

English Language Research

In conversation with Okim Kang part 2 - transcript

Speaker 1 0:00

Welcome back, Okim. In the last discussion, you provided some valuable insights into the wider area of Global English and how this affects language testing. In this section, let's turn to look more specifically at your research study. First of all, can you highlight the main findings for our audience?

Speaker 2 0:19

Oh, yes. So the title of the study was equality, diversity, inclusion: different varieties of accents in Aptis English listening test. So the purpose of the study is to examine whether including a range of English accent varieties, you know, which includes British accents and different Global English accents and British Council's Aptis listening task can affect test takers comprehension scores, or whether the test scores can relate to their attitudes toward accent inclusion. So what we found is pretty much, basically, we found no significant differences in listening comprehension scores across British accents or shared L1 accents or Global Englishes accents in Aptis listening tasks. This finding basically supports the inclusion of accent diversity in a high stake Listening Test, and also it provides an example of, you know, addressing EDI issues without compromising test fairness. In other words, as long as speakers were highly intelligible, these highly intelligible, non standard English accent can be incorporated into high stakes listening test without negatively affecting test takers comprehension outcomes. So that's pretty much the message we are trying to deliver, and this is my second or third project. I not exactly the same, but I've been arguing for this idea that we need to start to incorporate different accents in a high stake listening test. So I tried that with ETS's TOEFL test, then Duolingo English Test, and then British English, you know, Aptis Listening Test. Although designs were different, and some of the logistics were different, but largely speaking, the ideas and implications are similar that, once again, as long as speakers are highly intelligible, test takers don't necessarily have a negative outcomes, whether they listen to the standard accents or their own accents or totally different L2 accent, their performance scores were not significantly different. So this is something for us to think about as a test developers.

Speaker 1 3:01

So the message to test developers, then, from the main message to all test developers is, don't be afraid to incorporate highly intelligible accent variety in your listening tests, because it's not going to affect the scores, but it will promote inclusion and fairness. Would that be right?

Speaker 2 3:22

Right. But then there was a second part of the arguments that probably makes us think a little bit, and now I'm going to talk about that later. I mean, this idea, my philosophy, my ideology, is one thing, but I know the reality and the actual practice is another. When it comes to this project, I also asked, second part of the research question, was asking test takers of their attitudes toward including these accent varieties, right? So, like I said, you know, I had the World English speakers and the listening group, so Arabic listenings. I mean Arabic L1s and French L1 and Singaporean L1s. So these were three different L1 groups. When it comes to their findings about attitudes, Arabic speakers perceived these diverse accents as fair. So they say it's relatively okay, but then not acceptable, in a high stake test. And what is more interesting is Singaporean participants. I mean, we know in Singapore, English is their second language. It's an official language. It's an outer circle country, but Singaporean participants prefer the standard accents, so they still have their preference. And then, I mean, this is a positive finding, at least the French speakers were generally more accepting of accent diversity. But then what is interesting, though, according to our findings, although there was some significance about their attitudes and all that, you know, some groups prefer that. Some groups don't and they found it acceptable. Some people didn't find it acceptable, but then the relationship between their actual attitude scores and their performance scores, they were very weak.

Speaker 1 5:15

Ah, okay.

Speaker 2 5:17

So didn't correlate. Yeah, they the correlation was very weak. It was like a lower, lower than Pearson R lower than point three eight. So I guess what I could say is what they like and prefers is one thing, but what they can actually perform is another. So that creates another complication. But I think overall, I can say that our study provided some kind of empirical evidence supporting the accent diversity in a proficiency test without, like I said, compromising the fairness and validity. And then it could, you know, allow test takers to consider and also in this project, I kind of tested out the idea of giving test takers an option, of choosing, the choice.

Speaker 1 6:12

Yes, I found that really interesting, that they could make a choice. But, and I'll get onto that in a minute, I first wanted to ask you why you chose these four groups of speakers or listeners. The Belgian French, Arabic, Singaporean, actually three. Why? Why did you select those as your listeners?

Speaker 2 6:36

yes. I mean, first of all, I wanted to reflect the most common L1 backgrounds of test takers who can take the British Council Aptis listening test. So I already had a certain L1 backgrounds in mind. So that's why I chose French L1, and Arabic L1. And next, I didn't actually choose the Singaporean L1 but at the time when I was preparing my proposal, I was in communications with British Council's research coordinator. I think at that time, it might have been Mina Patel, and then she specifically wanted me to include the Singaporean L1 probably is because British Council had some connection with the Singaporean test takers, and also British Council was interested in this localized context. And then we know in Singapore, English is used as an official language. So it was an intentional effort to include one outer circle country, but especially the Singaporean L1 was British Council's interest. And I had some contact myself. And mostly what I did with this study is I tried to identify one. I call the coordinator who could help me with the recruitments and finding participants in the particular local context. And then I luckily had one in Singapore, so it kind of worked out for that reason.

Speaker 1 8:16

And it does provide a very interesting perspective, including Singapore speakers who probably have not learned English in the same way the Belgian French or the Arabic learners might have learned it. So yes, makes for an interesting study. Certainly the speech samples, there was a range of different accents, British, Singaporean, Arabic, French, German, Chinese and Indian English. Was this also sort of data driven perhaps, what data was available, or were they specifically selected for a particular reason?

Speaker 2 8:53

So for speakers, again, I had to reflect the listeners L1 groups first of all, so I had to include, because I also wanted to look at the shared L1 affect, in other words, if Arabic listeners, listening to Arabic accents, would they perform better? So I had to choose Arabic speakers and French speakers and Singaporean speakers, right? So that was my first choice. But then also I need to include the British accent, because that will reflect the nature of the British Council English test, yes. So those speakers were chosen. But then I also include German and Chinese accents and Indian accents, right? And these language varieties were also among the most frequent L1 backgrounds of Aptis takers, actually, so it was intentional, and we thought it's important for the representations aspects of EDI. But one thing is that when it comes to French speaker, we specifically had a Belgium French background for the logistics reasons. So it's not just French speaker in Paris. There was a slight deviation there, but it had to happen that way because of our logistic issues.

Speaker 1 10:40

Yeah, yeah, sometimes that's what helps to shape the research, right? Yeah, you touched briefly on giving test takers a choice. So they listened to three different samples. Is that correct? And they obviously listened to, if they were Singapore, a Singaporean listener, they would listen to a Singaporean speech sample, a British speech sample, and then they could choose the third sample. What was the rationale for letting them choose?

Speaker 2 11:15

You know, I always loved this idea that, what if test takers could have an option of choosing their own accent or own something. I mean, they ideally, they can probably choose the listening passage they like. I mean, that's my ultimate goal with current AI development. Let's say we make the test very localized, you know, and so that Singaporean listeners or test takers can choose a Singaporean oriented test, and then they get some of the listening passages being very familiar with their own content and Singaporean accent. So in this case, I mean, because I was doing something with accent, I try to introduce this accent varieties, and at the end, I let them choose, you know, accent they liked, and try to see whether this kind of approach can bring up any significant differences. In fact, there was no significant differences. So there was something I was really excited about, the finding that I was hoping for. But then, you know, more methodologically and theoretically speaking, I include this option of test takers choice because I thought that could reflect more authentic and agency oriented approach to listening assessment, so and also, in a way, it kind of reflects more of the real world, international context. Sometimes, I mean, not all the time, but sometimes we have a choice of choosing, what accent we want, like a Siri, for example, you know, the GPS, we can choose our own accent, right? So it kind of I thought you know, links us to a real life a little bit, and then from an EDI perspectives, giving participants a choice helps mitigate the perception of being randomly subject to an unfamiliar, you know, less preferred accent, so it could kind of have a little of control. So that is that. And then also, when it comes to attitudes and familiarity, you know, having a choice can probably boost their attitudes, yes, and then giving them more responsibility,

Speaker 1 13:52

Yeah, yeah. Very interesting approach, I think, certainly worth other researchers replicating that to see what happens, or perhaps looking at the difference between choosing the accent you want to hear and not choosing the accent or having one imposed on you. So that would be quite interesting. You mentioned the attitude survey and the acceptability of accents versus preference. Can you expand a little bit on this acceptability and inclusivity versus preference? Can you talk a little bit more about the difference and why you looked at those aspects?

Speaker 1 14:35

Yes, so I did include, I mean, it was based on my factor analysis, but at the end, I ended up with the two constructs. One is acceptability of accents, and the other is inclusivity versus preference for standard accents. So first, acceptability of accent reflects where the test takers felt all these accent varieties, whether it's standard one understand that were appropriate, understandable or legitimate for using high stake test. So this is more direct measure of how comfortable they were engaging with the different accents, whereas the second dimension, inclusivity, preference for standard accent captures attention. On the one hand, the participants value the fairness and representations that come with, including diverse accents, but on the other hand, some still perceive the standard accent as more trustworthy or proper choice for formal assessment. So there were two separate things, but when it comes to my study and my findings, like I

mentioned briefly earlier, French participants tend to be very open, including diverse accent is good, so they are much more receptive, whereas Arabic speakers rated inclusion of diverse accent as fair and inclusive, but then did not necessarily find them personally acceptable, and, they were not comfortable, and that they were much more comfortable with the standard varieties in an actual testing situations. So one possibility is that this whole sociolinguistic context and Arabic speaking countries, they tend to have high values on the correct forms of language in education. So we wonder whether that kind of culture create this attitude. What is interesting is Singaporean participants, which I mentioned, they show the strongest preference for standard accent.

Speaker 1 16:42

Interesting.

Speaker 2 16:44

But then, like I said, you know, English is an official language there, so we wonder. We are speculating. Perhaps this result is likely related to Singaporean specific language policy and educational practices which heavily promotes standard British Singaporean accent, and then probably that becomes a huge indicator for their success or their competence. So for them, even though Singapore is an outer circle context, their exposure to Standard English is heavily emphasized, and their educational goal is a gatekeeper for their professional success. I think this kind of social dynamic is creating this type of attitude,

Speaker 1 17:37

Yeah, so many factors that it can be, and we spoke about the potential that tests have to make things more inclusive, to create this positive wash back in terms of what language and what accents are focused on in learning, what do you see as the most challenging aspect of including this. I mean, your study shows that it's not going to affect your score, so, but there's still resistance. Where do you see the challenges and which stakeholders are going to be the most difficult to convince?

Speaker 1 18:14

I know, actually, like I said briefly, this is easier said than done, right when it comes to the reality, I think the first is, maybe there's going to be an issue of perception, of test fairness is a challenge, like I said, the stakeholders' perception, or policymakers, again. You know, Singaporean participants, they specifically preferred standard accents, right? It doesn't matter whether there are test score differences or not, their concerns will say, including diverse accents gonna offset, so weakens the test credibility.

Speaker 1 19:01

Interesting, yeah,

Speaker 2 19:03

Or can the test results be comparable? You know? So there's going to be some kind of perception issues. Also, I feel like there is an issue of standardizations or control of intelligibility. Like I said, when it comes to intelligibility, there is going to be core constructs. It's intelligible for certain people, but it is not intelligible for the other people. So there is the a gray area that we have to figure out what makes speech intelligible, and that part is going to be very hard. Also, there's going to be complexities related to how we make this test intelligible to everyone. Like I said, we can't include every possible accent available out there. Okay, so that's going to be hard. Also, another big problem is going to be the resistance from the institutions or commercial stakeholders.

Speaker 1 20:16

Yes, or sometimes parents, you know, it's parents seem to be some of the most difficult stakeholders, because they have certain perceptions and they want their kids to learn in a certain way.

Speaker 2 20:30

Yeah, yeah. So that's going to be and also, another one is our own test takers, preparation and instructional wash back effects. And we kept talking about, you know, introducing different accents gonna change our curriculum. But then, currently, we don't have those curriculums available. If we suddenly change our assessment practices, and by incorporating all different accents, like, how teachers gonna prepare our test takers for these right changes.

Speaker 1 21:04

Yeah, but we do need to start somewhere. And things like the CEFR is moving towards intelligibility rather than the native speaker to some degree. So, yeah, OKim, bringing this to a close, what are the key takeaways that you would like to share with the audience from your study going forward?

Speaker 2 21:34

Okay, so for me, I could say include, you know, we talked about the including highly intelligible accent varieties does not disadvantage test takers, right? That would be the main part that I would like to argue. And also, in the findings, test takers actually performed slightly better, I mean, nothing statistically significant or anything, but slightly better with a British accent. So there's a possibility that there's a familiarity or exposure can play a role. So something to think about. I mentioned briefly attitudes toward accent inclusions are not quite strongly related to performance, so the people can have all different kinds of attitudes, but that doesn't really matter too much. Then also giving test takers a choice of accent can probably enhance the perception of fairness, the agency issues. So something we can think about, and then overall, the inclusion of accent varieties can support the EDI aspects and well, align, aligns, assessment

practices with the reality of the Global English use. So I would say those are the ones that I like to argue.

Speaker 1 23:00

Wonderful. Thank you so much. Okim, that's fantastic. Lovely getting your insights from the valuable study for our audience. The full report is available open access on our website, and do look at more of our excellent research reports on other topics in language assessment and more in discussion sessions with other researchers. Thank you very much, Okim.