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Foreign Language Accents and EFL Learners' Attitudes

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Abstract

EFL learners' preference of and attitudes towards English accents differ. Some accents gain the preference and positive attitudes of learners simply because they are considered as more interesting and universal than others. Others, however, are considered as clearer, more academic and useful in EFL teaching and learning. Advanced Iraqi learners' preferences of and attitudes towards using the British accent (RP) and the American accent (GA) are highlighted in the present study.

Among the main findings of the experimentation carried out is that more than 66% of those learners have a preference of and a positive attitude towards the use of RP. This, however, necessitates an objective reconsideration of the present situation in Iraqi EFL classrooms concerning the preference of other English accents by the other learners.

1. Introduction

Teachers of English as a foreign language (EFL) usually perform the teaching task by using a spoken form of this language. This form is usually manifested through the use of one of the two major 'standardised' English reference accents Received Pronunciation (henceforth RP) and/or General American (henceforth GA). In other words, the learning process is made possible through such accents. In such cases, the teaching task rather than the

learning one is highlighted in academic studies. However, no previous studies, to the best of the present researcher's knowledge, has focused on the learning task regarding advanced Iraqi learners' preference of and attitude towards English accents have been conducted. Thus, the present study attempts to answer the following questions:

1. What English accent do advanced Iraqi learners prefer in learning this foreign language and why?
2. What kind of attitudes (positive or negative) do they have towards the English accent (s) they are taught through?

The present study is based upon the hypothesis that advanced Iraqi learners at the university level have a preference of and positive attitudes towards the English RP accent they are mostly exposed to through teaching English courses and subjects.

This study in its attempt to answer the above stated two questions is organized as follows:

Section (2) presents definitions of the terms 'accent', 'RP' and 'GA'. The third section gives the theoretical background of the antecedent studies. The section that follows represents the practical part of the study. It exposes the method and procedure of the experimentation out of which a number of results are obtained and discussed in section (5). The last section exhibits the main conclusions of the study.

2. Definitions of Terms

Accent is a term that is unlike other related terms such as 'dialect' and 'standard language' has received a good deal of definitional agreement. It is defined by Simpson (1994:8) as a "spoken variety of language (that) is realized

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in speech sounds... and their combinatorial possibilities." For Trask (1997:3) it represents a special way of articulating a certain language. It is considered by Lippi-Green (1997) as a decisive factor for characterizing age generations, social identity and class, level of education, and even ethnicity. According to him different accents are, as a matter of fact, different bundles of prosodic and phonemic features that characterize different geographic areas and/ or social classes. The Cambridge Advanced Learners' Dictionary, in its version of (2003), defines an accent as "the way in which people in a particular area, country or social group pronounce words."

However, by far the most representative definition of this linguistic and sociolinguistic term, in our opinion, is that given by Crystal (2003: 3) in which he says that it is "the cumulative auditory effect of those features of pronunciation that identify where a person is from, regionally or socially." It can be concluded that an accent is a true reflection of a speaker's social class, education, geographic belonging, and other discrepant quirks.

In this study, the major EFL reference – accents that are focussed on are RP and GA. RP is associated with England. It is located at the top end of the scale of British accents. It is often considered as a 'neutral' and 'correct' accent. In this concern Gupta (2007:3) comments saying that "there is not a single correct accent of English. There is no neutral accent of English. All speakers of English need to cope with many different aspects and learn how to understand them." Some distinctions have been suggested by linguists concerning this English accent. Thus, one hears of 'Conservative RP', 'Advanced RP' and 'Near RP'. These are usually spoken by: the older generation of the British Royal Family (the Queen Mother and her sister princess Margaret, the younger generation of the Royal Family as represented by Prince Edward, Prince Andrew and the in – laws of the family the Duchess of York (Fergie) and the late Princess of Walse (Diana), and the barristers, stockbrokers, diplomat and

announcers of broadcasting, respectively. Moreover, RP is the accent that is characteristic of educational settings and is usually taught to learners of EFL as is the case in Iraq.

On the other hand, GA is that English accent used in the US Northern, Mid-Western and Mid Coast areas. Just like RP, it is associated with high prestige social class speakers. Generally, it is the accent mostly used in broadcasting that is why it is sometimes called 'Network accent.' GA is also used in academic and pedagogical settings in many areas around the world.

Nevertheless, these two reference – accents of Standard English do not share the same cultural and historical background. Each reflects a totally different culture, history and body of literature. Therefore, they are taught at educational and academic institutions as quite distinct varieties.

Before closing this section, it seems suitable to clarify that the term 'Standard English' does not mean RP or even GA. Standard English is not a language, an accent, a style, nor a register. "Standard English is a purely social dialect... which is distinguished from other dialects of the language by its grammatical forms" (Trudgill, 1999: 123-24). Then, accordingly, it can be said that "while RP is in a sense, standardized, it is a standardized accent of English and not Standard English itself" (ibid: 118). In other words, Standardised English includes RP among other accents, but the reverse is not true; viz. speakers of RP speak standard English but not all speakers of Standard English necessarily speak RP. And this could also be said to be applicable to GA.

3. Theoretical Background

EFL and ESL learners' preferences of English accents, particularly RP and GA and their attitudes towards such accents have been given some attention

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by certain linguists as well as sociolinguists. In (1975), Green, Cunningham and Cunningham, by investigating the extent to which global advertising can be effective, draw the attention of the international community to the importance of a clear market globalization which can employ marketing strategies capable of destroying barriers such as regional traits one of which is language. Hence, they emphasize the importance of accent preferences that can solve global problems like language learning. Giles and Powesland, in (1975), discuss accent preferences of students who were divided into two groups by an investigator. The investigator spoke to each of these groups about psychology with two different accents, namely RP and Birmingham accents. The results of this investigation showed that the group of students who were spoken to with RP rated the investigator's intelligence higher than the second group with whom the investigator used the Birmingham accent. Moreover, he was regarded more competent in his RP guise than in the other accent which consequently made the RP students to write to and about him more than the other group of students. Furthermore, in (1991), Francis emphasizes the necessity of cultural adaptation on international negotiations. The researcher (ibid) focuses on the role of cultural adaptation as manifested by standard English accents, among other criteria, in breaking down international barriers. Again, RP and/or GA preference as a foreign or international English accent stands out prominently. Political situations and historical images of related countries can also affect learners' accent preference ratings. This is reflected in the results of a study conducted by Prodromou (1992), in which (300) Greek EFL learners who were studying for Cambridge first Certificate or Proficiency exams participated. The bad historical image of the USA greatly affected the results in that only 18% of the participants preferred GA, whereas about 75% of the sample preferred RP. Attitudes towards RP by Nigerian undergraduates are investigated by Ioratin - Uba (1995). The researcher concludes his study saying that those undergraduates regard RP to be the class 'norm' that is more 'standard' than GA.

In (1977), Lippi - Green carried out an experiment in an attempt to uncover Dutch EFL learners' attitudes towards the two English accents RP and GA. It was found out that Dutch learners consider RP as the 'norm', while GA was described as being 'dynamic and 'attractive'. In the same year, another accent preference study was made. Dalton and Puffer, studied the accent preferences of Austrian university students learning English as an FL and found that those students prefer both of RP and GA over non- standard English accents. Macedo, in (2001), selected (5) different native English speaking English teachers; two of them speak American, one British, one Canadian and the fifth one speaks Australian. He asked them to record a weather report and made (4) different Japanese high school classes to listen to the recording, which lasted for (30) seconds. Students' attitudes suggested the following (ibid: 10):

- a) RP was the unanimous accent associated with prestige level.
- b) Accents that were easier to understand were believed and liked better.
- c) Familiarity between the accents also contributed to believa-bility.

Lopez-Soto and Barrera-Pardo, in (2007), carried out an experimental study in an attempt to expose Spanish EFL learners' subjective preferences and objective intelligibility of GA, RP and South African accents. They (ibid: 1603) conclude that "83% of students believe they speak with some resemblance of an accent; 77% of the participants think they imitate a standard British accent." They add that "the rest believe their English is heavily influenced by an American accent with some traces of British English." 60% of those participants consider British English accents as more correct than American accents.

An attitude towards accents study was made by Esteki and Rezazadeh in (2009). The study "relies on the assumption that gender differences contribute to the exploitation of a foreign accent while speaking in English. In other words, male and female language learners adopt different attitudes towards recouring

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to their L1 accent." (Ibid: 140). In recouring to their own accent, such learners reflect their attitude towards the foreign language.

Thirty advanced Iranian EFL learners studying at the Language Institute of Khomeini Shahr participated in the two measuring instruments designed for this study, namely a question-naire and a structured interview. The researchers conclude that there is a significant relationship between the gender of the subjects and their susceptibility to preserve their L1 accent," (ibid: 141). Males' speech in English was, unlike the females', greatly affected by their L1 local accent. This, however, proved the "widely- held belief ... that girls are more capable to approximate their accent to a native-like status" (ibid: 142). Thus, they unlike the males, reflected a positive attitude towards the English accent they were learning in the institute. In the same year Cekic carried out a study of the comprehension skill of (40) Turkish students studying at Selcuk University. According to Cekic (2009: 115) "the Turkish EFL learners improve their learning skills more by using materials in GA English." This can suggest that EFL learners' preferences of and attitudes towards the English accents GA and RP can have a great impact on their learning process and attained proficiency level.

4. Methodology

1. Participants:

In this study, there were (2) groups of participants. The first group was composed of (72) fourth-stage advanced Iraqi learners studying EFL at the Department of English, of the College of Education at the University of Basrah, of the academic year 2010-2011. This group included (12) males who were the only ones in this academic stage and (60) females. All of the (72) participants have studied English for no less than (12) years at schools and the university.

The second group was composed of (20) university teachers, teaching different English courses at the same department. In this group, there were (12) male teachers and (8) female teachers. Among them, there were (1) professor, (4) assistant professors, (7) lecturers, and (8) assistant lecturers. Only (5) of them are Ph.D. holders. All of them were graduates of Iraqi universities, with the exception of one who got his M.A. from Buckingham University and another who got his Ph. D. from a Yemeni University.

2. Measuring Instruments:

Two measuring instruments, though of the same type, were utilized in the present study. The first one was a three – question questionnaire aimed at testing the first group of participants that is EFL learners' preferences of and attitudes towards RP and GA. A sample of this questionnaire is given in appendix (A). The second instrument was also a questionnaire, but this time it checked the second group's (i.e. the teachers') preferences and attitudes towards the same English accents. It was composed of (4) questions. A sample of this questionnaire is shown on appendix (B).

3. Material:

The answer of the first question in the learners' question-naire depends on the listening of the participants to (4) audio files taken from the internet; (2) of them are spoken with RP and the other (2) are produced by GA native speakers. One audio file of each accent takes about (2) minutes and the other lasts about (6-8) minutes. The topics of the talks are about the bible, urban legends, the US war against Iraq and the teaching of English to non-native speakers.

4. Procedure:

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Prior to the administration of the first questionnaire, the participants were informed that the answers they would give would be benefited from in attaining the goals and aims of the research and that they would not be used against the participants for any reason. Therefore, they were asked not to write their names on the answer sheets, but only their gender type (i.e. male or female).

The first questionnaire was distributed on the (26th of Dec. 2010), as was mentioned above, it was composed of (3) questions. The first question asks the participants to listen to (4) audio files spoken by native speakers of RP and GA, and then they identify the accent type by ticking (✓) the appropriate circle carrying that accent name.

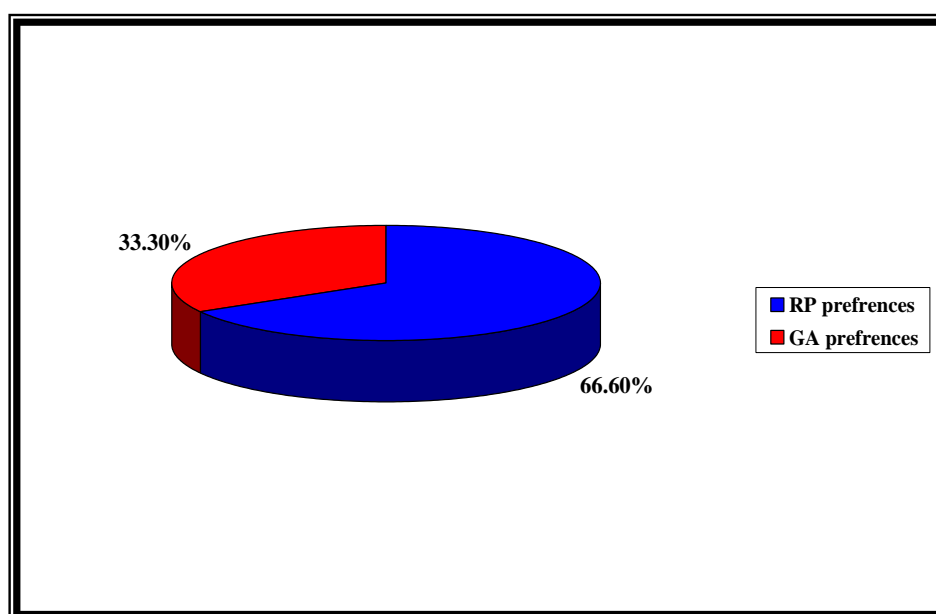
The audios were played twice before the participants can make their ticks. As for the second question, it asks the participants to name their preferred English accent (i.e. either RP or GA). The last question asks them to give reasons for their accent preferences. The participants took about (40) minutes in answering this questionnaire. After collecting the answer sheets, the researcher asked if there was any difficulty in understanding the audios and with the questions in general. They replied that there was no difficulty what so ever with the whole questionnaire.

The second questionnaire, on the other hand, was distributed after the administration of the first one, on the (2nd of Jan. 2011) as a supportive tool and a reflective evidence for the first group participants' responses. It was composed of (4) questions, the first of which asks the participants about the English accent they use in teaching. The second question asks for reasons. As it is possible for some teachers to prefer foreign accents other than the ones they should use in teaching. Hence, the third question asks the teachers to name the English accent they prefer and the reason for their preferences, which is the response they are supposed to give for the last question. The teachers were not limited by time;

some of them submitted their answer sheets the same day the questionnaire was distributed on, others however, submitted them after few days.

5. Analysis and Discussion of Results

After collecting the responses of the two groups of participants, they were analysed. Out of the (72) responses of the learners, (9) were excluded because they included critical answers of the first question. That is to say, those responses either made (1) or (2) correct ticks of the four ones. Therefore, we are left with (63) responses, that are divided as follows: (42) of them, (34 females and 8 males), that is 66.6% prefer RP and 21 (19 females and 2 males), that is 33.3% prefer GA. The following figure exhibits these percentages



(Fig.1) Percentages of advanced Iraqi EFL Learners' accent preferences

The participants who prefer RP justify their preferences by describing it as being:

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1. more correct than GA
2. more prestigious than GA
3. more standard than GA
4. more honorable than GA
5. more familiar than GA
6. easier to understand than GA
7. simpler than GA
8. clearer than GA
9. better than GA in academic settings
10. suitable for EFL teaching and learning
11. Since school time, they have been in contact with it.
12. Most of the teachers use it.
13. It is smooth and understood by all.

As for those participants who prefer GA, they gave the following reasons for their preferences:

1. It is modern.
2. It is used in most of the movies, shows and video clips we watch.
3. It is beautiful.
4. It is more natural than RP.
5. It is more common around the world than RP.
6. It is more interesting and sounds simpler and humbler than RP.

The results of the second questionnaire show that RP use outranks GA use for teachers. Out of the (20) participants, (15) affirmed using RP, or at least 'a sort of ' RP, while teaching English courses. The following are the reasons they give for their use of RP in teaching Iraqi EFL learners:

1. It is the English accent that we have been trained to use from primary school up to the university level.

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2. Our students should learn what I think is as "a well spoken English" which I see in the RP and not in the GA. Hence, I try my best to be the RP model available to our students.
3.
 - a. It is highly recommended for foreign learners studying English.
 - b. Students feel familiar with it as they are taught according to it in their courses of phonetics.
 - c. Students are accustomed to hear it long years ago when they were studying English at schools.
 - d. For me, I consider it more standardized and more akin to the students, concerning their phonetic symbols.
4. My original training is in the RP domain. My pronunciation guide is Longman Dictionary.
5. This accent is mostly preferred when teaching because it is more intelligible. So, in this way it is more suitable for the Iraqi learners.
6. I use the English accent RP when teaching the students at the university level because they are supposed to learn the best representative of the English accents.
7. I use it because I believe it to be the pronunciation of the Standard English, which Iraqi EFL learners at our department, in particular, should acquire since they are going to be teachers of English in the future. So, it is so essential to them to acquire the correct pronunciation system of English, which I believe it to be the RP.
8. There are two main reasons:
 - a. I have been taught this accent by my teachers when I was a college student.

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- b.** The recordings, which I have about teaching English as a foreign language, are all in RP. So, it is normal to use the accent that I hear most.
- 9.** RP is easier for comprehension in terms of pronunciation.
- 10.** When teaching Iraqi EFL learners, I aim at being clear and expressive. I think, RP enables me to convey materials clearer than the other English accents.
- 11.** I use RP because it is the standard English accent used by the Royal Family and the BBC. It is easier to teach the students RP and with RP than other English accents. In addition, it is the accent I learned.
- 12.** It is the standard accent used by the upper class of the English society and it is characteristic of the spoken form at the public schools and at Oxford and Cambridge universities.
- 13.** We studied it. I feel it is more understandable and recognizable by Iraqi EFL learners than other accents.
- 14.** We are supposed to use standard English in teaching EFL learners. According to me, I find RP more 'standard' than GA.
- 15.** I prefer teaching EFL learners with RP, not Scottish, nor Irish or GA. I think English is, first, the language of Britain not of America. Arguably, RP is clearer than GA.

The same (15) teachers who affirmed using RP in teaching, said that they prefer using it for the following reasons:

- 1.** It is interesting and more understandable for me.
- 2.** This is because:
 - a.** It represents a 'Standard English accent.'
 - b.** Our preference is not a matter of choice. It is more a matter of exposure. We as Iraqi EFL learners were much exposed to RP rather than to GA as the former was offered or presented to us

through different channels it was available in the curricula we studied as students, in the dictionaries we bought, in the media we were exposed to, and in the type of teachers we came under patronage.

- c.** Moreover, RP has been, for ages, the choice of the Iraqi Ministry of Education. The educational strategies in terms of English as a foreign language have depended on the British rather than the American; we find British Staff, British supervisors, British educational scholars, British designers, British names, British atmospheres, British culture ... etc.
- d.** Iraq as a colonized satellite was running in the orbit of the British Metropolis.

3. It is :

- a.** The prestige norm in England.
- b.** The type of opportunities most often described in reference to books in England and most often taught to foreign learners of English in England.
- c.** It is most familiar as the accent used by most announcers and newsreaders on serious national and international BBC broadcasting channels.
- d.** It is the accent that has always been chosen by British teachers to teach to foreign learners, and is the accent that has been most fully described and has been used as the basis for textbooks and pronouncing dictionaries.
- e.** It is the accent which tends to be associated with the better – educated sectors of the society, and is the one most often cited as a norm for the description of British English.

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- f. It is the form of pronunciation most likely to be nationally understood, and attract least regional criticism hence the association of RP with the phrase BBC English.
4. It is more learnable than GA.
 5. It is more appealing to me. I think it is the purest accent. Ideologically speaking, the image of the two countries (Britain and America) may contribute to my preference for the RP accent.
 6. It is the accent I find more polished and standardized than GA.
 7. I prefer to listen mostly to RP audios and recordings. It is to me the true British accent.
 8. It is easy, clear, and simple.
 9. It is more suitable for educational settings than GA.
 10. I think the speaker's linguistic background plays an important role in the adoption of certain accents. I use to listen to speakers of RP more than the other English accents.
 11. For me, I find it easier to be understood. I'm not quite sure; may be because I learned and now teach RP!
 12. It is clearer and can be easily understood and pronounced than GA.
 13. It is closer to Standard English and more formal than other accents.
 14. I found it easy to learn, use, and teach.
 15. In secondary schools and at the university, we have been taught RP rather than GA. So, we are more familiar with RP than GA.

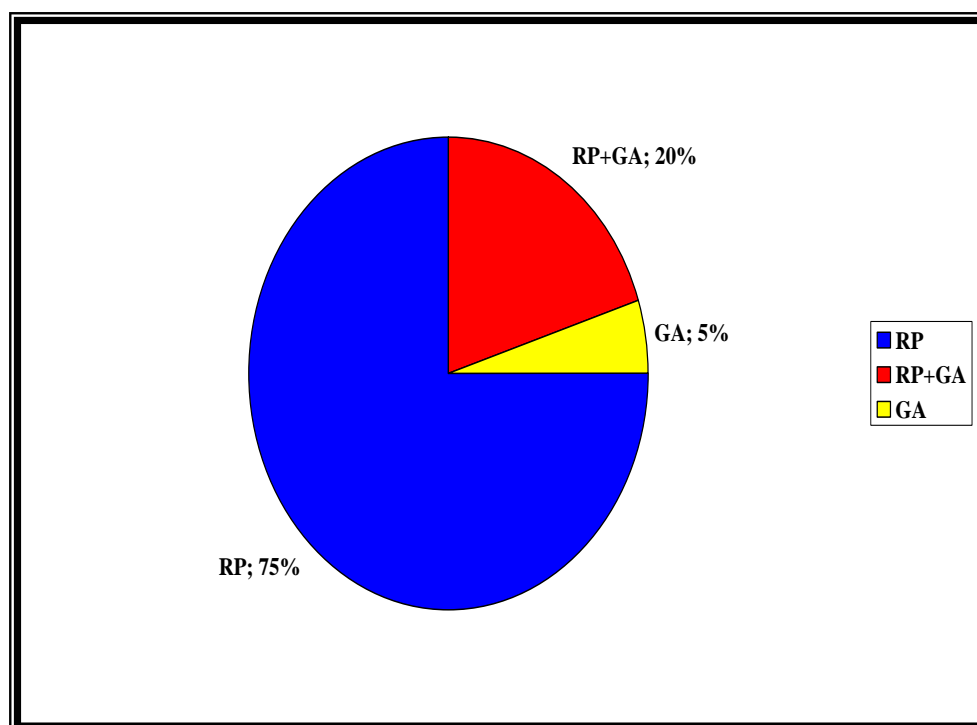
Regarding the other (5) teachers, (4 of them answered the first question saying that they use a 'mixture' or a 'combination' of British English and American English in teaching EFL learners. The reasons they give for such a use are stated below:

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1. I first started my career with (BE) then I was strongly affected by (AE). So I couldn't have my own pure accent.
2. I do so just to let my students be aware of the variation between the world's most widely used two Englishes.
3. In fact, I leaned English through books and readings. Therefore, my accent is a mixture, and I can't help it.
4. It is necessary to show the differences between RP and GA, in pronunciation, spelling, structure Etc.

Concerning the last participant, she uses GA because she believes that students find it easy to catch in class. Moreover, she says that she prefers GA because it is more common than RP.

The following figure illustrates the percentages of the teachers' accents preferences



(Fig.2) Percentages of teachers' accent preferences

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So, in the light of the above analysis of the two questionnaires results, one can state that students' preferences of RP and their attitudes towards this accent are not ungrounded. It seems that the use of RP by 75% of these Iraqi Students' teachers in teaching English courses has a vital impact on these students' preference for this English accent. However, the gender variable does not seem to have an influence on learners' preferences since 75% of both of the female teachers as well as the male teachers equally prefer RP. Similarly, the gender variable does not have an effect on the learners' preferences for both of the females and males largest percentages of preference point to RP.

6. Conclusions

EFL teaching and learning are usually performed by the use of standardized English accents, particularly RP and GA. The case in Iraqi academic institutions is not an exception. The class norm is mostly RP. Nonetheless, some classes witness the use of GA, or some coloured types of RP and GA. The findings of the present experimental study support the above belief. Three quarters of the teachers' sample affirmed the use and preference of RP in academic settings and about 66.6% of the learners sample indicated their preference of this accent. This, however, does not mean that we should encourage the use of only RP at the expense of GA, or even any other standardized English accent. The results of the learners' questionnaire show that about 33.3% of the learners prefer listening to and using GA under the influence of not only those teachers (i.e. 25%) who either use a pure GA or a combination of GA and RP, but also the great influence of American movies, talk shows, reality programmes, songs, video games ... etc.

Thus, since it is not scientific to describe any accent to be more 'correct' or even a 'better' one than others; therefore, we cannot say that RP is more correct or better than GA and this necessitates that we deal with the present

situation objectively. In other words, favouring one accent over another can be based on pedagogical grounds that include taking into consideration the objectives of the intended academic course, the chosen teaching materials, the selected method of teaching, among others.

We should not forget that students' motivation in learning a foreign language can be greatly affected by the medium of learning, viz the English accent. So, if learners' motivation and consequently their learning process can be pushed forward when teachers and / or learners use the English accent they believe can facilitate and result in the learners' academic success, then we believe that we have no other better choice than that 'facilitating' accent. Perhaps, exposing EFL learners to a variety of English accents, both standardized and otherwise, is closer to reality, since in real life situations we cannot help preventing learners from being exposed to various accented materials. Teachers, actually, need to understand that RP and/or GA may not necessarily be considered by all of their students as the best accents. Some students may have negative attitudes towards these accents; hence they may prefer learning an English accent that may not coincide with that accent used by the teacher or other students. Here comes the teachers' role in enhancing learners' motivation and desire towards exploring and learning that accent which they believe to be not worth learning. So, as the above findings of the experimentation proved the validity of the hypothesis underlying this study, we can say that the Iraqi EFL classroom situation concerning the English accent used in teaching and learning needs to be reconsidered so as to elevate the learning progress level, and consequently have better academic standards characteristic of Iraqi EFL learners.

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Appendix (A):

Advanced Iraqi EFL Learners' Sample Questionnaire

Gender Type: (Female) , (Male)

Dear students,

This questionnaire is meant to expose your attitudes towards two English accents, namely: the British accent generally known as Received Pronunciation (i.e. RP) and the General American accent (i.e. GA). Your serious participation in this questionnaire is highly appreciated.

Thank you

1. You are going to listen to four texts, some of them are spoken by British speakers using RP, and the others on the other hand are spoken by American speakers using GA. After listening to each recorded text, tick the accent-type circle given below that you think you listened to.

a. ☐ ☐
RP GA

b. ☐ ☐
RP GA

c. ☐ ☐
RP GA

d. ☐ ☐
RP GA

2. Which of the two English accents (i.e., RP. and GA) do you prefer?

3. Why?

Appendix (B):

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Iraqi University Teachers' Sample Questionnaire

Name:

Dear Colleague

I kindly request you to answer the following questionnaire. Your participation is highly appreciated.

Thank You

- 1) Which English accent do you use when teaching Iraqi EFL learners at the university level?
- 2) Why?
- 3) Which of the English accents RP (i.e. received Pronunciation), GA (i.e. General American), or any other one do you prefer?
- 4) Why?

Answers:

مواقف متعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية تجاه اللكنات الإنجليزية

الخلاصة:

تختلف مواقف متعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية تجاه اللكنات الإنجليزية و نسب تفضيلهم واحدة على الأخرى و لأسباب مختلفة. فقد تفوز بعض هذه اللكنات بنسب تفضيل أعلى و مواقف إيجابية من المتعلمين لكونها بنظرهم ممتعة و عالمية أكثر من غيرها. و تعتبر الأخرى بأنها أكثر وضوحاً و أكاديمية و فائدة من سواها في عملية تعليم الإنجليزية و تعلّمها. تسلط الدراسة الحالية الضوء على حالة المتعلمين العراقيين المتقدمين للغة الإنجليزية حيال اللكنتين الإنجليزيتين (RP) أو ما يسمى (باللفظ المقبول) و (GA) و المقصود بها (الأمريكية العامة). من بين أهم الإستنتاجات التي خرجت بها هذه الدراسة هو أن أكثر من ٦٦% من عينة الدراسة من المتعلمين يفضلون اللمنة (RP). و هذا يحتم ضرورة إعادة نظر موضوعية لحالة صفوف تعلم اللغة الإنجليزية في العراق فيما يخص تفضيل بعض اللكنات الإنجليزية على غيرها من المتعلمين