



---

## How understandable is native-English TV content to Saudi and Sudanese University students?

Ezzeldin M T Ali<sup>1</sup>, Saeed Abdallah Al Zahrani<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Department of English Language and Literature, Faculty of Arts & Humanity Sciences, University of Gadarif, Al Qadarif, Sudan

<sup>2</sup> Department of English Language, Faculty of Sciences and Arts, University of Albaha, Al Bahah, Saudi Arabia

---

### Abstract

This paper examined and compared the extent to which native-English TV content was intelligible for Saudi and Sudanese university students. Measurements of understanding the content were achieved via two testing methods: (i) a speech perception test, and (ii) an online questionnaire. The results of the perception test showed that both groups of participants reported a quite good level of speech understanding. The results of the questionnaire were good in comparison to those of the perception test, albeit some practical problems were detected. The lack of practice and exposure to native English and the lack of listening practice were crucial factors that accounted for the sub-optimal speech intelligibility scores among the participants.

**Keywords:** speech understanding, speech perception, native-English TV content

---

### Introduction

The use of authentic multimedia content such as TV shows, YouTube videos, and information and computer technologies (ICT) as a pedagogical medium in ESL/EFL has gained increasing attention in recent years, coupled with the spread of mobile and interactive technologies in the classroom (Al-Hariri and Al-Hattami, 2017) <sup>[9]</sup>. Multi-media has been defined as a combination of multiple types of media such as images, videos, and animations combined with audio that is used to enhance students' understanding and memorisation (Guan *et al.*, 2018; Alemdag and Cagiltay, 2018) <sup>[5, 1]</sup>. Students achieve better learning outcomes when using multimedia content than with text-only methods (Chen and Liu, 2008) <sup>[3]</sup>. Coleman *et al.* (2016) pointed out that the use of ICT has been transformative in the learning environment shifting classrooms from being overly teacher-focused to teacher-facilitated, student-centred, co-learning environments. Specifically, TV programmes presently play an important role in language learning by providing a large resource of real-life English-language content. EFL students also find TV programmes useful for developing their listening skills. Arguably in the case of Sudanese learners of English, understanding native TV English is difficult as English is used as EFL and not ESL. However, university students of English are, to some extent, familiar with English as featured in the media (TV, radio, film, etc.).

This paper discusses how intelligible English-language TV programmes are to Saudi and Sudanese EFL students. Specifically, it investigates the extent to which English-language TV programmes featuring native English speakers are understandable to Saudi and Sudanese EFL university students of English. The paper also attempts to address the current research gap of the speech intelligibility problems ESL/EFL students have with native-English TV programmes.

### Literature review

In the Arabic context, few studies have addressed the issue of Arab EFL learners' use of multimedia and ICT resources as a learning medium. Among these, Kabouha & Elyas (2015) <sup>[7]</sup> investigated the effects of using YouTube videos on vocabulary acquisition outcomes in 100 intermediate Saudi female EFL learners aged 18–20 by using an experimental approach. The students were divided into two groups, a control group, and an experimental group. The control group was taught a set of unfamiliar English vocabulary items using only flashcards (i.e. static printed images) while the experimental group was taught the same set of vocabulary using a multimedia approach in equal time two weeks. The results of a post-instruction vocabulary knowledge scale (VKS) test showed that the experimental group significantly outperformed the control group, suggesting that the use of multimedia in this context caused the greater vocabulary acquisition. In addition, the results of a survey among the students indicated that they found using a multimedia-based approach for vocabulary learning more motivating and interesting than using like flashcards. Multimedia content often shows paralinguistic features like speakers' faces and lip movements when talking, which facilitate comprehension in EFL contexts (Parry & Meredith, 1984) <sup>[11]</sup>; however, some multimedia content is unsuitable for use in Sudanese and Saudi EFL contexts as it may include instances of off-camera speech (i.e., where the speaker's face and lip movements are

not directly visible). This is likely to have a detrimental effect on listening comprehension among EFL learners; Parry & Meredith (1984)<sup>[11]</sup> showed that Jordanian EFL learners performed better on a listening test when they were shown a video of the speaker in question compared to an audio-only file: "The results clearly show that the inclusion of visuals enhances subjects' performance in listening tests". This is likely because: most natural interaction includes visibility of the interlocutors involved, and hence test-takers who sit purely audio proficiency tests in English or any other language are placed at a disadvantage (p.1).

On the one hand, some studies support the use of authentic materials such as TV programmes in EFL contexts; for example, Otte (2006)<sup>[10]</sup> investigated the impact of using authentic listening texts on students' listening comprehension and found that such materials enhanced the students' listening comprehension skills and motivation. On the other hand, the use of native-English TV multimedia content for Saudi EFL students is likely to be problematic because such programmes are designed to be understood by native speakers, not EFL learners. For example, Kilickaya (2004)<sup>[8]</sup> claims that using authentic materials in EFL contexts places an additional burden on teachers due to the complex vocabulary and grammar that require simplification and explanation. Kienbaum *et al.* (1986) also found that no significant differences were evident in learner performance between those who were taught using authentic materials (such as TV programmes) and those who were taught using traditional materials. Besides, identifying and selecting suitable TV programmes for use in the Arabic EFL context is time-consuming and it is often difficult to prepare suitable learning activities for such students (Miller, 2005). Moreover, Martinez (2002) points out that the majority of authentic materials such as native-English TV programmes are often strongly culture-specific and thus difficult for EFL learners to comprehend. This is especially the case for Saudi EFL learners due to the gap between western and Arabic cultures. Further, Martinez (2002 p.555) points out that "authentic texts from one culture may give a false impression to students from another unless they are presented in an authentic context which makes it clear precisely what they exemplify", which makes their use problematic for use with Saudi EFL learners. Another problem that Saudi EFL learners are likely to have with using English-language TV programmes as a learning resource is that, as Kilickaya (2004)<sup>[8]</sup> asserts, the use of such authentic materials with weaker learners is likely to de-motivate and frustrate them as they do not have the skills and vocabulary required to process and understand such materials effectively. Finally, as Guariento and Morley (2001, p. 347) posit, "At lower levels... the use of authentic texts [such as TV programmes] may not only prevent learners from responding in meaningful ways but can also lead them to feel frustrated, confused and... de-motivated." In summary, Arabic EFL students face several problems when native-English TV programmes are used as a learning resource. First, while multimedia content such as YouTube content can be a beneficial learning resource for Saudi Arabic-speaking EFL students (Kabouha & Elyas, 2015)<sup>[7]</sup>, the nature of English-language multimedia/TV content makes it likely that off-camera speech where lip and face movements are hidden is likely to be problematic for Saudi EFL learners (Parry & Meredith, 1984)<sup>[11]</sup>. Moreover, using TV programmes is likely to be problematic for Saudi EFL learners due to cultural-equivalency factors and the increased burden that the use of such materials has on teachers.

### Methods Used

The first research tool was an online questionnaire which was designed to collect impressions from the Sudanese and Saudi university students about the native-English TV content. The questionnaire featured 20 multiple-choice questions with four options (responses from 0 to 40 = failure), 50, 75, 100). Students were asked to select the answer that best described their response. The second research tool was a perception test based on the TV native-English content adopted for this study. It featured perception-based tasks where participants were required to watch two TV programmes featuring native-English-speakers (Ali, 2011)<sup>[2]</sup>. The participants were required to watch excerpts of English-native-speaker programmes and answer comprehension questions.

### Participants

The participants included two groups of students ( $N=40$ ). The first group were undergraduate students of English ( $n=20$ ) at the faculty of Sciences and Arts, Albaha University, Saudi Arabia; the second group were undergraduates of English ( $n=20$ ) at the faculty of Arts and Human Sciences at Gadarif University, Sudan. Both groups were studying undergraduate English courses and were taking similar modules. There were no demographic differences between the two groups, in terms of number or gender and level of education that may have affected their performance on the above-mentioned tasks. Interestingly, both groups enjoyed similar experiences of using multi-media resources as part of their online university studies.

### Testing material

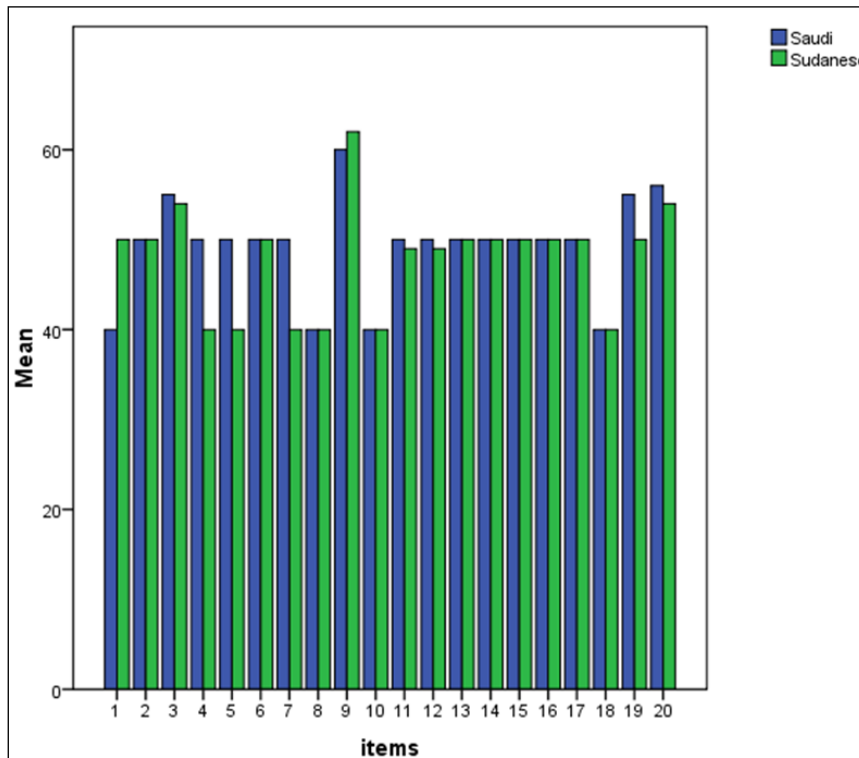
The audio-visual material comprised of two extracts of a native-English TV material. The tests were divided into two sections: (i) a perception test that required the participants to watch/listen to the content and then fill in the answers (see 1), and (ii) an online 20-item questionnaire covering different aspects of speech intelligibility relating to the content of the two extracts (Appendix 4 & 5).

### Testing procedure

In the first part, the participants were asked to watch the programme extract and then answer a list of questions about what they had watched. In the second part, the participants watched the two videos again; before being

asked to select one of a series of four scoring options to rate the intelligibility of the content. The scores of each of the above tests were then processed statistically.

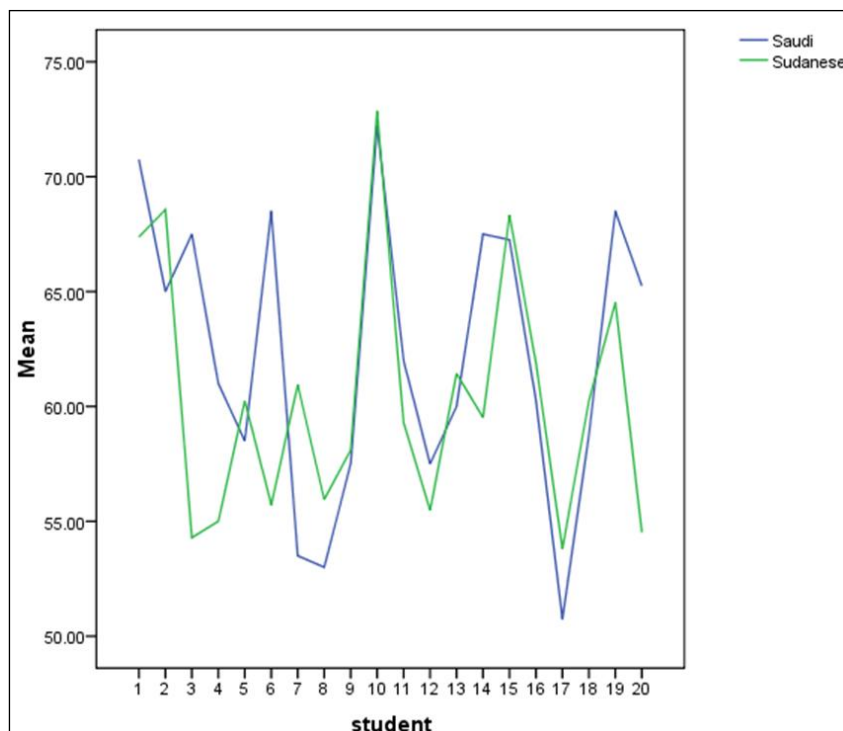
**Test Results Intelligibility**



**Fig 1:** The total means scores of speech intelligibility of the audio-visual content.

As shown in Figure 1 (above), 75% of the overall scores of both groups (Saudi and Sudanese) ranged from 40–50% while around 25% of scores were >50%. The total mean scores of both groups were moderately correlated  $R=.689$   $r=.689$  ( $p < .01$ ). This relationship suggests that the scores of the two groups are related.

**Questionnaire results**



**Fig 2:** Results of the online questionnaire: Saudi and Sudanese participants’ impressions of the native TV English TV content

The internal reliability of the results of the 20-item speech intelligibility test was investigated by using Cronbach's alpha. The results showed that the total scale was (7), which is statistically acceptable for indicating test reliability.

Figure 2 (above) presents the total mean of speech intelligibility scores for the 20 items included on the test for the Saudi and Sudanese participants. In general, around 70% of the scores ranged between 53% and 67, which indicates a relatively good level of intelligibility among both cohorts. Only two students achieved high scores (>70%): one Saudi and one Sudanese participant. Interestingly, there were only slight differences between the scores of the two groups. The correlation coefficient between the total mean scores of the two groups revealed a statistically significant difference ( $p$ -value = 525 (0.05). This relationship suggests that the scores of the two groups are almost identical. Interestingly, the results also showed that both the Saudi and Sudanese participants scored lower rates responding to the questions about speech intelligibility such as high speed of speech, lack of practice, word stress, unfamiliarity with native-English-speaker speech, and pause cues (see Appendix 1). The scores of students for these aspects ranged from 40%–53%. However, the scores in the rest of the other questions are relatively higher, ranging from 55%–67%. There was some convergence between the scores of the two groups, the reasons for which are discussed later.

### Discussion

The results of the two groups presented above indicate that the Saudi and Sudanese participants achieved relatively good understanding of native TV English albeit there are some flaws; both the perception (comprehension) and questionnaire results are low. This is probably because the students do not have enough listening practice, exposure to native-English speech, and because of the huge linguistic differences between English and Arabic. Previous studies (e.g., Ali, 2011) [2] reported similar conclusions. Interestingly, although the groups of the study were from two different countries, their performance was similar. This suggests that the two cohorts share similar skills of English. Moreover, the results of the questionnaire suggest that the Saudi participants scored more highly; this could be due to more opportunities for exposure to native-English-speaker speech compared to Sudanese participants; Saudi students have more opportunities to listen/talk to native speakers of English in the elementary level. Importantly, the strong statistical relation between the perception test and the questionnaire indicate that there is some pattern in the performance of the participants in the test and the questionnaire. This suggests some convergence taking place between the results of the participants in favour of the two groups.

### Conclusion

Both the Saudi and Sudanese participants achieved similar levels of understanding of native English TV program content. The level of the level of understanding of the two groups of native TV content was low. This suggests that both groups lack advanced-level listening perception skills, which are crucial for achieving a native-like perception of these authentic English-language audio-visual programmes.

The participants demonstrated inadequacies in perceiving the authentic native English speaker audio-visual content, most probably because of their lack of exposure to native English and listening practice of such content.

### Recommendations

Arabic-speaking EFL students need to watch more native-English TV program content to enhance their speech intelligibility. This could be achieved by encouraging these students to watch more native-English TV programmes in their free time rather than watching Arabic-language programmes. For example, regularly substituting English-language news and entertainment programmes for their Arabic equivalents and switching to English-language-only content for their broader viewing.

Arabic universities have a role to play in providing more native-English learning content that complements such students' courses of study. For example, recording lectures in English or providing links to additional online learning content in English as part of the students' program of study. Further, university preparation courses for Arabic students should provide more native-English learning content to prepare Arabic students to make the shift to English in their undergraduate studies.

### References

1. Alemdag E, Cagiltay K. A systematic review of eye tracking research on multimedia learning. *Comput. Educ.*,2018;125:413-428.
2. Ali EM. Speech Intelligibility problems of Sudanese Learners of English- Netherlands Graduate School of Linguistics (LOT dissertation series nr. 270) Utrecht Landelijke Onderzoekschool Taalkunde, 2011.
3. Chen HY, Liu KY. Web-based synchronized multimedia lecture system design for teaching/learning Chinese as a second language. *Compute. Educ.*,2008;50(3):693-702.
4. Derwing MT, Munro MJ. Accents, Intelligibility and Comprehensibility Studies in Second Language Acquisition; *Language Teaching*,2009;42:476-490.
5. Guan NJ, Song D Li. On the advantages of computer multimedia-aided English teaching *Procedia Comput. Sci.*,2018;131:727-732.

6. Hamdan JM, Al-Hawamdeh RF. The Effects of 'Face' on Listening Comprehension: Evidence from Advanced Jordanian Speakers of English. *J Psycholinguist Res.*,2018;47:1121-1131. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10936-018-9582-7>
7. Kabouha RH, Elyas T. The Impacts of Using Youtube Videos on Learning Vocabulary in Saudi EFL Classrooms, 2015.
8. Kilickaya F. Authentic materials and cultural content in EFL classrooms. *The Internet TEFL Journal*, 2004.
9. Al-Hariri MT, Al-Hattami AA. Impact of students' use of technology on their learning achievements in physiology courses at the University of Dammam. *Journal. Taibah Univ. Med. Sci.*,2017;12(1):82-85.
10. Otte J. Real language to real people: A descriptive and exploratory case study of the outcomes of aural authentic texts on the listening comprehension of adult EFL students enrolled in an advanced EFL listening course. *Dissertation Abstracts International*,2006;67(4):1246B. (UMI No. 3212979)
11. Parry TS, Meredith RA. Videotape vs. audiotape for listening comprehension tests: An experiment. *OMLTA Journal*,1984;47:53. Retrieved December 19, 2016, from <http://www.eric.ed.gov>.