.4	5.5	34	25.4	13.3	6.1
3b Robert NEST, Canada	17.3	24.5	22.8	7.5	26.2	23.9	14.7	4.3
4a Ahmed NNEST, Syria	4.6	11.5	47	14.7	11	13	34	11.8
4b Paul NEST, UK	3.5	11.5	40.6	24.2	6.9	13	30.3	18.7
5a Mohammed NNEST, Oman	8.1	11.8	36.6	22.2	13.8	17.6	27.7	16.7
5b Gary NNEST, Philippines	5.8	20.5	35.4	15	13.5	19	25.1	8.6

SD: strongly disagree; D: disagree; A: agree; SA: strongly agree.

Table 6. Means scores and standard deviations

Speaker	Mean	Std. Deviation
1a Fazal, NNEST, Pakistan	16.98	6.261
1b Frank, NEST, UK	21.35	7.757
2a Amir, NNEST, Iran	15.07	6.764
2b Mark, NEST, US	17.61	7.275
3a Jimmy, NNEST, Kenya	13.94	6.045
3b Robert, NEST, Canada	14.16	6.314
4a Ahmed, NNEST, Syria	19.08	7.285
4b Paul, NEST, UK	20.61	7.602
5a Mohammed, NNEST, Oman	18.69	8.146
5b Gary, NNEST, Philippines	17.83	7.577
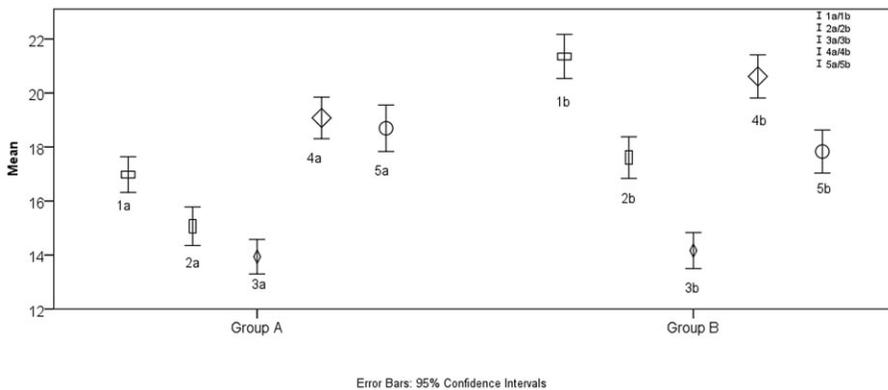
Figure 1. Confidence intervals

also revealed a greater psychological salience of the UK accent as a desirable standard, echoing findings from studies in other cultural contexts (Dalton-Puffer et al. 1997; Ladegaard and Sachdev 2006; Li 2009). Perhaps not unlike Hong Kong in this respect (Li 2009), historical ties between Britain and Oman may account for the perceived attractiveness of the UK accent.

Not only did students state a clear preference for a NEST as a pronunciation model in three of the four NEST/NNEST paired recordings, they also tended to assign higher ratings to teachers if they were informed the speaker was a NEST. Consistent with students' stated accent preferences, the two guises with overall highest ratings were presented as teachers from the UK. Overall, however, students did not demonstrate a wholesale preference for teachers on account of their NES status. The three teachers most highly rated after the UK guises were the Arab and Filipino guises. Students

responded particularly positively to the Syrian and Omani guises; the relatively minor difference between their ratings of the two guises of each of these speakers suggests that students generally had a positive attitude towards teachers of English with a moderate accent typical for Arabic NSs. Despite their declared preference for NES teachers to improve pronunciation and their professed learning goal of 'wanting to sound like a NES' (see Table 4), students may be very receptive to the accent of teachers from their own cultural environment.

The most significant difference between students' ratings occurred in the case of the Pakistani speaker. While he received only moderate ratings as a NNEST, when presented as a teacher from the UK, his ratings were the highest. Previous research has signalled the low prestige accorded to South Asian accented speakers by Arab students (Al-Kahtany 1995). This is perhaps due to the large number of South Asians working in Gulf countries in low-qualified, manual work (Dresch 2006).

While the Iranian speaker was rated more highly when assigned a US guise, his ratings were markedly lower than those of the Arabic NS when assigned his NNEST guise. While he shares the same Middle Eastern provenance with the Arabic NSs, for political reasons (Peterson 2004), Iranians are rarely offered teaching positions in educational institutions in the Gulf, and students are less likely to have had previous experience of an Iranian teacher. For the speaker receiving the lowest ratings (the Kenyan speaker), no statistically significant difference was found between his ratings as a NEST and NNEST. It is unclear why this accent was unpopular; further work on students' attitudes nationalities or ethnic groups and accents may shed light on this.

Some findings are difficult to interpret. All texts read by the speakers were grammatically correct, but students' perceptions of the degree of correctness varied greatly (see Table 5); ratings were not always more favourable for the NEST guise, and where the NNEST variable remained constant (5a/5b), ratings also differed. Further, all teachers received overall lower ratings as a prospective teacher of the credit-bearing English 2 course than as a prospective teacher in the foundation institute. It appears students were generally more confident about identifying suitable teachers for preparatory English language training than for a course that constituted part of a degree programme. Students also more readily responded to statements regarding the speakers' status than to statements relating to social attractiveness; for the latter, students were more inclined to answer 'don't know'. In many cases, fewer than 50% of students responded to the statements regarding social values. In hindsight, this is perhaps due to how the exercise was contextualised; speakers had been assigned the social role of 'teacher' and this probably activated expectations regarding professional competence to a greater extent than social attractiveness. The text type read by the speakers may have also been a contributing factor; dry and factual, it provided little opportunity to discern the speaker's personality.

Conclusion

As an expanding circle context in which English is used extensively between locals and expatriate workers from outer circle countries, the Gulf constitutes a rich sociolinguistic context for studies on attitudes to accents. Omani learners of English potentially receive considerable exposure to English through local media and advertising and through the need to employ English with expatriate workers in professional contexts such as the service sector. Thus, while didactic materials in schools tend to concentrate on exonormative models such as UK/US-accented English, the English used in myriad communicative contexts of their immediate environment is most usually spoken by native speakers of Arabic and South Asian languages from the surrounding region.

The purpose of this study was to investigate how knowledge of a teachers' NES/NNES status affects Omani students' level of confidence in the teacher. As only one data collection instrument was used, the usual caution should be exercised when interpreting these findings. It was not possible to ascertain the extent to which students responded truthfully to questionnaire prompts and, notwithstanding measures to counter listener fatigue, it cannot be discounted that this may have influenced the results. Despite this caveat, the results from this study using an adapted matched-guise technique involving five different speakers indicate that, while Omani students do tend to give preferential ratings to teachers they believe to be NES, results are more textured than a simple NES/NNES dichotomy. Students' stated preferences for particular accents or NESTs do not always concord with students' attitudes to accents in response to audio stimuli and thus may not be a good predictor of attitudes to teachers' accents in the classroom. An example of this is the relatively high ratings of Arab NNESTs. Students likely view these teachers as models for their own learning path, and their higher ratings may be an expression of solidarity with these teachers who have reached proficiency levels to which they themselves may aspire.

The manipulation of the NES/NNES criterion revealed a discrepancy between the ratings assigned to most speakers. This discrepancy was particularly marked in the case of the Pakistani speaker. As Oman is home to large numbers of low-skilled workers from Pakistan (and other South Asian countries), it is possible that students equate Pakistani speakers of English with low social prestige. Such findings are in alignment with previous research that has established that listening is a co-constructed activity and is partly influenced by the listener's social categorisation of the speaker and the listener's resultant conscious or unconscious expectations of this social group's pronunciation of English (Cargile 1997; Lindemann 2002; Cargile et al. 2010).

The results from this study have important implications for gatekeeping contexts such as job interviews, where the evaluation of oral proficiency of NNESTs most frequently occurs by people who are not trained in the

evaluation of linguistic competence and who are unlikely to be sensitive to the socio-phonological issues involved in judgements of speaker competence. Evaluations by trained and untrained raters of a language learner's oral proficiency level may differ significantly (Barnwell 1989; Thompson 1991; Kraut and Wulff 2013) and there is reason to believe that judgements by an educational institution's administrative staff of a prospective teacher's oral competence may at times be more influenced by socio-psychological factors than linguistic information (Kalin and Rayko 1978; Kang and Rubin 2009; Anya et al. 2011). Gatekeepers in employment contexts need to be aware of the role of accent in the formulation of impressions of job candidates and how allegations of accent may be used in place of more overt forms of discrimination (Boyd 2003; Kang and Rubin 2009; European Commission 2012; Lippi-Green 2012).

The study also has implications for material developers and course curriculum content. Despite claiming to want a NES teacher and to aspire to a NES accent, Omani students are receptive to other accents and appreciate highly proficient NNESTs. Didactic materials need to acknowledge this by providing greater exposure to competent NNES users in different social and professional contexts (Kubota 1998; Decke-Cornill 2002; Jenkins 2005; Kirkpatrick 2007; Lindemann and Subtirelu 2013); for the Gulf market in particular, listening materials need to include exposure to proficient, accented English as spoken by NSs of South Asian languages, Arabic and Kiswahili. The inclusion of such accents in commercially produced material would likely give greater validation to competent users of English within the immediate local community and wider region. While an exonormative model may continue to be viewed as a socially desirable acquisition goal for many EFL students in the Gulf for reasons of prestige, favourable presentations of proficient NNES with accents common to the immediate environment may positively impact on students' confidence in the English language ability of such speakers, a factor of importance due to the high number of NNESTs in tertiary institutions in the region. Familiarity with or explicit training in particular differences between accents may even result in more positive attitudes towards these accents (Derwing, Rossiter, and Munro 2002; Kraut and Wulff 2013). Little is yet known, however, about values attached to certain accents on the basis of the speaker's nationality in the Gulf Arab context. While this research has confirmed that the speakers' nationality often does influence Omani students' level of confidence in the speaker's use of English, the particular associations that students have towards accents (as seen, for instance, in Evans and Imai 2011) remains to be explored.

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Notes

1. Due to a long history of commercial and political ties between the two countries (Reda Bhacker 1994), the UK is a traditional study-abroad destination for Omani students.
2. Female enrolment is higher in most types of tertiary institutions in Oman (Al-Barwani and Albeely 2007: 127).

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Appendix

Example of text used for recordings

Sohar lies half way between Muscat and Dubai, 200 kilometres northwest of the capital. Located on the coast, it was once the maritime capital of Oman. It is famous for its fort, which has a wonderful museum inside. It also has a lively fish souk close to the sea and is supposedly the birthplace of Sinbad the Sailor. About 70 kilometres is Khaburrah, the traditional weaving centre in Oman. Here, many handcrafts are produced such as rugs, bags and baskets and pottery is also sold. Although you can buy these items back in Muscat, here you can buy them directly from the people who make them.