

World Englishes and Intelligibility in English-Medium Classrooms

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Abstract

Nowadays, academia is impacted by globalisation and the internationalization movement; which are carried out by the use of English. English has widely become the dominant language of instruction in higher education. Among the vast aims and objectives of such a widespread movement are apparently these goals: to create a unified scientific community and to pave the communication channels in order to access or be accessible for knowledge and science advancements. This well-promoted situation should consequently welcome various English speakers, native and non-native. That is, various varieties of English—or Englishes as defined by sociolinguists—can be brought together into a single milieu, since what matters in such a context is the subject matter knowledge delivered in English rather than the language itself or a specific English or variety of it. However, if the delivery of the content knowledge undertaken by teachers is confusing to students, there would be a possibility for content loss. Thus, intelligibility of the available Englishes should be viewed as a key element in the process of content knowledge acquisition. Acknowledging the importance of speech intelligibility, the current study quantitatively examines which Englishes are considered intelligible to medical and health-allied students and professionals from an Arab expanding-circle country, namely Saudi Arabia. The involved Englishes are determined by the context. The study shows that both native and non-native Englishes can be intelligible, yet non-native English should belong to the expanding-circle countries—Arab in particular—if they are to be classified as such.

Keywords: World Englishes, intelligibility, English as medium of instruction

INTRODUCTION

Doubtlessly, speech unintelligibility causes the listener or receiver frustration, demotivation, and withdrawal. Furthermore, it can be a major reason behind content loss: “if the spoken word or dialog is unintelligible, much of the content is lost” (Gruszka, 2013). Since content is the pivot and essence of the teaching/learning process being executed in academic contexts, the speech through which this content is delivered should be clear and intelligible from the recipients’ viewpoints, students in this case. Accents are one of the main reasons that can lead to poor speech intelligibility (Gruszka,

2013); thus, accent is treated in this study as the element though which an English is judged.

Smith's (1992) model of intelligibility, comprehensibility and familiarity propounds that familiarity and intelligibility are in a positive relationship. That is, intelligibility can be dependent upon familiarity in the sense that with greater exposure to and familiarity with a certain English or variety, there is a greater chance for that variety to be intelligible. Indeed, this has been proven as a fact by a breadth of studies and surveys on intelligibility. Accordingly, the current study builds its hypotheses upon the relationship between these two elements as will be detailed in the methodology section.

Furthermore, previous studies and investigations in the context reveal that there is a link between intelligibility and attitudes towards Englishes. That is, intelligibility stands as a key factor in favoring certain Englishes over others. Therefore, this survey can help interpreting World Englishes attitudinal studies in the context.

LITERATURE REVIEW

World Englishes (WEs)

Roaming the world, English, wherever settled, developed into local varieties since people used the language in their own ways (Yano, 2009:249). These 'local varieties' have later been called 'World Englishes' (e.g. Graddol, 2006:84; Bolton 2004). Bolton also indicates that the term WEs refers to the widespread approach to the study of the English language worldwide, particularly associated with Kachru (1985) and other scholars working in a "world Englishes paradigm."

He gives examples of the Englishes referred to by the term WEs as the 'New Englishes' found in the Caribbean and in West and East African societies such as Nigeria and Kenya. In addition, the term includes Asian Englishes, such as Hong Kong English, Indian English, Malaysian English, Singaporean English, and Philippine English.

In Kachru's model, three concentric circles are used to classify world countries according to English status and its speakers in these countries. English speakers are categorized under three circles: the inner circle, which includes countries where English is the mother tongue or first language (L1) for the majority of their people who are considered natives, such as the UK, the USA, Australia and New Zealand. The second is the outer circle, where English is spoken as a second language by non-native speakers who have developed institutionalized varieties of English. This circle includes countries such as India, the Philippines, and Malaysia. People who learn or speak English as a foreign language belong to the expanding circle, which includes all Arabian Gulf countries, China, and Russia. Although the model has received criticism due to its 'centre-periphery dichotomy' (Erling 2004:224) and the fact that some argue that this model cannot explain the increase in bilingual speakers who acquire both a native language and English simultaneously (e.g. McKay, 2002 and Jenkins, 2000), it is still favored by the majority of scholars from the field. As Jenkins puts it, it is still undoubtedly the most influential and useful model of categorizing and identifying WEs.

Crystal (2003) indicates that the diversity resulting from English being mixed with local or regional languages creates intelligibility problems. Therefore, many linguists argue that there should be a standard of English for international use (e.g. Quirk, 1990). Similarly, Atechi (2007) points out the attention paid by several sociolinguists to the emergence of non-native varieties being a major issue that can result in mutual unintelligibility between English users and speakers around the world. As Yano (2009) phrases it, since WEs have initially been developed for international use and purposes, noting the diversity of these local varieties, “the language is required to stay internationally intelligible due to its growing use as a global lingua franca” (p.249).

Nowadays, universities are indeed representing a *de facto* lingua franca context, especially when English is the medium of instruction, with a special reference to the context approached in this study in which several Englishes from Kachru’s outer and expanding circles are extensively available.

Intelligibility Within World Englishes

In the field of sociolinguistics, intelligibility is essentially positioned and linked to the subfield of World Englishes. Intelligibility, however, is treated and approached differently within this context. That is, some sociolinguists advocate the rights of each ‘non-standard’ or ‘non-native’ English while many others, such as Quirk (1990) and Chevillet (1993), believe that English should remain a monolith, standardized language according to the native standards in international communication. This latter stance emphasizes the element of intelligibility so communication flow is maintained, unlike the first party who disregard this element in favor of acknowledging and emphasizing the identity of each English.

Generally, Englishes from the outer and expanding circles are associated with negative connotations mostly due to intelligibility issues. Several studies show that these Englishes, being ‘foreign-accented’, are reported to be unintelligible in comparison to native speakers’ Englishes or models of Kachru’s inner circle (refer to Jenkins, 2009; and Jenkins 2003).

Furthermore, a breadth of studies has been established in order to investigate the intelligibility levels from the side of both native and non-native speakers towards also both native and non-native Englishes. Some scholars claim that native speakers are more intelligible than non-native speakers to an audience of non-native speakers (e.g. Nash, 1969; Munro, 1998). Nash (1969) also elaborates that non-native speakers may be unintelligible to native speakers, but likely not to other non-native speakers. On the other hand, some think that non-native Englishes speakers are more intelligible than native speakers to other non-native speakers (Smith and Rafiqzad, 1979). Smith and Rafiqzad’s study found that speakers who share the same linguistic background, i.e. ‘same speaker’, can be intelligible to each other. The element of intelligibility then obviously can be grounded on and linked to factors related to the listener and speaker. That is, speech that may be intelligible to a group of listeners might not be considered as so by another group (Bent and Bradlow, 2003).

English as lingua franca (ELF) in Academia

Since English has and is immensely spreading across the globe, most of the world's countries today for which English is an additional or foreign language are adopting English as the language of instruction in tertiary institutions (Pakir, 2004; González, 2013). In other words, it has become the lingua franca of academia worldwide since it is being used predominantly in academic institutions (Björkman, 2008), a situation that advocates the participation of millions of speakers who carry their varying backgrounds and linguistic repertoire to the scene. The targeted context is very typical of this discussion.

In fact, not only academia, but also all facets of life are now multilingual, where speakers from different countries of the world are brought together into specific domains. It is in this context that miscommunication may occur due to the diversity in accents and dialects. This paper pays special attention to specific spheres that use English as its medium of instruction in academia, examining students and alumni of medicine and medical related fields, since attention should be paid to the subject matter in such situations.

THE STUDY AND ITS HYPOTHESES

Through an online quantitative survey, the current study aims at identifying the intelligibility level of certain Englishes available at the targeted university. The survey targets both current students and alumni or professionals as its participants in an attempt to examine the relationship between familiarity and intelligibility.

The study hypothesizes that alumni are, compared to freshmen and/or sophomores, to be more familiar with all the Englishes approached in this study (1st) - namely the American and British, the Indian and Filipino, the Egyptian, Sudanese and Saudi.

Also, based on the dependency relationship between familiarity and intelligibility, and on the reality of the context, the study hypothesizes that participants, especially students, find native 'inner-circle' Englishes/varieties unintelligible due to limited availability of native speakers in the region (2nd). In the same vein, due to extensive availability in the context, Indian and Filipino Englishes should be considered intelligible to the participants (3rd). Also, and consequently, the Saudi and other Arab Englishes should hypothetically be intelligible to the participants (4th).

The approached Englishes in the study will be sorted and classified according to Kachru's three circles in terms of investigating the familiarity element. There is an exception with the Indian and Filipino Englishes, as both come from the outer circle and will be treated separately. This exception is not arbitrary but built on previous studies from the context that show differences between these two Englishes from the participants' side. Furthermore, these two Englishes in particular are usually referred to by students as problematic in terms of intelligibility, claiming that they are heavily accented. As with intelligibility, the study investigates the level of intelligibility regarding each English separately.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

- To identify the most and least intelligible Englishes or speakers for students and alumni.
- To investigate if there is a positive relationship between familiarity and intelligibility assigned to certain Englishes by comparing the two groups of the participants.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- What are the most and least intelligible Englishes to Saudi medical and medical-related students and graduates?
- Is there a positive relationship between familiarity and intelligibility?

METHOD

Participants

The study included 160 students and 134 graduates/professionals who responded to an online questionnaire. The majority of the students (109) are females. The higher response rates came from the faculty of Medicine (77) and the faculty of Dentistry (54); whereas only 16 students responded from the faculty of the Applied Medical Sciences, 8 from the Pharmacology school, and 5 from the Nursing Colleges. Respectively. 67 students are attending the fourth level of their undergraduate degree, and 44, 31 students are attending the third and second levels, respectively.

134 medical professionals participated in the study: 38 physicians, 26 dentists, 42 nurses, 3 pharmacists, 5 pharmacologists, 12 radiologists and 8 physiotherapists. 109 out of the total are aged between 24 and 30. Female participants showed a higher rate of response than their male counterparts: 92 vs. 42. The majority of these participants have less than 5 years of experience in practicing their jobs as medical or medical-related professionals.

FINDINGS

In this section the results of examining the familiarity levels of both groups will be presented separately with two charts: one for each group relating to the approached Englishes. After that, the intelligibility level towards each English will be presented also as two separate categories of data, i.e. the students' followed by the professionals.

Familiarity

Students

Apparently, the most familiar Englishes amongst the student participants are the inner-circle Englishes, namely the American and/or British (60 %)

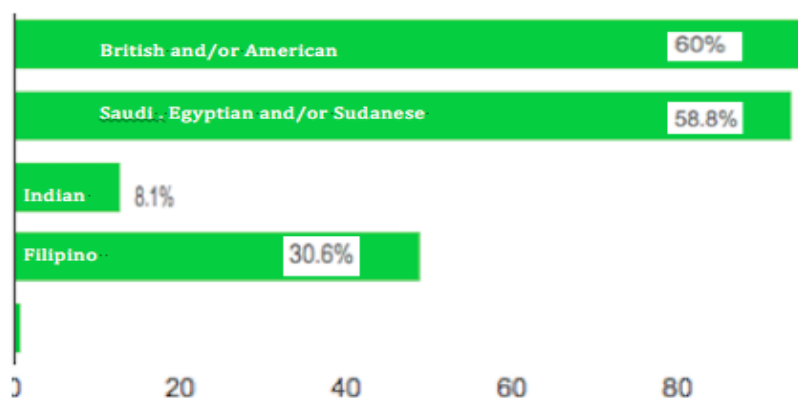


Figure 1. Students' Familiarity levels towards the addressed Englishes.

In second place come the expanding-circle Englishes, namely Arab Englishes: Saudi, Egyptian, and Sudanese (58.8 %).

Thirdly comes the outer-circle English, i.e. the Philippines English amongst the participants (30.6 %). Lastly is the Indian English, also in the outer-circle, which is assigned the lowest level of familiarity (8.1%).

Professionals

The professionals' data indicated that they are most familiar with the expanding-circle Englishes (78.2%), followed by the inner-circle category (57.3%).

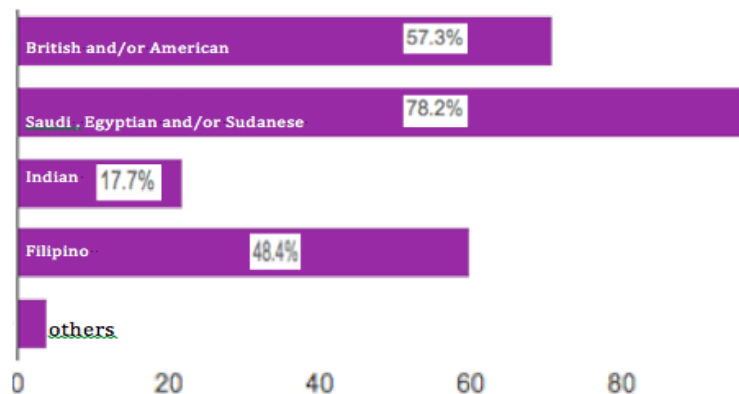


Figure 2. Professionals' Familiarity levels towards the addressed Englishes.

Like in the students' data, the Indian English is assigned the lowest familiarity rate (17.7%), and Filipino English seems to also be more familiar to the professionals (48%). However, in comparison to the students' data, the last two outer-circle Englishes are apparently more familiar to the professionals. This finding can indicate greater exposure to speakers from this circle.

Intelligibility

To identify the level of each English intelligibility, the participants rated, on a five point scale, the extent to which they understand English when spoken by a representative or speaker from the origin of that English. On this scale, 1 indicates the lowest and 5 represents the highest degree of intelligibility.

Students

The data shows that the least intelligible Englishes to the students correspond to the Indian and Filipino speakers, with the Indian being assigned with a higher level of unintelligibility (45%) than the Filipino English (26%).

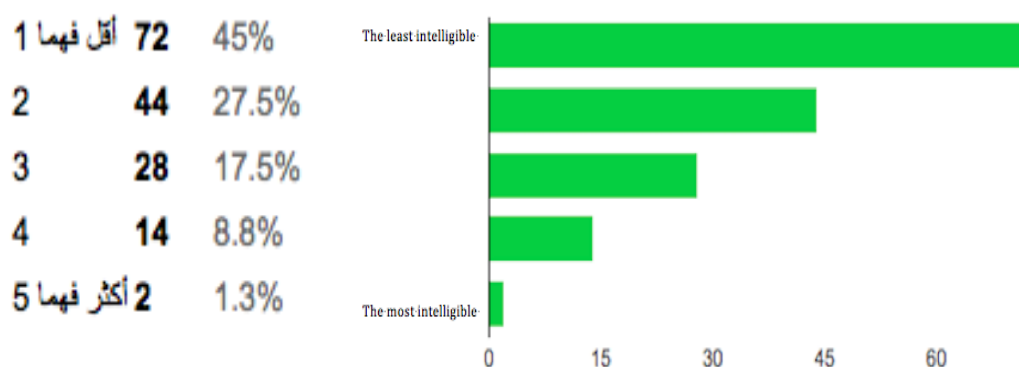


Figure 3. Students' Intelligibility levels to the Indian English



Figure 4. Students' Intelligibility levels to the Philippines English

On the other hand, the Saudi speaker seems to be the most intelligible speaker to the students (38%), followed by the British (31%) and the American speakers (24%).

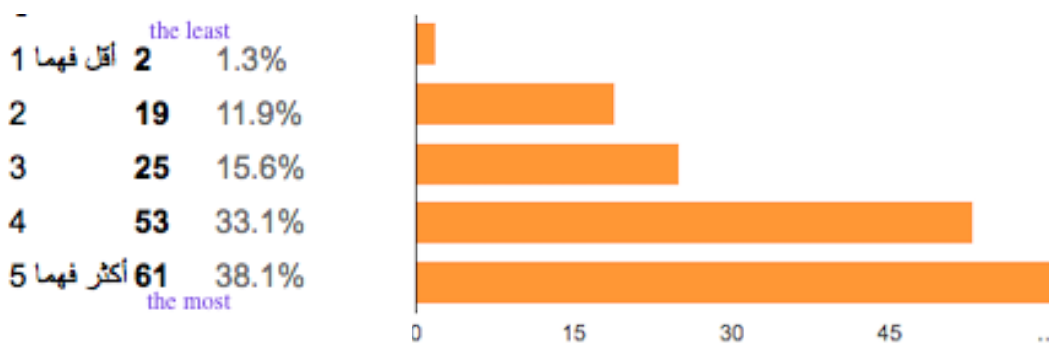


Figure 5. Students' Intelligibility levels to the Saudi English

1	أقل فهما	7	4.4%	the least
2		16	10%	
3		47	29.4%	
4		41	25.6%	
5	أكثر فهما	49	30.6%	the most

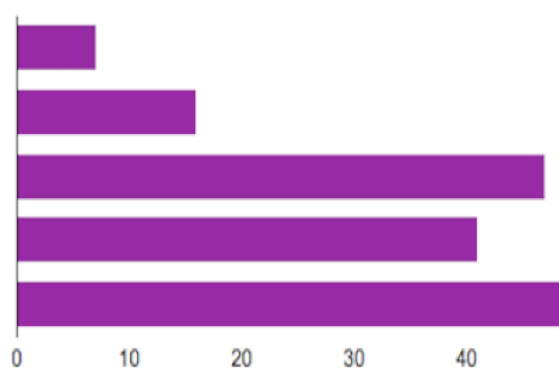


Figure 6. Students' Intelligibility levels towards the British English

1	أقل فهما	5	3.1%	the least
2		26	16.3%	
3		49	30.6%	
4		41	25.6%	
5	أكثر فهما	39	24.4%	the most

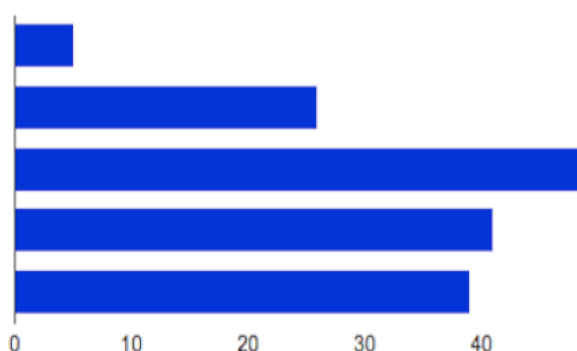


Figure 7. Students' Intelligibility levels towards the American English

Similarly, the Egyptian speaker can also be intelligible to the students (23%). If both the forth and fifth options of the scale are accumulated, all the proposed Englishes, except the Indian and Filipino Englishes, can be similarly intelligible.

1	أقل فهما	5	3.1%	the least
2		29	18.1%	
3		40	25%	
4		50	31.3%	
5	أكثر فهما	36	22.5%	the most

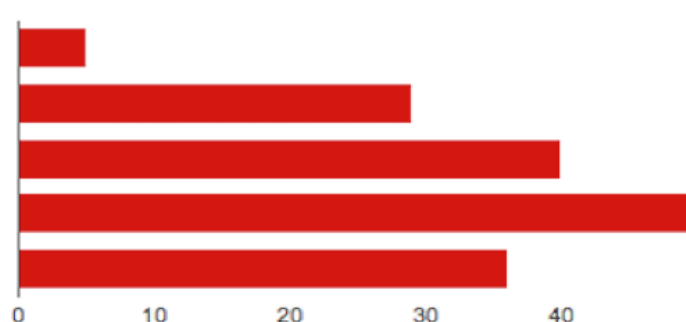


Figure 8. Students' Intelligibility levels towards the Egyptian English

1	أقل فهما	16	10%	the least
2		27	16.9%	
3		51	31.9%	
4		40	25%	
5	أكثر فهما	26	16.3%	the most

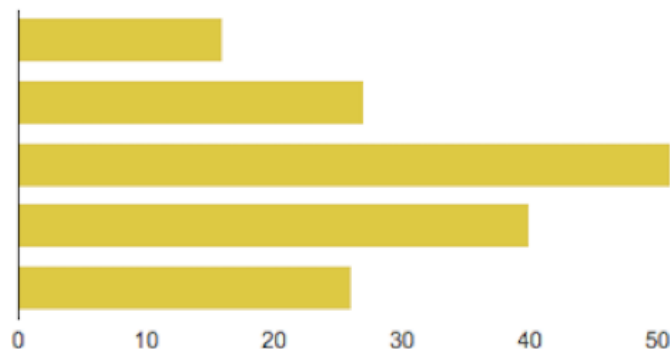


Figure 9. Students' Intelligibility levels towards the Sudanese English

Professionals

When compared to the other proposed Englishes, the Indian and Filipino Englishes appear to be the least intelligible to the professional participants. Yet, they can be seen as being more intelligible to professionals as compared to the students.

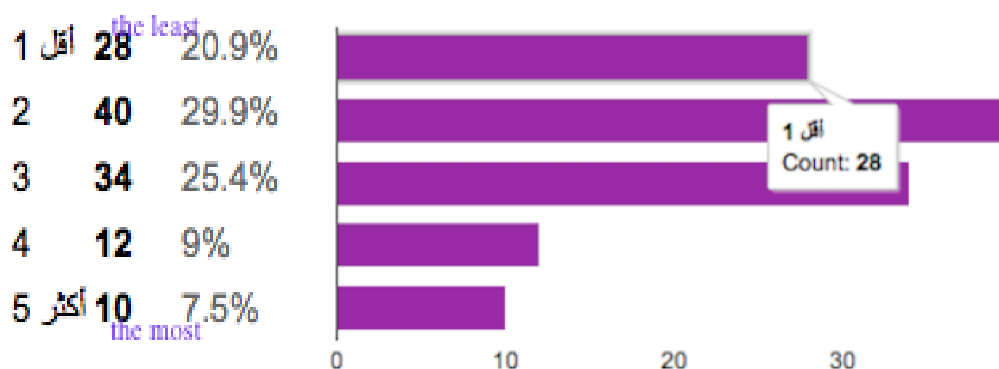


Figure 10. Professionals' Intelligibility levels towards the Indian English

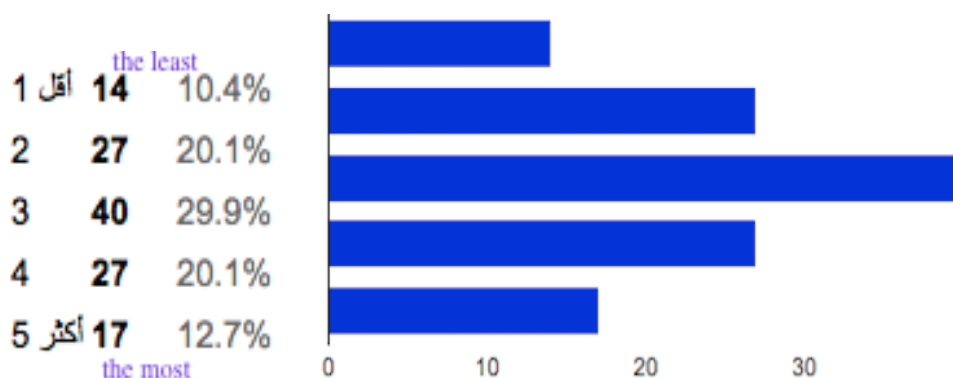


Figure 11. Professionals' Intelligibility levels towards the Philippines English

Similar to the students' data, the professionals' data indicated that the Saudi speaker is the most intelligible speaker. Moreover, the American speaker is among the most intelligible speakers (36%). Again it is noted that when the fourth and fifth options of the scale are accumulated, all the other speakers, except the Indian and Filipino, are considered intelligible.

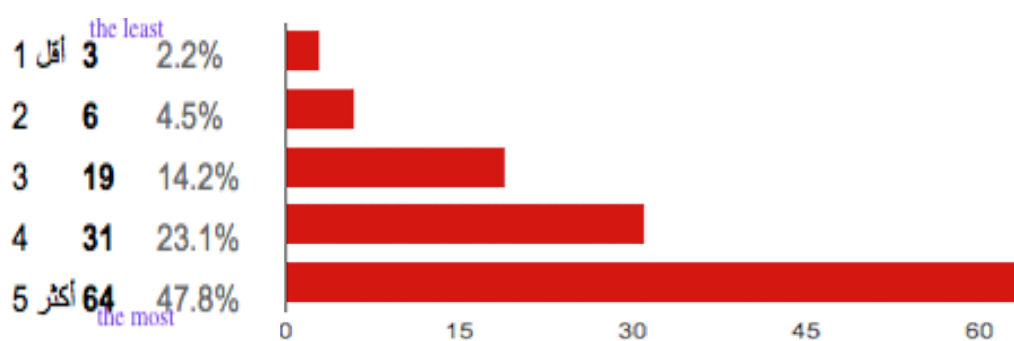
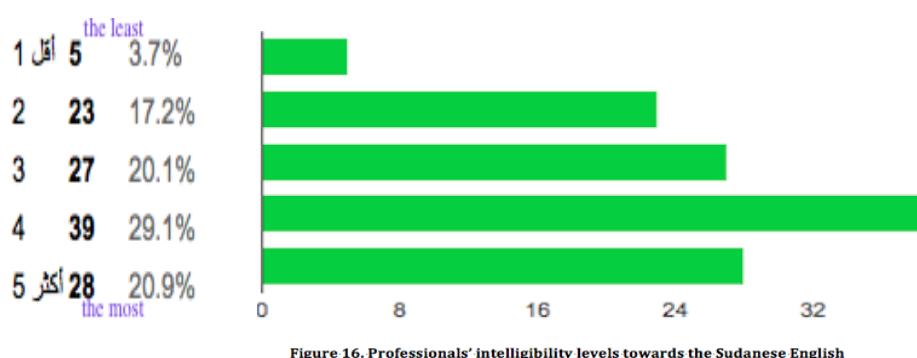
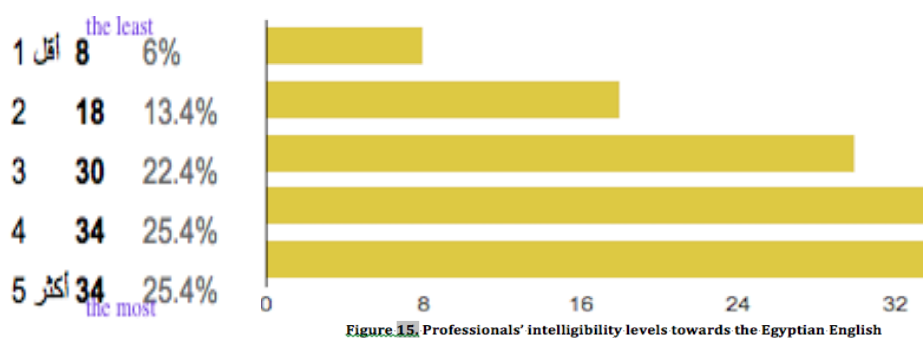
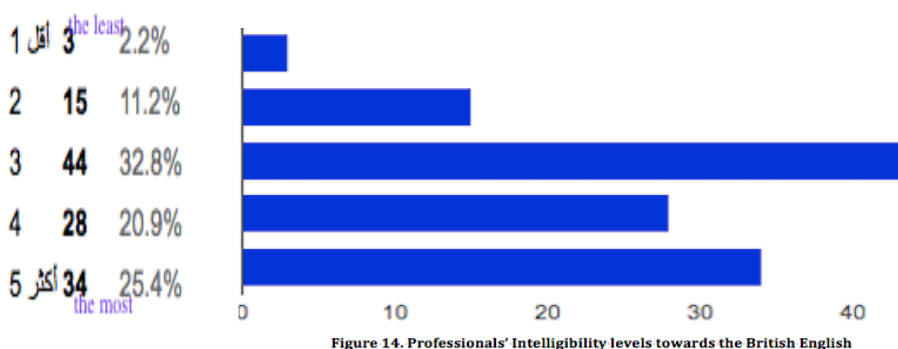
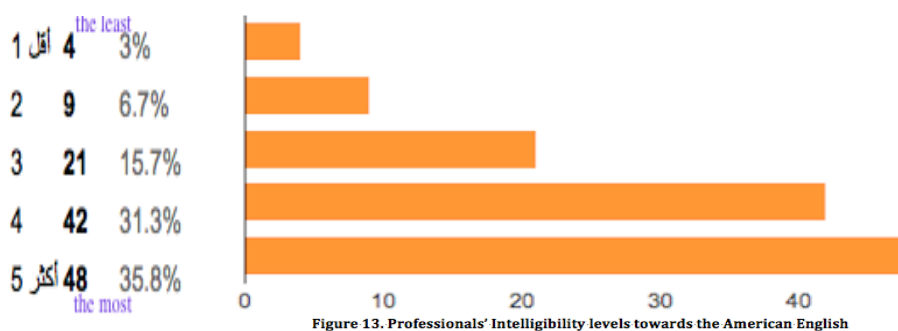


Figure 12 Professionals' Intelligibility levels towards the Saudi English



DISCUSSION

The data clearly indicates that both groups of participants are homogeneous in terms of both familiarity and intelligibility levels regarding all the discussed Englishes. Although the study hypothesizes that graduates or professionals could and should be more familiar with all the discussed Englishes, the familiarity levels they show towards the

outer-circle Englishes, i.e. Indian and Filipino, remain low. Yet, in general, the professionals revealed comparatively higher levels of familiarity towards all the proposed Englishes. It can be said, however, the first hypothesis of the study is rejected since the results show no significant differences between the two groups.

If we are to accept and consider that the levels the professional participants towards the outer-circle Englishes are authentic (regardless of the fact that they are more likely to be constantly encountering these Englishes in the workplace environments¹) the relationship between familiarity and intelligibility hence is established because the reported intelligibility levels by the same group—and regarding the same Englishes—are also low. In detail, the professionals indicated a familiarity level to the Indian English by 17.7%, and 48% to the Filipino English. This can similarly be reflected in the intelligibility scale, as the levels show stronger negative results towards the Indian and Filipino Englishes (refer to figures 10 and 11). However, these participants reflected higher levels of the two elements, i.e. familiarity and intelligibility, towards the Filipino English compared to the Indian English.

The previous discussion is very typical to the students' case, who assigned 30.6 % and 8.1% familiarity levels to the Filipino and Indian Englishes. Respectively, these two appear to be the least familiar and intelligible in the group of the Englishes presented (refer to figures 3 and 4). Again, it is worthy to highlight that although both of these Englishes belong to the outer circle, the Filipino English seems to be far more familiar and intelligible to the participants. Thus, treating Englishes individually rather than grouping them into such categories or circles in similar studies might be more plausible.

As I indicated above, the data gathered from the two participating groups reveals a great extent of homogeneity in terms of the specific angles of the study; thus, I shall henceforth make no distinction between them in the following discussion and will use the term 'participants' to refer to both the students and professionals.

It has been revealed that the Indian, then the Filipino—the combined outer-circle Englishes—are the least familiar and intelligible Englishes to the participants. That is, the third hypothesis of the study is rejected.

The most familiar and intelligible Englishes for the participants evidently are the 'expanding-circle' Saudi English, followed by the inner-circle British and American Englishes. At the same time, the other two expanding-circle Englishes from Arab countries, Egypt and Sudan, are also assigned very high levels of familiarity and intelligibility. Thus, the second hypothesis of the study is also rejected, whereas the last, forth, hypothesis is accepted. The previous discussion also means that both native and certain non-native Englishes can both equally be intelligible to certain- non-native speakers, unlike what Nash (1969), Munro (1998), and Smith and Rafiqzad (1979) found.

¹ from an emic perspective and relying on previous studies.

Assigning Saudi and other Arab Englishes higher levels of both familiarity and intelligibility can suggest that the shared or 'same' native language and accent can be a factor that affects intelligibility between the two sides of communication, the speaker/talker and the receiver/listener. In other words, when the receiver and speaker share the same language and/or accent/dialogue, the oral English by the speaker can be very intelligible to the listener. Thus, the Saudi participants of this study state that they understand English when spoken by Saudis and other Arabs: people whose first language and accent/dialogue are mostly the same as theirs. This reflects what is identified as "interlanguage speech intelligibility benefit", which is "the benefit afforded by a shared interlanguage between a non-native talker and listener" (Bent and Bradlow, 2003, p.1600). However, Bent and Bradlow theories that indicate "second-language learners often report that the speech of a fellow non-native talker is easier to understand than the speech of a native talker" cannot be generalized since the participants in this study reported the intelligibility of specific non-native Englishes other than the native Englishes, and the unintelligibility of other non-native Englishes.

As with indicating high levels of intelligibility to inner-circle Englishes, it can be argued that intelligibility might not necessarily be linked to the availability of speakers of this circle in the stakeholders' surroundings. In other words, the familiarity hence intelligibility of such Englishes might have been acquired through the media as an example, especially with the technological abundance and the vast spread and influence of social media in particular, which can all ease accessing native speakers and their Englishes.

CONCLUSION

The findings reached by this study can help decision-makers regarding the teachers who are the most intelligible to the students. Since greater exposure to the least intelligible Englishes—namely the Indian and Filipino varieties—does not seem to positively influence the professional participants' familiarity levels, the decision-making authorities should exclude such theory. That is, what is thought to be or considered unintelligible to participants from this context is more likely to remain as such. Although a practice of identifying and excluding certain Englishes can imply a sense of discrimination, the learners' wants and needs should be satisfied, especially when the issue is related to the content knowledge and the subject matter of their academic path and future career. Regardless of all the debates over the legitimacy of non-native Englishes and other issue of ownership in the area of World Englishes, in the case of English-medium instruction contexts, the focus should exclusively be paid to the content and specific field knowledge. Any factor that may interrupt its acquisition should be carefully considered.

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