

## “What Reference Accent should we Adopt?” University Students’ and Teachers’ Preferences for and Attitudes Toward English Reference Accents

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**Abstract:** English possesses different varieties in all the circles mentioned by Kachru (1985). However, two of them, American English and British English are considered the major reference accents. As observed, students prefer to use American English while teachers prefer British English although this proposition has not been confirmed by prior research. Therefore, the present study endeavored to understand Kurdish university students’ and teachers’ preferences and attitudes toward the two major accents of English that are situated within the Inner Circle of Kachru’s model through a self-reported questionnaire adapted from previous studies. More importantly, the study tackled the factors that influenced their attitudes toward either of the aforementioned accents through a second self-reported questionnaire inquiring about the reasons why they preferred one accent over the other. The sample included 87 students and 49 teachers from different universities in the Iraqi Kurdistan Region. The study used percentages, means, and t-tests to analyze the data. Unexpectedly, the data analysis revealed similar attitudes of Kurdish university students toward American English and British English. Nevertheless, the majority of Kurdish university instructors held more positive attitudes toward British English. As for the reasons, although their responses were various, the study listed the order of some factors that influenced their choice of accent.

**Keywords:** Attitude, American English, British English, Factors, University Students and Teachers.

### 1. Introduction

The English language has spread across every corner of the world. The number of its users, which was only five to seven million speakers during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I in 1603 (Jenkins, 2009), has now crept up to somewhere between 1.5 and 2 billion speakers at the start of the 21st century (Crystal, 2012; Jenkins 2009; “The most spoken languages worldwide in 2022,” 2023). Of this number, around 380 million speakers use English as their first language, 300 million speakers use it as a second language, and 1 billion speakers use it as a foreign language (Peterson, 2020). This dramatic increase in the number of speakers of English has led the English language into different accents, often classified under the heading ‘World Englishes’ (Kachru, 1992).

Research on English accents has seen pervasive interest in the past decades. One significant facet of this area of investigation is determining which variety of English should serve as a model for EFL learners to follow. Traditionally, two opposing principles have informed pronunciation instruction,

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namely the nativeness principle which states students should model a standard dialect from the US or UK, and the intelligibility principle which focuses on intelligibility (Scales et al., 2006).

An increasing number of scholars have stressed the significance of global intelligibility (Crystal, 2012; Jenkins, 2009; Scales et al, 2006) because much communication occurs among nonstandard varieties of English. Nevertheless, achieving native-like English is still prioritized in English language education (Choi, 2015) because learners themselves prefer to model native speakers and native English varieties, particularly American English and British English (Kuar, 2014; Rashid, 2011; Scales et al, 2006; Weisi et al, 2019).

Language is strongly associated with society in that it not only affects but is also affected by an array of social factors. The way an individual speaks can reveal a lot about them, demonstrating the speaker's age, identity, religion, and other social factors. Furthermore, the way one speaks has been socially assessed by others on a scale from beautiful-ugly, right-wrong, more prestigious-less prestigious, and so on (Senefonte, 2016). Therefore, expressions of favorable or unfavorable emotions toward a language or its speakers and accents may reflect impressions of linguistic difficulty or simplicity, degree of importance, elegance, social status, and so forth (Richards & Schmidt, 2010).

Iraq and Iraqi Kurdistan have traditionally been categorized as a country where English is taught as a foreign language and a compulsory subject. Targeted instructional models both in schools and universities were initially and essentially British. Furthermore, previously Iraqi students and teachers generally preferred British English to American English (Rashid, 2011). Nevertheless, the tendency toward British accents, especially Received Pronunciation (RP) has declined in Iraq and Iraqi Kurdistan, as observed. Kurdish students tend to adopt American English in their everyday English spoken discourse more than British English which might reflect their attitudes toward American English. However, no research has, to date, reported Kurdish university students' and teachers' attitudes toward the accents of English.

A question inquired by many students in most EFL Kurdish classes involves, "What accent of English do we have to pursue, American English or British English?" Most instructors, as observed, might prefer British English over American English due to their prior education that was based on that accent of English. Therefore, they suggest British English. However, students generally prefer to choose American English. This implies a contrast between students' and teachers' attitudes toward a particular accent of English. Therefore, tackling non-native-speaker attitudes is essential as a non-native speaker's preconceived attitudes shape the way they react to a certain variety of languages (Al-Dosary, 2011).

Language attitudes develop through a number of factors including prior linguistic exposure through media, current instructional practices, the usability of a certain linguistic variety in a certain educational or cultural context, and the political power of the dialect users (Al-Dosary, 2011). In this regard, Weisi et al. (2019) conducted a study revealing the participants expressed their preference for American English due to exposure to American English. Furthermore, Carrie (2017) confirmed that prestige can be a denominator of accent preference, revealing that the participants showed a preference for British English due to status and prestige. Thus, the present study aims to tackle two major issues, including the preferences and attitudes of Kurdish university students and teachers toward British English and American English and the factors that are associated with their attitudes.

Based on the aims stated above, the study will address three major questions:

1. What attitudes do Kurdish students hold toward the two major English reference accents?
2. What attitudes do Kurdish teachers hold toward the two major English reference accents?
3. What are the reasons that can affect students and teachers to choose a particular variety of English?

## 2. Literature Review

The investigation of language attitudes stems from research in sociopsychology of the 1960s, especially the seminal work of Lambert and others in 1960, which investigated people's attitudes toward speakers with particular styles of speaking employing the indirect matched-guise technique (as cited in Carrie, 2017; & Chan, 2018). Based on theories of second language acquisition, there exists a strong correlation between language attitudes and language learning (Garrett, 2010) and students' language attitude is regarded as a major denominator of the level of success in the acquisition of a second language (Garrett, 2010). Therefore, studying language attitudes is necessary. This section defines the related terms and theories and then reviews the pertinent literature.

### 2.1 Kachru's model of world Englishes

A number of models have been put forward to understand the spread of English and to classify English speakers as well as world Englishes, including the Dynamic Model of Postcolonial English (Schneider, 2007), the World Map of English (Strevens, 1992), and the Wheel Model of World English (McArthur's, 1987, as cited in Jenkins, 2009; Martens, 2020; & Zhang, 2010). The most powerful and leading model, however, involves Kachru's (1985, 1992) Circle Model, which categorizes varieties of world Englishes into the Inner Circle, the Outer Circle, and the Expanding Circle. These circles correspond to the use of English as a native, second, and foreign language respectively, as shown in the figure below.

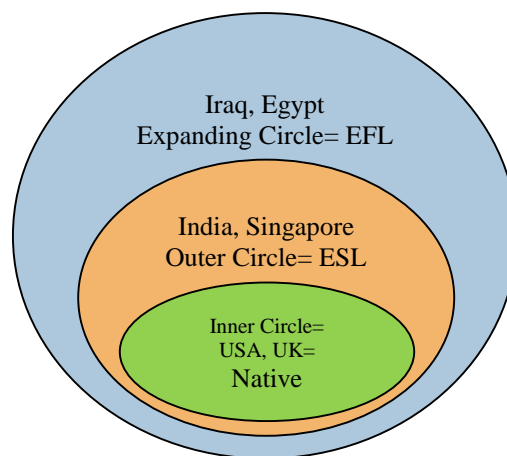


Figure 1: Kachru's (1985, 1992) three concentric circles model

Accordingly, the Inner Circle shows the traditional basis of English that includes regions where English is used as a principal language or more clearly as a native language such as countries like the UK, the US,

Australia, Canada, and so forth. The Outer Circle involves nations where English is spoken as a second language, having an official status and a colonial background, and being used for the government affairs such as education, the media, and commerce. This comprises 75 countries including Malaysia, India, and so on. The Expanding Circle, however, involves regions where English is taught as a foreign language in universities (Kachru, 1992; Martens, 2020).

## **2.2 Language Accent**

Accent forms an important aspect of language attitude. However, defining accent is not an easy task because it has been viewed from various theoretical perspectives. The most comprehensive is that given by Crystal (2012) who defines it as the overall auditory effect of those pronunciation characteristics that show where a person is from, regionally or socially. Accordingly, recognizing an accent corresponds to the ability to identify from where or from which first language background the speaker stems.

According to Crystal (2012), the standard accent is Received Pronunciation (RP) in the UK while General American (GA) in the US. These two varieties are regarded as the most appropriate forms of English in the world. However, their commonness varies in different parts of the world (Phan, 2020). People from merely six countries, including the United Kingdom (the UK), the United States of America (the US), Ireland, New Zealand, Australia, and Canada are regarded as English native speakers (Crystal, 2012).

One theory that is relevant to the study of accent attitudes involves Accent Prestige Theory which states accents are utilized as clues to determine characteristics of speakers. More clearly, the theory proposes that the individual who uses a standard accent is judged better than speakers with non-standard accents. The theory judges the characteristics of speakers on two major dimensions, namely the status dimension which includes such attributes as intelligence, education, etc., and the solidarity dimension which includes attributes such as friendliness, kindness, and so forth (Anderson et al., 2007).

## **2.3 Attitudes Toward English Accents**

In dealing with attitudes toward English accents, several lines of research can be identified, two of which will be presented and discussed below.

One such line has investigated foreign speakers' attitudes toward native and non-native English accents. In this regard, Pilus (2013) investigated Malaysian students' attitudes toward British, American, and Malaysian accents. He revealed that students had positive attitudes toward British English but were comfortable with their own Malaysian accents. He concluded choosing a native accent as a model for pronunciation learning is a viable option. Consistently, Huang and Hashim (2021) investigated perceptions of Chinese university students toward eight English accents, namely British English, China English, American English, Indian English, Japanese English, Australian English, Southeast Asian English, and Canadian English. They revealed ambivalent attitudes. They showed that standard English varieties including American and British English varieties were rated by the students as the most preferred, the most familiar, and the proper models of instruction. Fang (2016) tackled Chinese university students' attitudes toward English accents including American English, British English, China English, Canadian English, and French English. He showed participants' dominance of native ideology. Kuar (2014) examined how non-native speakers of English, trainee teachers, view non-native and native speaker accents. The findings

showed that the students perceived the native accents more positively than the non-native accents. Yet, consistently, McKenzie (2015) revealed that Japanese students rated UK and US English accents particularly positively in terms of status. Zhang (2010) studied Hong Kong university students' attitudes toward eight varieties of English using interviews and a verbal guise technique. The results showed that Hong Kong students had relatively positive attitudes toward educated Hong Kong English accents, which is a variety of RP, in terms of solidarity. Moreover, Mandarin-accented English was evaluated highly. Importantly, American English (GA) was rated more highly than British English (RP), which might imply that the replacement of British English with a General American accent could be underway.

Yet, a second line of research, which is the focus of the present study, has tackled second or foreign speakers' attitudes toward American English and British English. Carrie and McKenzie (2017) studied Spanish university students' attitudes toward British English and American English, as English reference accents, using the verbal guise technique. The findings revealed that participants could more accurately recognize, through phonological variation (such as postvocalic /r/ and intervocalic /t/), RP than American English. Additionally, participants gave certain labels to RP that are loaded with social meaning involving standard, neutral, and pure speech. Carrie (2017), in another study using the verbal guise technique, found the same thing, i.e., students desired to emulate RP due to status and prestige. However, the students associated GA with greater solidarity and stronger affiliative feelings. Contrary to these two studies, Weisi et al (2019) found university students' disposition toward American English among Iranian students. Of the plethora of research accomplished on this topic, only one study (Rashid, 2011) has been conducted regarding Iraqi university students' attitudes toward and preferences for American and British English. The results of his study showed students' preferences for RP. Participants perceived RP as more correct, more prestigious, standard, honorable, familiar, easier to understand, clearer, and better. However, those participants who preferred GA considered it more modern, beautiful, natural, more common around the world, and sounds simpler and humbler than RP. Rashid (2011) calls for more research in the Iraqi context regarding this area of investigation to which the present is a response.

Thus, it is evident that a plethora of research has been conducted regarding students' attitudes toward the accents of English in various educational and cultural settings, within the framework of the circles mentioned by Kachru. However, very few or no studies have been conducted to tackle teachers' attitudes. Furthermore, no studies have investigated students' attitudes in the Kurdish context. This has created a problem in how English, in particular accent and pronunciation instruction, should be addressed. Therefore, the present study addresses the issue in question and presents the factors associated with the attitudes.

#### **2.4 Factors Associated with Accent Attitudes**

An array of factors has been reported in the literature to be associated with preferences for and attitudes toward certain accents. Carrie and McKenzie (2017) attributed Spanish as a second language university students' high identification of and positive attitudes toward the RP compared to American English to previous exposure to RP and to geographical proximity. However, the identification of GA in their study, although lower than RP, was found to be relatively high due to the cultural prominence of GA. Fang (2016), in his study, attributed the dominance of native ideology to the idea that students do not have the chance to be exposed to other Englishes. However, they are exposed to native Englishes through formal

instruction. Another relevant study, which was conducted by Weisi et al. (2019) revealed that Iranian students' preference for American English was associated with the students being exposed to American English. And, lack of guidance and lack of reinforcement toward British English affected students' preference for British English. Additionally, Chan (2018) revealed various factors that could affect students' attitudes including cultural identity, perceived intelligibility of English accents, affective feelings, awareness of language variation, the experience of language use, and more importantly, situational language choices. Thus, it is clear from the above studies that exposure is one of the common factors affecting students' preferences and attitudes.

### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1 Design of the Study**

This study tackled Kurdish university students' attitudes toward two major native English accents including American English and British English. For this purpose, the study employed a semantic differential scale. So, the study, both in terms of its data collection and analysis is considered a quantitative study.

Considering the approaches that have been used for tackling attitudes, three broad approaches have been used to measure accent attitudes since the 1960s, including the societal treatment approach, the direct approach, and the indirect approach. In this study, a direct approach has been adopted to investigate both students' and teachers' accent attitudes due to unobtrusiveness and practicality issues. This approach, as the name suggests, directly asks participants for their evaluation of accents and informants explicitly express their opinions (Garrett, 2010)

#### **3.2 Participants**

Sampling was conducted through convenience sampling choosing those participants who were accessible. This resulted in a sample of 87 Kurdish university students and 49 university instructors from various academic, social, and geographical backgrounds. This has made the sample rather heterogeneous because they were recruited from various universities in Iraqi Kurdistan.

In terms of gender, 39 (44.8%) students were male, while 48 (55.2%) students were female outnumbering male participants. However, considering the year at college, students were almost equally distributed, with 23 (26.4%) students belonging to the first year, 22 (25.3%) being second-year students, 22 (25.3%) being third-year, and the rest of the participants being fourth-year.

Considering the second group of participants, that is, the instructors, 27 (55.1%) of them were male and 22 (44.9%) were female. As for their experience at university, their responses varied and ranged from 2 years to 25 years, with a mean of ( $M=9.08$ ).

#### **3.3 Data Collection**

The collection of data for this study stemmed from questionnaires. Data were collected from Kurdish students and teachers to understand how they evaluate and assess American English and British English through two questionnaires designed by the researchers from prior studies (Al-Dosary, 2011; Kuar, 2014;



& Pilus, 2013), one for students and the other for teachers. These questionnaires were similar to Osgood's semantic differential scale, which utilized a list of adjective pairs arranged on bipolar rating scales. Adjectives were organized according to two major factors: 1. Evaluation (positive-negative, e.g., pleasant-unpleasant), 2. Potency (e.g., strong-weak). The questionnaires were composed of 15 items based on certain adjective descriptors on a five-point scale through which each relevant accent was rated (from 1 to 5) by students and teachers.

More importantly, another questionnaire was designed to investigate the factors that are associated with students' and teachers' attitudes or preferences for American English or British English, which was adapted from (Chan, 2018; Pilus, 2013; Weisi et al., 2014). The tool incorporated 20 items organized on a five-point Likert scale, with scores ranging from (1= strongly disagree to 5= strongly agree). It was again answered by both students and teachers to elicit the factors behind choosing one of the two investigated accents of English.

### **3.4 Validity and Reliability**

Regarding validity and reliability, the instruments were piloted and tested for both validity and reliability. For validity, a number of studies published in reputable journals, master and doctoral dissertations as well as other studies employing adjective labels were reviewed (Carrie, 2017; Kuar, 2014; Martens, 2020; Pilus, 2013; Rashid, 2011; & Zhang, 2010). The review of all those studies led to a questionnaire comprising 21 adjective labels based on commonness and suitability to the Kurdish context. Then, the questionnaires with 21 adjectives were piloted by being sent to 5 university students and instructors to check the adjective labels for both intelligibility and commonness. They were requested to answer the questions and asked to indicate the questions they did not understand. However, after the forms were sent back to the researchers, only 15 labels were retained. The same procedures were followed for the factor questionnaire. This was carried out because, according to El-Dash & Busnardo (2001), different contexts react to attitudinal labels differently.

For reliability, however, Cronbach's Alpha was used and reliability scores of 0.86 and 0.92 were obtained for the students' attitudes toward American and British English scales, respectively. As for the teacher scales, scores of 0.92, and 0.94 were obtained for each of the scales applied. All these scores indicate high levels of reliability.

## **4. Results**

### **4.1 Results of the Background Questions for the Student Questionnaire**

One of the significant questions the participants were asked involved, "Can you differentiate accents?". This result is reported in the pie chart below.

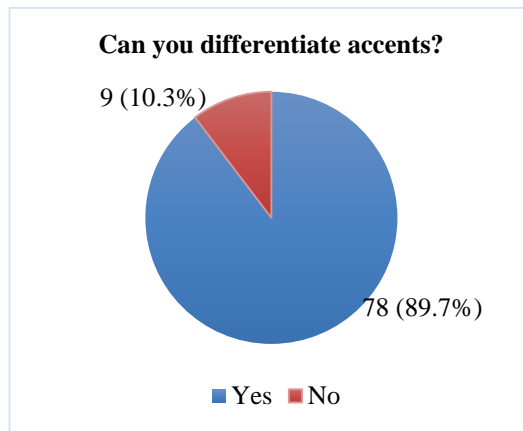


Figure 2: Students' Identification of English Accents

As the figure shows, the majority 78 (89.7%) of the students reported they could recognize or differentiate between British and American English, but a minority (9, 10.3%) of students reported they could not differentiate between British and American English.

Students were also asked two other important general questions whose results are summarized in the table below.

Table 1: Students' Responses to General Background Questions

No.	Am E	Br E	Both	Total
1. Which model accent do your university teachers use?	10 (11.5%)	45 (51.7%)	32 (36.8%)	87 (100%)
2. What model accent do you think should be taught and used at university?	14 (16.1%)	33 (37.9%)	40 (46%)	87 (100%)

Note. Am E= American English; Br E= British English

Regarding the first question, the table clearly shows that the majority of university students 45 (51.7%) stated that their instructors use the British accent, a smaller number, 32 (36.8%) students believed that they use a mixture of both accents, while a very small number, 10 (11.5%) students, stated their instructors use the American accent. As for the second question, the majority of university students (40, 46%) thought both accents should be used and taught at university, 33 (37.9%) students preferred the British accent, and only 14 (16.1%) students preferred the American accent.

#### 4.2 Students' Attitudes toward British English and American English

To reveal students' overall attitudes, one sample t-test was utilized and the results are shown in the table below.



Table 2: Students' Overall Attitudes toward American English and British English

Accent	CM	ThM	SD	P. Value	T. Value	Df	T table
Am E	52.04	45	9.94	0.000	48.83	87	1.990
Br E	53.89	45	12.61	0.000	39.85	87	1.990

Note. CM= calculated mean; ThM= theoretical or standardized mean; df= degree of freedom

Table 2 reveals students' overall attitudes toward American English and British English that are positive as the calculated means (CM= 52.04, 53.89) are higher than the theoretical means (ThM= 45) respectively. Additionally, the t values (48.83, 39.85) are higher than the t table score (1.990). This corresponds to the background question (Q2, Table 1) that showed ambivalent attitudes toward both accents.

### 4.3 Factors Associated with Students' Attitudes Toward American and British English

What was reported above included students' attitudes toward American and British English. This section will present the results related to why students selected American English on the one hand, and British English on the other. For this purpose, the ranking order of the items was considered based on the means recorded. The highest means were obtained for the following statements presented in the table.

Table 3: Factors impacting students' attitudes toward American and British English

Accent	Factors	M
Am E	It is easy to understand and speak.	4.29
	I am used to listening to it.	4.26
	It is accepted for international communication.	4.23
Br E	I understand it better.	4.08
	I am used to listening to it.	3.95
	Because pronunciation learning at university is based on that accent.	3.92

Note. Br E= British English; Am E= American English.

The table shows the three most significant factors that contributed to students' preferences for American English. The first and most important factor associated with American English included, "It is easy to understand and speak" with the highest mean score of (M=4.29), followed by "I am used to listening to it" with a mean of (M=4.26), and "It is accepted for international communication" with a mean of (M=4.23). The reasons why students preferred and selected British English were quite similar, with the highest mean score (M=4.08) being obtained for "I understand it better", followed by "I am used to listening to it" and "Because pronunciation learning at university is based on that accent" with mean scores of (M=3.95) and (M=3.92) respectively.

#### 4.4 Teachers' Attitudes Toward American English and British English

The teachers' questionnaire also included three important general background questions relevant to teachers' attitudes. The results of these three questions are reported in Table 4 below.

Table 4: Teachers' Responses to the General Background Questions

No	Am E	Br E	Both
1. What model accent do you think should be taught and used at university?	5 (10.2%)	18 (36.7%)	26 (53.1%)
2. Which variety of English do you mostly use yourself?	7 (14.3%)	23 (46.9%)	19 (38.8%)
3. What variety of English do your students like to use?	20 (40.8%)	7 (14.3%)	22 (44.9%)

Note. Am E= American English; Br E= British English.

Table 4 explains that the majority of university instructors (26, 53.1%) thought both accents should be taught and used at university, 18 (36.7) stated British English should be taught, and only 5 (10.2%) instructors stated American English should be used and taught. Considering the second question, the majority 23 (46.9%) stated they use British English, 19 (38.8%) stated they use both accents and only 7 (14.3%) stated they use American English. As for the third question, the majority of university instructors 22 (44.9%) stated their students use both accents, an approximate number 20 (40.8%) instructors stated their students use American English, and only 7 (14.3%) stated their students use British English.

considering the attitudes of teachers toward American English and British English, the analysis revealed teachers' positive attitudes toward both accents, as shown in the table below.

Table 5: Teachers' attitudes toward American English and British English

Accent	CM	ThM	SD	P. Value	T value	Df	T table
AM E	52.26	45	11.05	0.000	33.102	48	2.011
Br E	58.14	45	12.56	0.000	32.37	48	2.011

Note. CM= Calculated mean; ThM= Theoretical mean

Table 5 presents the results of the teacher questionnaire that showed positive attitudes of university teachers toward American English and British English as the calculated means (52.26) and (58.14) are statistically significantly higher than the theoretical mean (45) at (Sig= 0.00). Although their attitudes toward British English are a lot higher than those toward American English that confirms the above results in Table 4.

#### 4.5 Factors Associated with Teachers' Attitudes Toward American and British English

The below table shows the most common factors that led to teachers selecting a model accent of their preference.

Table 6: Factors Associated with Teachers Selecting an Accent of their Choice

Accent	Factors	M
Am E	I am used to speaking it.	4.40
	I am used to listening to it.	4.20
	I have had more exposure to that accent	4.20
Br E	I am used to speaking it.	4.15
	It is accepted for international communication.	4.06
	I can understand it better.	4.03

As the table illustrates, the first three key factors that led to teachers select American English included being used to speaking American English (M= 4.40), being used to listening to it (M=4.20), and having had more exposure to American English (M= 4.20). Teachers who selected British English similarly rated being used to speaking British English as the most influential factor (M= 4.15) in their selection of British English. However, they also revealed other factors influencing their choice of British English including British English being accepted for international communication (M= 4.06) and being easier to understand (M= 4.03).

## 5. Discussion of the Results

English possesses so many diverse varieties that have led scholars to categorize world Englishes into Inner, Outer, and Expanding Circles. Although there is a shift in the use and users of English, the dominance of native ideology is still prevalent and native accents are more favored than other English accents in both the Outer and Expanding Circles (Carrie, 2017; Chan, 2016; Fang, 2016; Huang & Hashim, 2021; Kuar, 2014; McKenzie, 2015; Phan, 2020; Pilus, 2013; Scales et al., 2006; Weisi et al., 2019). Previous research has shown negative attitudes toward non-native speakers who have a poor accent (Senefonte, 2016). Therefore, this study considered two major reference accents of English that are American English and British English.

Considering the student participants in this study, almost all the students, similar to Ballard and Winke (2017), Carrie and McKenzie (2017), and Chan (2016), demonstrated their capability of distinguishing between American English and British English, which is essential for the study of attitudes as one cannot express their own attitudes or perceptions without exposure to and familiarity with an attitudinal object (Carrie & McKenzie, 2017; Dewaele & McCloskey, 2015; McKenzie, 2015; Huang & Hashim, 2021). Certain accents are more familiar and, therefore, identifiable to students than others. In the Hong Kong context, it has been found that students are more familiar with Hong Kong English, RP, and GA than Australian, Indian, Chinese, and Philippine English accents due to greater exposure to the former accents (Chan, 2016). In the Kurdish context, students have more exposure and familiarity with RP and GA.

Unexpectedly, however, the majority of the students thought both accents should be taught and used at university. This was, in turn, confirmed by teachers who stated that their students would use both accents. Yet more surprisingly and contrary to the researchers' assumptions and compatible with Pilus (2013) and Rashid (2011), a considerable number of students in the present study thought British English rather than American English should be taught at university. This might be attributed to their teachers' influence on

them as when they ask their teachers what model accent to use, their teachers would probably advise them to use British English. One of the conclusions of Ballard (2013), which is congruent with the present study, is to expose students to both accents as familiarity with an accent facilitates comprehension (Ballard, 2013; Ballard & Winke, 2017; Huang & Hashim, 2021) and influences acceptance and positive evaluations of accents (Dewaele & McCloskey, 2015).

Overall, students expressed positive attitudes toward both accents with the mean scores being almost the same, congruent with Qadir and Omar (2023). This confirms the instrumental significance of the English language in general and the above results. These ambivalent positive attitudes toward the two accents indicate students' major purpose of learning the language rather than focusing on pursuing a certain accent. More importantly, as observed, what matters to students is to develop their fluency in the language, which is a fundamental aspect of communicative competence and necessary for job opportunities in the context. More importantly, the political and economic power of the US and the film industries on the one hand, and the effect of the two pronunciation courses offered to students in British English as well as the use of a British accent by teachers on the other hand (Rashid, 2011), might have generated these ambivalent attitudes of students. Above all, this indicates, as confirmed by Fang (2016), the entrenchment of the native ideology. This result supports and buttresses prior studies (Ballard, 2019; Chan, 2018; Huang & Hashim, 2021) that these two accents, particularly the GA and RP versions are often employed at both the governmental and administrative levels as the default and reference accents in most native and non-native countries (Huang & Hashim, 2021). More importantly, accents in other Outer and Expanding Circles have been described as deviant, unintelligible, strange, and even terrible English accents (Huang & Hashim, 2021). Finally, this result is incompatible with Weisi et al. (2019), Rashid (2011), Pilus (2013), and Chan (2016).

As for the factors that are associated with students' selection of their preferred accents, the present study revealed several factors that can all be considered as real factors behind their preference and positive attitudes toward the two accents. However, only three of the twenty factors are presented and discussed here for the purpose of simplicity. Students who selected American English rated three factors as the most influential ones involving easiness of understanding and speaking (similar to Pilus, 2013), being used to listening to it, and being accepted for international communication. According to (Carrie, 2017; Huang and Hashim, 2021; Scales et al., 2006), a perfect correlation exists between easiness of understanding and students' preference for an accent. Incongruently, Phan (2020) found that the dominance of American English in terms of media, film industry, Internet, and technology for the past two decades has made students have more exposure to American English and, therefore, have a preference for it. Weisi et al. (2019) found that American English exposure and lack of reinforcement and guidance toward British English were factors in students selecting American English. However, students who selected British English in the present study, rated comprehensibility (Pilus, 2013; Scales et al., 2006), being used to listening to it (Rashid, 2011), and pronunciation learning being based on that accent (Pilus, 2013) as the most significant reasons.

Similar to students, Kurdish university instructors thought both accents should be used and taught at university which indicates teachers' focus on the linguistic significance of both accents rather than using one model accent in teaching. However, when they were asked what model accent they use themselves,

the data showed that the majority of Kurdish university instructors would use British English (Rashid, 2011), which was also confirmed from students' perspectives that the majority of their teachers would use British English.

Considering teachers' attitudes toward American English and British English, the analysis showed positive attitudes toward both accents. Yet, their attitudes, different from those of students, were statistically significantly higher toward British English than American English (Carrie, 2017; Rashid, 2011), which was one of the major assumptions of the present study, being confirmed. The explanation for this might be the influence of the English language education system in Iraq on the teachers' attitudes.

Finally, the teachers were also inquired about reasons for their preferred accents. Three reasons were reported to be the most influential for teachers who selected American English including being used to speaking to it, being used to listening to it, and having had more exposure to American English. Previous studies have acknowledged exposure as an important factor for accent attitude and preference (Ballard, 2013; Carrie & McKenzie, 2017; McKenzie, 2015). However, teachers who selected British English reported other factors behind their preferred British accent including being used to speaking it, being accepted for international communication, and understanding it better. As said earlier, comprehensibility and easiness of understanding are significant determinants of accent preference.

## **6. Conclusion**

The principal objective of the present study was to reveal Kurdish EFL university students' and teachers' preferences for and attitudes toward the two major reference accents of English that are American English and British English. The analysis of the data yielded several significant results that have not been revealed and even touched upon by prior studies in the Kurdish context.

Importantly, Kurdish university students held slightly positive attitudes toward both reference accents of English. This implies the dominance of the native ideology on the students' part and that students believe that successful and effective communication derives from the close approximation of native accents whether it be American or British English. This might be, more or less, attributed to the students' exposure to these two accents through different media for American English and the instructional materials being in British English in preuniversity and university education for British English. Since students' attitudes were positive toward both accents, the factors behind their preferred accents were rather similar which might contribute to validating the results obtained. One such factor involved being used to listening to American and British English which is more associated with their dominance in the educational context in question.

More importantly, teachers' attitudes were also positive toward both accents. However, they were more positive toward British English than American English. The reasons that underlie their perceptions were: being used to listening and speaking to it, having had more exposure, being accepted for international communication, and easiness of understanding these two accents. These results contribute to the literature available on the topic as teachers' attitudes and the factors that affect them are under-investigated. One possible reason behind these positive attitudes of students and teachers might be due to Kurdish speakers' weak identity as identity and attitudes are negatively correlated. The results obtained in the present study

imply that both accents should be used and taught at pre-university and university education as, from the trait evaluation that was made for the two accents by students and teachers, it can be concluded that the lowest scores obtained for the traits were positive.

## 7. Limitations and Recommendations

This study has contributed to this area of investigation in multiple ways. First, it has extended research in the field of language attitude, being the first study to delve into Kurdish students' and teachers' attitudes in Iraqi Kurdistan, a significant educational context that is underexamined. Second, it revealed important factors affecting students' and teachers' attitudes toward English accents. Nevertheless, it is limited to the investigation of evaluative reactions only to two Inner Circle English accents, which are familiar accents. This study did not investigate students' attitudes toward Outer and Expanding Circle accents. A future study should consider students' and teachers' attitudes toward these accents. Yet, more research is needed regarding Inner Circle accents using a different methodology including the Verbal Guise Technique or Matched Guise Technique recruiting a larger sample size. A more serious limitation is the type of sampling method through which the participants were selected. Other types of sampling methods might have produced more generalizable findings. Therefore, future studies should consider this limitation.

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