



## The absence of bilingual English listening conversations in the global EFL course series and its impact on the learners

Minu Paul<sup>1</sup>, Sadaf Ruqsar<sup>1</sup>, Majida Yasmin Aziz John<sup>2</sup>, Luiza Taskin Turza<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Lecturer, Department of English, Academic Campus for Girls, Jazan University, Saudi Arabia

<sup>2</sup> Department of English, Academic Campus for Girls, Jazan University, Saudi Arabia

### Abstract

This study investigates the prevalence of the listening syllabuses of international English learning course materials and why they are native UK/US accented and have no or limited level of acculturation. The paper poses this question from an established EFL learning view by Schumann (1986) and others who emphasize including the learners' mother culture besides the target language culture for proper language transfer. The study uses a semi-structured survey questionnaire instrument involving a sample of 48 bilingual EFL teachers with experience in teaching at least one of the international EFL course book series. The sample is from the Middle East & North African (MEA) population of EFL learners and teachers. The study concluded that there is a significant area of deficiency in the listening syllabuses of the popular UK/US-originated EFL course series adopting only native English accents in their listening audio/video media. On the other hand, the absence of bilingual listening media would have been more viable for the learners' listening skills and overall English progress.

**Keywords:** International EFL course series, acculturation, native english accent

### Introduction

The American influence, movies in particular, seems to have driven a global mania of imitating and mastering the American accent. On the other hand, though, why is the American influence not engulfing all walks of life and fields? However, between the fantasy of the EFL Learners and the reality of the American influence, the whole business sector is making revenues. There is a score of globally consumed EFL learning course series - some of which date back to right after the end of the colonial reign and have been circulated ever since. To some extent, for these international EFL learning course series to originate in their original native English countries like the US, Canada, the UK or other countries, is understandable. This is especially understandable because the former colonial powers used to fund, develop and give away these series such as the Long to their former colonies. That early giveaway, actually was not really for free according to Alabasy (2022) <sup>[2]</sup> but rather an act of colonial empyreal manipulation through the language which is the strongest of all the cultural attachments. Until the present day, anti-colonial sentiments still have exhibited their influence on learning the English language. In the Arab World, for instance, there is still an absolute socio-political current against English language education and learning. Now that the United States which is not a colonial power, has enthroned the Western influence in the world including the Arab region, the American accent is not widely welcomed. This is despite the deep American influence. Yet, a counter-argument for embracing the American accent, in particular, is still there as posed by Nunan (2024) <sup>[10]</sup> who considers it a privilege. It is the Americans who have eventually contributed to popularizing the English language even more by presenting a model state in every field and domain. This is to the extent that many people do not differentiate between American and American English as long as either is a leverage for advancing in the academic and professional spheres. On the other hand, British (UK) English has lagged

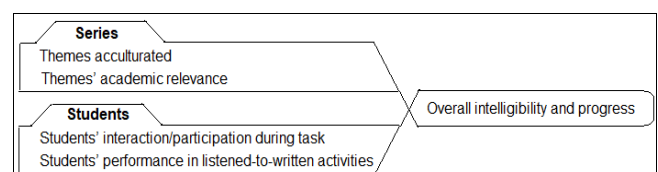
in historical and economic factors among several others according to Naji, Amran, & Almakrob (2023) <sup>[9]</sup>.

### Problem statement

Why the persistent adoption of native UK/US accented and limitedly acculturated series of English learning course materials' listening syllabuses and not local bilingual ones, is a rational question to ask. It is a logical question to ask for two plausible reasons. Firstly, the population of the EFL learners will use English in their local "unaccented" environment; not to mention they are likely being taught by local bilingual teachers. Secondly, for the population of the EFL learners throughout the Middle East & North African (MEA) region, acculturation is particularly important to them; for cultural reasons besides the already stated linguistic one. The MEA population of EFL learners share a great deal of common cultural backgrounds in addition to a "modest" level of English proficiency.

### Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study is to establish viable criteria for evaluating the viability of the native English accented listening syllabuses of the series that support the word of the expert teachers. To achieve this purpose, the study first devised a framework whose components involve the two subjects of the evaluation; the series side and the learner's side. The framework is modelled in the simple diagram below:



### Questions of the study

- Does it matter whether or not EFL learners learn/practice listening through native English or bilingual audio/video conversations?

- At what level of English proficiency would EFL learners pick up an American or British accent?
- What prevents the adoption of bilingual listening audio/video materials?

**Literature Review**

Accent definition and acquisition are no more than a linguistic sub-topic of language variation, according to Algeo (2006) [3] who refers to British and American English accents in particular, as they are two varieties of the English language and that they are mostly studied by students rather than in scholar contexts. More precisely, Antonio (2019), describes American and British English as two varieties of English that stand out as national varieties. The topic of accent though, is not a new one as Swann (2004) refers to it as an Intra-speaker variance within a single speaker's language just like the case of dialects except for the phonetic differences such as the phonemes, morphemes, syntactic constructs and less differently meanings (Nunan, 2024) [10]. As for the reasons, the accent variation occurs, according to Dar-Swaileh & Alfalah (2010) [5] the same as those with dialects such as the geographical, political and historical factors. Whereas, the blogger Shahin (2023)- a UK-born, of Pakistani ethnic shares his experience with accent shifts saying, "After my lifelong in the UK, and moved to Boston in a business trip, I struggled to speak American fluently.... despite my homework of doing so still my vocabulary slips into UK English, a habit of my accent!".

The accent of non-native English-speaking people, such as EFL speakers, is another perspective for analyzing this subject. At what level of English proficiency can non-native English speakers learn American or British accent, is a key question that takes reviewing relevant literature to answer. One simplified answer is given by Faqeadulla (2024) [7, 8] that since accents in general are aspects of pronunciation, the L2 speaker and whatever his language is, must be familiar with its sub-varieties and realize the laborious task of mastering the sub-varieties. Another simplified answer is given by Alabasy (2022) [2] that it is just as difficult for American movie actors to do (imitate) the British accent which usually takes a great deal of rehearsing. In more scholarly words, Algeo (2006) [3] like the case it is with dialects within the US English and those within UK dialects, with a sufficient degree of exposure and mingling with the folk of the direct, the speaker can acquire either. However, Rahimi (2015) [11] poses the challenge that, no matter how well the US masters the UK accent or vice versa, the product is anticipated to be devoid of regional variations; if there is what can be called US or UK accents ever.

The population of EFL learners of English in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, share some common characteristics. The MENA region which is mostly composed of 22 Arab countries besides Iran and Pakistan, is also mostly Anglophone and only the North African countries of Morocco, Algeria, Mauritania and Tunisia are Francophone (Abdelgadir & Ramana, 2017) [1]. According to MENA's level of English language proficiency, Iran and Pakistan come ahead in terms of the popularity of English among the population. The overall level of English language proficiency among the population of the 22 Arab countries according to Naji, & *et al* (2023) [9] varies, still it widely ranges between Beginner and Intermediate by the internationally recognized Standard Test of English

Proficiency (STEP). Another level of English language proficiency among the Arabic-speaking population comes from the renowned platform Education First, EFL (2022) [6] which reports the Arab world's populations to be mostly rated as Beginner Level, fewer Late Beginner Level and only the UAE and Tunisia are rated as Intermediate Level. In connection with these stats, Mokari & Werner (2017) argue that, even though American or British accents are unimportant, only EFL learners of advanced levels should and can consider mastering them.

**Method**

This study adopts a semi-structured survey questionnaire instrument in collecting the data. The method involves first inviting a sample of 48 bilingual EFL teachers to share their past experience of teaching international EFL course book series from a given list.

**Participants**

The participants are current co-teachers of the researchers who belong to 4 different nationalities: Sudanese, Jordanian, Egyptian and Saudi. The participants included both genders and aged between 30 and 50 years old and their experiences in teaching the given EFL course series date back to their home countries and also here in Saudi Arabia for some of them. Most of the teachers had their teaching experience with the given global EFL series in both private language schools and formal college settings. The survey questionnaire was passed to the participants through WhatsApp texting medium and the responses were obtained within 3 days around December 2024.

**Instrument**

The survey questionnaire –Table (1) below, is given in two fields: the first field is for the list of the globally taught EFL course series for the participants to choose the series which they have taught, while the second field is the 4-item evaluation criteria which are given for the teachers to rate them on a scale of 1-5 with 5 being the highest. The 4 survey questions are composed of two sets: 2 of which are intended for gauging the teachers' evaluation of the series, and the second set's 2 questions for determining the students' overall intelligibility and progress of their listening skills.

**Table 1:** Survey Question Form

Choose a series you have taught, then evaluate it on a scale of 1-5 with 5 being the highest:

<input type="radio"/> Direct English <input type="radio"/> Garnet <input type="radio"/> Workplace Plus <input type="radio"/> English for Everyone <input type="radio"/> Other	
Criteria	Evaluation
1. Themes acculturated (local lifestyle, social norms, livelihoods, heritage, etc.)?	① ② ③ ④ ⑤
2. Themes' academic relevance (vocabulary diversity, school-to-series inter-relation, science/global topics)?	① ② ③ ④ ⑤
3. Students' interaction/participation during task	① ② ③ ④ ⑤
4. Students' performance in listened-to-written activities?	① ② ③ ④ ⑤

A list of the most popular globally taught EFL course series, particularly in the MEA region of EFL learners referred to in the survey questionnaire, is given in Table (2) below. In addition, the teachers are given room to mention other series that might be included in the list.

**Table 2:** List of Popular Series in MEA

Series	Native English Accent
○ Direct English series	CA
○ Garnet series	UK
○ Workplace Plus series	US
○ English for Everyone series	US
○ Learn English series	US
○ Oxford Headway series	UK
○ American Headway series	UK
○ Other	-

**Results**

The responses of all 48 participants were collected and then tabulated. With regard to the statistical part of which the series was marked as taught the number of times, the data is overlooked as insignificant.

**Table 2:** Teachers’ Evaluation of the Series

Criteria	Rating (out of 25)	Percentage
1. Themes acculturated	8	32%
2. Themes’ academic relevance	12	48%
3. Students’ interaction/participation during task	15	60%
4. Students’ performance in listened-to-written activities	14	56%

At a glance, only the 2 learner-side out of the 4 criteria items of evaluating the series scored above average; namely, “students’ interaction/participation during task” rating 60%, and the students’ performance in listened-to-written activities” rating 56%. On the other hand, both of the series-side criteria items scored below average; “students’ interaction/participation” scoring 32%, and “students’ performance in listened-to-written activities” scoring 48%.

**Discussion & Findings**

First, taking the series side represented in the first two survey questions, they both collected below average scores; Question#1 “themes acculturated” scoring 32%, and Question#2 “themes’ academic relevance” scoring 48%. Considering that, it is a world of 48 different teachers with years of experience teaching these series, the below-average rating is negative and alarming. It indicates the teachers’ disagreement with the viability of these series in developing the MEA region’s population of EFL learners. This negative testimony was also supported by conclusions from several reviewed studies. The first drawback in these native UK/US originated English learning course materials posed by Algeo (2006) [3], is they are indiscriminately directed to all the categories of the learners; whether they are of formal educational institutions, or informal language schools whose enrollees are seeking everyday English. The designers of this series attempt to balance between the global learners and local learners of the English language in the fold of two covers. Also, considering that US/UK-originated series are necessarily or at least limitedly inclusive of the EFL learners with their environment and culture, shows a negative factor of the learners’ engagement as emphasized by Cenoz & Lecumberri (1999) [4]. As for the "themes' academic relevance" this criteria is considered in contrast to the common non-academic ones prevalent in the series and referred to by Faqeabdulla (2024) [7, 8] such as travelling,

culinary, festivals and the like. Besides the fact that such themes are not of interest to the MENA region's EFL learners, they are at the cost of more essential ones. Secondly, taking the learner side represented in the 3rd and 4th survey questions, they both collected a little above average score; Question#3; "students' interaction/participation" scored 32%, and Question#4 "students' performance in listened-to-written activities" scored 48%. This low rating must not be surprising considering the outcome of the above series. As mentioned earlier, these series are designed for both formal and informal English learning global population which makes them either irrelevant or less practical for EFL learners who average about Beginners by International testing systems. As Abdelgadir & Ramana (2017) [1] argue, today EFL learners are exposed to Native American accents through movies and satellite TV programs more than ever before, however, no overall tangible progress in speaking is sensed. On the other hand and about this last point, it is the American accent rather than the British accent that is dominating the globe. Furthermore, the Arab world region has adopted none of these native English accents for the obvious reason referred by Faqeabdulla (2024) [7, 8] to be for lacking the fundamental command of English; let alone picking up either accent. The listening-writing skills' interrelation which Question#4 expressed in the student's ability to do the written activities that are complementary to the relevant listening session, is of another implication. The EFL learners are not supposed to do that poorly in such tasks after listening to the conversations probably more than once. Why not? The answer comes from Naji & et al (2023) [9] who in most cases the students can rewind the conversation as long as it takes to get the answer to the given text question.

The findings to draw out of the series-side and the learner-side components of the popular UK/US-originated listening syllabuses are evident flaws in both. The flaws in both of the components of the evaluation criteria mean –without reservation, the overall invalidity of these listening syllabuses. The reasons why these syllabuses exist are everything but established linguistic or pedagogical perspectives, but rather to do with convenience and commercial reasons. The impacts, on the other hand, are quite destructive to the EFL learners' listening skills and progress. In contrast, the learners would be better off and benefit from the conversations in their local unaccented English, the language they are familiar with hearing from their teachers, surroundings and companions. This being said, bilingual recorded listening syllabuses with bilingual speakers and properly acculturated themes and vocabulary, would be enough for reversing this situation.

**Conclusion**

It can be concluded that the only-native accent listening syllabuses of the popular UK/US-originated EFL course books, is a deficiency, and they are negatively impacting the learners’ listening skills. The deficiency in these listening syllabuses that results from prioritizing accented native UK/US speakers and conversations also resulted in limited themes acculturation which is proven to be crucial to the progress in all 4 language skills. The result of this deficiency is the learners missing the motive and the interest in listening to accents that they know they will never be able to imitate let alone master. On the other hand, the

inexistence of bilingual audio/video listening materials is understandable rather than justifiable. It is explicit that, these listening syllabuses are an integral part of the whole package; with all the four skills interconnected. However, it is unjustifiable that the audio/video listening recordings can still be voiced through unaccented bilingual speakers, which is not happening.

## References

1. Abdelgadir, E, Ramana L. Challenges of teaching English to Arab students. College of Higher Studies and Scientific Research. International Journal of English language, Literature and Humanities,2017:16(XI):221-227.
2. Alabasy T. Evaluation of Intermediate School EFL Textbooks from Teachers' Perspectives. Journal of Faculty of Education, 2022, 15(1). Taibah University DOI:10.53332/jfe.v15i1.799
3. Algeo J. British or American English? A Handbook of Word and Grammar Patterns, 2006. Cambridge University Press. <https://www.bing.com/ck/a?!&&p=21c684>.
4. Cenoz J, Lecumberri L. The effect of training on discrimination of English vowels. IRAL Journal International,1999:37:261-275. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1515/iral.1999.37.4.261>
5. Dar-Swaileh A, Alfalah D. The developing language learner: An introduction to exploratory practice. International Journal of Applied Linguistics, 2010, 20(3). DOI:10.1111/j.1473-4192.2010.00268.x
6. EF. EF English Proficiency Index. EPI 2022. Education First (EF) Saudi Arabia, 2022. <https://www.ef.com/home-ef-epi>
7. Faqeadulla B. British or American English: An investigation among students in the English Department-College of Education, Salahaddin University. Irbil, Iraq, 2024. DOI:10.13140/RG.2.2.28930.90564
8. Faqeadulla B, Mokari P, Werner S. Perceptual assimilation predicts acquisition of foreign language sounds: The case of Azerbaijani learners' production and perception of Standard Southern British English vowels. Lingua,2017-2024:185:81-95. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0024384116300651>
9. Naji M, Amran Y, Almakrob A. Arabic-speaking EFL learners' pronunciation of British English vowels: A production-based study. Journal of Language Teaching and Research. Department of English. PSU University, Saudi Arabia,2023:14(3):730-739. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.17507/jltr.1403.21>
10. Nunan D. Research on English Language Teaching and Learning in the Middle East and North Africa. 1st Edition. TIRF-Routledge Series, 2024. <https://www.routledge.com/Research-on-English-Language>
11. Rahimi M. EFL teachers' and learners' perspectives on "English file series". Global Journal of Foreign Language Teaching,2015:5(2):115. DOI:10.18844/gjflt.v5i2.186