

Accent Dynamics in the Malaysian Workplace: Perceptions and Implications

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ABSTRACT

Achieving a native-like accent seems to be the dream of many language learners of English due to the association of correctness with being the standard variety. Although there is a plethora of accent studies in Malaysia, the perceptions of the varieties of English accents used in Malaysia from the perspectives of organisational members remain overlooked. The present study is concerned with the expectation of English accents projected towards the corporate workers themselves and others in a workplace context. This mixed-method study aimed to explore the awareness and perception of 15 organisational members, consisting of five higher management and 10 general employees towards the British accent, American accent and Malaysian accent along with its effect on effective workplace communication. Based on the interviews and questionnaires conducted with the addition of accented audio recordings, findings revealed that respondents showcased a mismatch of perceptions. While the general employees felt the need to alter their natural accents in a professional setting, the higher management denied the accusation of accents being used as a measurement of an individual's competence and professionalism with exceptions to several fields of work. Hence, this highlights the inconsistency of respondents' views towards the three prominent accents in Malaysia along with the bias towards the native accent and the suppressed prejudice towards the local accent. Overall, this finding has provided a direction for educational authorities, local organisations, educators and English-learning individuals to embrace the varieties of English accents while emphasising the importance of language diversity in a workplace and academic setting.

Keywords: English accent; workplace communication; perception; accent bias; language diversity

INTRODUCTION

The spread of English around the world has elevated its status to a global language, shifting its role and usage. This shift has also changed the ownership of the language, as it is no longer exclusively controlled by native speakers (Boonsuk, 2021; Baker & Ishikawa, 2021; Rose & Galloway, 2019). As a result, the number of non-native English speakers has increased significantly (Boonsuk, Wasoh & Waelateh, 2023), leading to its widespread use in various contexts globally. English has become the lingua franca of the ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) community (Choomthong & Manowong, 2020), driving a growing demand for proficiency in education, business, and entertainment to support socioeconomic development (Tan et al., 2018). This global expansion has also led to the emergence of different varieties of English, with diverse accents reflecting the language's wide use.

Malaysia, as a nation which used to be under the colonisation of the British, has placed great importance on emphasising the role of English in the education system as a way of preparing the nation's future hopes in stepping into the corporate world after completing their formal

education. The tendency of non-native speakers to diverge from the relatively standard and native variety has resulted in the birth of English varieties. The development of a new variety of English has also altered and provided a wide horizon of English accents for speakers to choose from. In the context of Malaysia, the most prominent accents are British, American, and Malaysian. Despite the purpose of each respective accent being to convey similar meanings, not all accents are regarded as having the same status of power (Malissa & Wong, 2012; Hansen, 2019). In general, English speakers tend to have an immense and higher form of respect towards native accents as compared to non-native accents (Zainab et al., 2014; Boonsuk et al., 2023; Choomthong & Manowong, 2020). This has resulted in the act of switching accents to accommodate the understanding of native speakers although the Malaysians' preferences for English accents remain ambiguous (Pillai, 2008, 2009; Norman, 2017). It is also vital to note that this action may arise subconsciously as accents used by a speaker can greatly impact people's impressions and perceptions towards them in various aspects (Hansen, 2019; Boonsuk et al., 2023). Hence, some accents may hold a greater possibility of stigmatisation compared to others. The stereotyping act that brings along prejudice and bias related to English accents has skyrocketed the concern of the academic community as there is a notable impact on the job selection process (Malissa & Wong, 2012; Norman, 2017; Hansen, 2019). Future job seekers tend to have a pressing necessity to achieve and practise native-like English as they do not view their local or non-native English accent to be of help in a formal setting to settle for great employment (Tan et al., 2018). The pressure to shed non-native accents in favour of those deemed 'correct' has intensified, as many companies expect employees to be highly proficient in English, the language of business and professionalism (Siti Zaidah et al., 2019). In native-speaking countries, the deep-rooted negative perceptions of non-native English accents have also been a prominent problem in the aspect of employment as career competency has been constantly questioned while job seekers face blatant discrimination while trying to land a job (Anderson et al., 2007; John & Zhou, 2018; Ameer, 2019). It is thus the objective of this present study to examine the perceptions of English accents among management and employees in organizations in Malaysia, with a focus on how these perceptions influence workplace communication and dynamics.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

IMPORTANCE OF ENGLISH IN MALAYSIA'S WORKPLACE

Malaysia is progressing to achieve excellence in the economic sector; however, the low proficiency of future employees has been indelibly woven into the worries of the nation as it is putting Malaysia's growth at stake. Zulita (2018) reported that almost 64% of employers express dissatisfaction and disappointment along with a hint of agony as the employability of Malaysians has dropped sharply due to their English language proficiency. This is supported by the studies of Singh (2018) and Ishak (2018) where higher management mentioned the importance of setting a standard of English proficiency, mainly focusing on speech forms and presentation styles as those play a vital role in their first impressions during the job interviews. Employers undoubtedly would prioritise graduates with strong language skills as they reflect well on the company's image. Standardising English proficiency levels could help attract employers by demonstrating high communication skills, making it easier for candidates to get hired. Improving English proficiency across various sectors in Malaysia is crucial for economic success, effective communication, and professional growth. For instance, in the banking industry, English has become the primary

communication language, which is crucial for maintaining career growth and effective customer interactions. However, diverse linguistic backgrounds can cause misunderstandings, impacting job performance and client relationships. Research suggests that improving English proficiency among banking professionals is necessary for better workplace communication (Yusmahariz et al., 2023 & Sareen, 2016). In the aviation industry, English proficiency is critical to ensuring safety and smooth operation as miscommunication due to language issues can lead to fatal accidents. This aligns with findings by Hamzah and Wong (2018), who analysed the causes of misunderstandings and revealed that although most controllers and pilots are competent in relaying information and taking instructions, their language proficiency could be further enhanced. Such improvements are especially important for coping with the linguistic demands of their roles during extenuating circumstances, as this is when lapses in communication were found to occur more frequently. Despite English being the official language, aviation professionals often lack adequate language training, leading to potential misinterpretations (Tengku, 2016). Thus, enhancing English skills in this sector is essential for preventing catastrophic errors. Government sectors also rely on English for international relations, making it a key requirement during recruitment. Effective communication in English is necessary to avoid business misfortunes. Many experienced professionals struggle with English accents and slang, highlighting the need for better training. The solution to this is being proficient in English communication which could save time and prevent workplace misunderstandings.

MALAYSIAN PERCEPTIONS TOWARDS ACCENTS

While proficiency in English is essential for effective communication, accent can influence how a person's language skills are perceived. Malaysians' perceptions of English accents have been shaped by historical British colonization and contemporary exposure to various accents through daily communication and entertainment. Studies show that Malaysians often prefer American English for its perceived intelligence and comprehensibility, influenced by entertainment media, despite British English being emphasized in the education system (Wan et al., 2019). Malaysian English, while familiar, is often viewed negatively and associated with lower correctness and professionalism (Tan et al., 2018). According to the findings of this study, the participants displayed discomfort in utilising the accent as it appears to be non-proper and questionable when it comes to accuracy. They believe that native-like English must be attained to improve educational and economic prospects while the local accent does not have what it takes to be considered a standard or proper variant. This bias is evident in educational settings, where British accents are favoured for their perceived clarity and sophistication. Rajadurai (2006) explored pronunciation issues among Malaysian English learners, highlighting that while educators often emphasize native-like pronunciation as an ideal, students may struggle with the practicality of adhering to these standards in the country's multicultural context. This emphasis on native-like accents extends beyond education into corporate environments, where such accents often influence hiring decisions, workplace dynamics, and perceptions of competence (Harper, 2004). Zainab et al. (2014) investigates the attitudes of Malaysian university students towards native and non-native English accents. The results indicated that students had a bias towards in-group accents, meaning they evaluated non-native lecturers' accents more positively. Exposure to the variations of English accents in Malaysia stems not only from the national education system but also manifests in workplace settings, where accent bias can impact professional interactions and career advancement.

opportunities. Additionally, the booming entertainment industry contributes to this diversity. In entertainment, local accents are often used comically, reinforcing negative stereotypes.

In a study performed by Malissa & Wong (2012), radio listeners were asked to indicate their preferences and exhibit perceptions towards the radio deejays in Malaysia. The deejay with a Malaysian accent was perceived as boring, lazy and unfriendly due to sounding “too Malaysian” and “too Malay”. On the contrary, the deejay with an American accent was perceived to be the most preferred deejay, despite respondents having the hardest time in deciphering and comprehending the accent used. However, the existing literature often overlooks the non-homogeneity of Malaysian English accents. Malaysian English is not a single, uniform accent, but rather a spectrum of varieties influenced by factors such as ethnicity, social status, and region. A World Englishes perspective highlights that English accents are no longer defined by native speaker norms but are instead recognized as dynamic, evolving, and varied across the world (Kachru, 1985; Jenkins, 2003). Understanding the diversity within Malaysian English accents and how they fit within global English frameworks is essential for a more comprehensive view of how English is perceived and used in Malaysia. Overall, there is a complex interplay between familiarity, preference, and perceived correctness in the way Malaysians view different English accents.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theory utilised in this study is accent prestige theory. This includes a broad lens of characteristics used in creating perceptions towards accents. According to Fuertes et al. (2002), there is a tendency of people, unknowingly, to judge the accent of speakers through certain characteristics as a judgement tool. This theory states that any native accent may obtain outstanding, positive bias and be rated better as compared to the non-native accent. Through the accent speech theory, accents are perceived, and impressions are generated using two types of categories suitable for a workplace context.

The first category refers to the dimension of status. This reflects the perceived social status of a person through the accent they possess, such as intelligence and level of education. In the context of the workplace, these two traits tend to play a high level of priority as they tend to be the characteristics employers look for. The first dimension reflects their professionalism and how they are being portrayed in the workplace. On the other hand, the second dimension depicts the solidarity aspect. This includes traits such as trustworthiness and kindness. These two characteristics, albeit reflect the personality of the owner of the accent, play a vital role in maintaining an organised relationship in a workplace.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The Verbal Guise Technique is utilized in investigating the perceptions of corporate organisation members towards the variety of English accents used in Malaysia’s workplace. The study’s conceptual framework consists of several main components such as the varieties of English accents (British, American, and Malaysian) and the perception of organisation members towards accents along with their impacts on workplace communication which will be the variables that may indicate the success of the study. The judgement of accent may also be affected by speakers’ rate of speech, tone of voice and general fluency of English as the speakers representing each accent differ. The dependent variable refers to the information received from the respondents to

subsequently analyse the level of awareness and perceptions of accents in Malaysia's workplace by the organisation members who actively use English daily. Thus, this would satisfy the implication of whether accents hold an enormous effect on workplace communication that may affect the workflow.

In this study, Accent Prestige Theory provides the theoretical lens to understand the dimensions of status and solidarity that shape perceptions of accents in workplace communication. These theoretical dimensions are operationalized through the Verbal Guise Technique, which serves as the methodological foundation of the study's conceptual framework. By linking the two, this research investigates how perceptions of British, American, and Malaysian English accents influence professional interactions and organizational dynamics, with a focus on communication efficacy and workplace harmony.

METHODOLOGY

A mixed-method approach, combining qualitative and quantitative methods, is used to examine the awareness and perception of different English accents among organization members in Malaysia. The quantitative aspect focuses on identifying accent varieties and their impact on workplace communication and job opportunities, while the qualitative aspect captures nuanced experiences and perspectives through interviews. Validity of the study is enhanced through data triangulation from questionnaires and interviews. The study involved 15 participants from various multinational corporations (MNCs) in Malaysia, selected using purposive-convenience sampling based on specific criteria. MNCs were selected because they offer greater opportunities for interaction with both local and international English speakers, ensuring respondents have adequate experience and exposure to various English accents in workplace settings. Purposive-convenience sampling was chosen to ensure the participants had direct relevance to the study objectives. Participants were selected based on their roles and availability to provide meaningful insights to the study. This approach is commonly used in qualitative research to obtain rich, context-specific data when the target population is relatively small or specialized (Patton, 1990). Participants comprised five higher management members and ten general employees, representing diverse demographics and industries. The higher management members must possess the position of a senior manager or higher, and responsible for contributing and leading the choice made during an employment process. Demographically as a whole, nine of the respondents (60%) were in their 20s, followed by four (26.7%) in their 30s along with one respondent each (6.7%) in the age group of 40s and 50s respectively. Younger individuals were mostly general employees within an organisation, whereas older age was typically associated with higher-ranking positions like senior regional manager, or director. The sample size was determined by the principle of data saturation. Fewer participants are believed to be sufficient to capture diverse perspectives, as long as the data reaches saturation. The interviews with 15 participants, including five from higher management, achieved this balance, providing both depth and breadth of perspectives. Higher management employees were specifically selected for their strategic insights into the use of various accents by general employees. Their limited number reflects the hierarchical structure of the organisation and their smaller proportion relative to other groups. Nevertheless, the data collected from these five individuals was both comprehensive and representative of their unique role within the organisation. The participants were fully informed about the purpose, procedures, risks, and benefits of the study before agreeing to take part to ensure voluntary participation. The Verbal

Guise Technique (VGT), the research instrument used, measures participants' attitudes toward different accents through authentic recordings of native speakers. In the Verbal Guise Technique (VGT), recordings of accented voices are used as samples for respondents to evaluate. However, since VGT requires native speakers of the accents, accessing suitable samples can be challenging. To address this, audio recordings were carefully selected from Weinberger's (2015) Speech Accent Archive. The website compiles a wide range of accents from around the world, offering an extensive number of samples. Users can select those that best suit their study based on demographic and linguistic backgrounds. For the study, the text uttered by all recordings is similar in order to maintain uniformity for research purposes. The complete text with an average of 20 seconds can be referred to below:

Please call Stella. Ask her to bring these things with her from the store: Six spoons of fresh snow peas, five thick slabs of blue cheese, and maybe a snack for her brother Bob. We also need a small plastic snake and a big toy frog for the kids. She can scoop these things into three red bags, and we will go meet her Wednesday at the train station.

The first accent sample chosen for the study was Malaysian Accent (Sample 1) from a 43-year-old woman from Seremban, Malaysia, who speaks Hindi and Arabic, with English learned at age six. This recording lasted 22 seconds. The second was British Accent (Sample 2) from a 30-year-old woman from Birmingham, UK, who speaks German and Mandarin where English is her native language, learned naturally. The recording lasted 20 seconds. Finally, the American Accent (Sample 3) from an 18-year-old woman from Washington, USA, who speaks Spanish and German where English is her native language, learned naturally. This recording lasted 17 seconds.

QUESTIONNAIRE

General employees were asked to rate how comfortable they were in expressing their natural accents in their workplace. This was followed by whether the choice of accents they had had influenced how their superiors perceive their professional competence, the need to alter their accents in a workplace setting and lastly, a question that revealed whether there was a prevalent accent bias in their workplace. On the other hand, the higher management were asked to rate the clarity of communication when someone uses a different accent than them. This was followed by three other questions regarding accents affecting professional credibility, the practice of bias in hiring or promoting decisions along the preferred accent deemed as the best for workplace communication. To summarize, two sets of questionnaires were created for higher management and general employees to explore their perceptions of accents in the workplace. Each set contained 26 items divided into three sections:

1. Section 1: Demographic questions
2. Section 2: Perceptions of accents using a five-point Likert scale. Respondents rated accents (which were presented as belonging to the opposite group) based on intelligence, education level, trustworthiness, and kindness.
3. Section 3: Focused on workplace communication and accent importance in organizational effectiveness. It included Likert scale ratings and close-ended questions. General employees rated comfort with using their natural accent and its impact on professional competence, while higher management rated the clarity of communication with different accents and the role of accent bias in hiring and promotions.

The reliability of the questionnaire sections, which employed a Likert scale, was evaluated through a pilot study involving five participants from each group. This process aimed to determine internal consistency and was guided by the methodologies of Tan et al. (2018) and Wan et al. (2019). Reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha (α), where values closer to 1.0 indicate higher reliability. According to George and Mallery's (2003) guidelines, acceptable reliability ranges were applied to interpret the results. The questionnaire for higher management yielded a Cronbach's alpha of 0.95, signifying excellent reliability, while the questionnaire for regular employees recorded a value of 0.75, indicating acceptable reliability.

TABLE 1. Result of Reliability Analysis

Group of respondents	Cronbach's Alpha (α)	Reliability
Higher Management	0.95	Excellent
Regular Employees	0.75	Good

INTERVIEWS

A semi-structured interview was conducted with higher management-level employees to encourage more spontaneous responses, fostering a more candid expression of their perspectives. An interview was needed to decipher the importance of accents which are intricately woven into the language spoken in this workplace, English. These open-ended questions delved into the perspectives, experiences, and decision-making processes of higher management regarding the use of various English accents in the corporate field. The open-ended questions in the interview include their perceptions, thoughts on accents and language proficiency and advice for future job seekers in the aspect of English accents.

RESULTS AND FINDINGS

The study aimed to explore the preference for English accents among employees in Malaysia, focusing on three options: British English, American English, and Malaysian English. The majority of both higher management and general employees primarily use Malaysian English in daily conversations, despite the influence of British English through the educational system. Respondents were then tested on their ability to recognize and distinguish between the three accents through recorded samples. Almost all participants successfully identified the accents, showing a high level of awareness. They were also asked to rate the accents based on four attributes—intelligence, education level, trustworthiness, and kindness—using a five-point Likert scale. The results showed a general preference for the American accent, which scored the highest on intelligence, education level, and trustworthiness. The British and Malaysian accents, however, were rated higher for kindness. Despite this, the difference in scores between the accents was minimal, indicating that while the American accent was favoured overall, the other accents were still seen positively in specific attributes. Refer to Table 2 for the overall means and standard deviations for the general employees based on the four attributes.

TABLE 2. Overall means and standard deviations of evaluation scores of three accents through 10 observations (general employees)

Accent	Intelligence		Education level		Trustworthiness		Kindness	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
A (Malaysian)	3.9	0.57	3.6	0.52	3.7	0.67	3.9	0.74
B (British)	3.9	0.74	3.8	0.79	3.7	0.67	3.9	0.88
C (American)	4.0	0.67	4.0	0.67	3.8	0.63	3.8	0.92

For the general employees, the American accent is perceived as the most intelligent, with opinions moderately varied. The British and Malaysian accents are seen as equally intelligent, but opinions on the British accent are more varied. The American accent is most associated with a high education level, followed by the British and Malaysian accents. Opinions on the Malaysian accent are the most consistent. Both Malaysian and British accents are seen as equally trustworthy, but the American accent is slightly preferred. Opinions on the American accent are more consistent. Finally, the Malaysian and British accents are equally associated with kindness, while the American accent is perceived as the least kind. Opinions on the American accent show the most inconsistency.

TABLE 3. Overall means and standard deviations of evaluation scores of three accents through five observations (higher management)

Accent	Intelligence		Education level		Trustworthiness		Kindness	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
A (Malaysian)	3.8	0.84	4.0	1.00	4.0	0.71	3.8	0.84
B (British)	3.8	0.84	4.2	0.84	3.8	0.84	3.6	0.55
C (American)	3.8	0.84	4.0	1.00	3.8	0.84	3.4	0.55

Table 3 outlines the overall means and standard deviations for four attributes rated by five respondents from the higher management on their preference among three accents: Malaysian, British, and American. With regards to intelligence, all accents scored equally with a mean of 3.8, indicating no preference. The standard deviation was also similar at 0.84, showing consistent responses. For education level, the British accent had the highest mean, indicating a strong association with education, while Malaysian and American accents were rated equally. The British accent also had the lowest standard deviation, reflecting higher agreement among respondents. The Malaysian accent was rated the highest for trustworthiness, with British and American accents scoring equally. The Malaysian accent had the lowest standard deviation, suggesting consistency in responses, while the others showed more variability. Finally, the Malaysian accent was most associated with kindness, followed by the British and American accents. The British and American accents had the lowest standard deviation, showing consistent agreement, while the Malaysian accent had more variability. Overall, while general employees tend to prefer the American accent, higher management shows a more balanced view, with a slight preference for the Malaysian accent in trustworthiness and kindness.

With regard to workplace communication and accent importance in organisational effectiveness, general employees felt accents do have an impact in workplace communication while higher management generally believed accents do not influence communication. This reveals a mismatch in perceptions between the two groups. Higher management had mixed views on clarity when conversing with different accents, while general employees were comfortable using their natural accents, although this might inadvertently lead to communication issues when accents differ.

Accents also influence perceptions of professional credibility. Higher management typically dismiss the idea that accents affect how someone is perceived, but many general employees feel their accents impact how others view their competence, indicating a disconnect in perceptions.

In hiring or promotion, accent bias is a significant issue that can perpetuate inequality in the workplace. Hiring decisions that prioritise an applicant's accent over their qualifications or experience promote harmful stereotypes and limit diversity. Nevertheless, the higher management in this study denied practicing accent bias, but general employees were split on whether they felt the need to modify their accents for professional reasons.

Finally, preferred accents within the workplace can subtly influence opportunities. More than half of general employees believed there was a preferred accent in their organization, which could impact their career advancement. However, higher management showed a preference for American and Malaysian accents, with only one favouring the British accent. In summary, the differences in how accents are perceived by higher management and general employees underscore the need for greater awareness and inclusivity in communication practices within organizations.

The interviews were carried out with employees from higher management levels in order to get a deeper level of understanding towards their views and perspectives regarding accents in the workplace, generally. As they were actively participating in the process of hiring new employees, it is vital to get a justification for the choice made in their previous questionnaires, as it could serve as a guideline for future job seekers in navigating themselves through the job employment process.

It was discovered that most higher management employees did not have a specific preferred accent, provided communication is clear. Some favour a neutral or Malaysian accent for ease of communication with diverse groups. Their views varied, with some respondents associating accents with education or geography, while others consciously avoided such perceptions. A few acknowledged unconscious biases, especially towards the British accent, but none of them linked accents directly to social or economic status. Many participants believe that an accent does not necessarily reflect an individual's English proficiency. However, some noted that strong accents might occasionally create misleading first impressions about language competence. This perspective aligns with the experience shared by one participant, who remarked, "*Locally, I think people still look up to you if you speak with an accent; they get excited about it. But the accent of a language does not indicate whether a person is intelligent.*" She recounted an incident involving a candidate with a native British accent, who was initially admired for his accent but failed an editing test due to low language proficiency. Consequently, she strongly believes that English accents are not indicative of one's proficiency or competency in the language.

In terms of hiring decisions, opinions were divided. Some higher management employees saw accents as potentially enhancing workplace chemistry or customer interactions, particularly in roles that require verbal communication. Others prefer to focus exclusively on qualifications, viewing accents as irrelevant to the hiring process. There was also a split in views on whether employees should adjust their accents. Some argued that authenticity and cultural integrity should be preserved, advising against altering one's accent merely to fit in. However, others suggested that clear communication is paramount, especially in roles involving external communication, and that adjusting one's accent might be necessary depending on the specific demands of the job.

DISCUSSION

MISMATCH OF PERCEPTIONS BETWEEN ORGANISATION MEMBERS

This paper discusses the differing perceptions between general employees and higher management regarding the importance of accents in the workplace. General employees often felt pressured to adopt a native-like English accent, believing it will make them appear more competent and professional. However, higher management placed more importance on English proficiency and communicative competence rather than accent. While accents can influence employability, especially in customer-facing roles, the primary focus remains on the ability to communicate effectively. In short, while general employees were worried about their accents, higher management were more concerned with overall language skills and communication effectiveness.

The findings from this study align with Accent Prestige Theory, which highlights how accents are often perceived as markers of social status, power, and competence. The pressure felt by general employees to adopt native-like English accents reflects an internalization of societal norms that associate such accents with professionalism and credibility. This perspective ties directly to the theory, as it demonstrates the influence of “prestige accents” in shaping workplace behaviours and self-perceptions. However, the differing emphasis placed by higher management, which is prioritizing English proficiency and communicative competence over accent indicates a divergence in the application of accent prestige. While accents may influence employability in customer-facing roles, the management's focus on practical communication skills suggests a move towards valuing functional outcomes over superficial markers of linguistic prestige. This shift could signify a more inclusive approach to language use in professional settings, challenging traditional biases highlighted by Accent Prestige Theory.

LANGUAGE DIVERSITY

The study examines the perceptual mismatch regarding accent diversity among employees in Malaysian corporate organizations. It highlights that age and experience influence attitudes towards accents, even though these factors were not the initial focus. Elite professions that require high English proficiency are often dominated by individuals from privileged social and economic backgrounds. However, the study finds that employees in multinational corporations do not correlate accents with English proficiency or social status. Awareness of accent diversity is essential as it can impact professional employment decisions. The study also reveals that while some employees, particularly younger ones, felt pressured to adopt a native-like accent to appear competent, higher management emphasized English proficiency and clarity over accent. In multinational companies, language diversity is valued, and this has shifted some employees' perceptions, making them more accepting of various accents. The practice of language diversity in the workplace helps increase empathy and reduces discrimination against non-native accents. The paper briefly touches on how age influences perceptions of accents, observing that younger respondents tended to be stricter in evaluating local accents, while older respondents, with more corporate experience, were more flexible and accepting. Although this aspect was not a primary focus of the research, the result contrasts with findings from other studies where older generations were more rigid in their accent preferences. For instance, Hyrkstedt and Kalaja (1998) found that older individuals perceived native-like accents as more credible and authoritative. In the Malaysian context, the older generation's moderation and acceptance of accent diversity are attributed to the country's colonial history and the need for practical communication in a multicultural society.

SUPPRESSED ACCENT BIAS IN MALAYSIA

In Malaysia, although English is not the native language, many people still face accent bias. There is a trend where Malaysians try to adopt a native-like English accent, believing it will improve their social and professional standing. This attitude is rooted in the idea that language and accents can be changed with effort, which leads to stricter judgment of others who do not conform to this standard. Research indicates that Malaysians sometimes perceive native-like English accents (for example, Received Pronunciation or General American) as more "prestigious" or "credible" than local or non-standard accents. A study by Pillai (2012) highlighted that Malaysian English speakers often adopt features of other varieties to conform to global intelligibility norms or to project a desired identity. This bias can cause stigma, especially for non-native speakers, who may be judged more harshly for their accents by both native and non-native English speakers. In workplaces, especially in multinational companies, there is a perception that adopting a native-like accent could lead to better job opportunities. A study in workplace communication (Fong, 2011) suggests that speaking with a native-like accent can positively influence perceptions of professionalism. However, some believe that accents are uncontrollable and should be accepted as part of one's identity, which can lead to a more positive and rational judgment of individuals based on their skills rather than their accents. Despite the older generation beginning to shift their views, younger generations still hold on to the belief that a native-like accent indicates competence and capability. This belief can lead to self-doubt and unnecessary pressure to conform, potentially linking accents to social status and leading to a new form of linguistic marginalization. To combat this, early exposure to different accents and a focus on proficiency in English, rather than accent perfection, could help reduce accent bias. However, some interviewees believe Malaysia has a long way to go in changing these perceptions. Moreover, the study highlights that bias is not always obvious. People may claim not to care about accents in professional settings, but subtle prejudices often emerge in face-to-face interactions. For example, a respondent found a Malaysian-accented recording amusing, reflecting a spontaneous bias that contradicts their conscious effort to appear non-prejudiced.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, the findings indicate that there is a discrepancy in how different organization members perceive accents, reflecting deeper sociolinguistic and cultural dynamics. General employees tend to favour native accents (American, British) and feel pressured to adopt them for career advancement while the higher management emphasizes clarity in communication over accent, albeit with an acknowledgment of industry-specific biases. These perceptions are rooted in systemic influences, such as an education system that prioritizes native English standards, inadvertently undervaluing local accents like the Malaysian accent.

This discrepancy has broader implications for workplace dynamics, equity, and cultural identity. Pressuring employees to adopt native-like accents can marginalize non-native speakers, affecting their confidence and authenticity. To address this, organizations should value all accents as unique and important. By fostering an environment that celebrates linguistic diversity, organizations can challenge stereotypes, reduce discrimination, and empower employees to communicate confidently in their natural accents.

Ultimately, this shift goes beyond inclusivity, aiming to harness the richness of cultural diversity as a strategic asset in today's globalized workplace. By fostering acceptance of local accents, organizations can pave the way for harmonious, culturally enriched environments where competence and professionalism are evaluated based on merit rather than linguistic conformity.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

As for future research to be done in the context of accents in the workplace of Malaysia, there is a dire need to explore the diverse range of accents present in corporate settings. Investigating various accent types can provide fresh perspectives and yield valuable insights that remain underexplored in Malaysian studies. This includes the perceptions towards the job position in the workplace based on accents along with the extent of prejudice experienced by non-local corporate workers due to linguistic differences. Additionally, it is crucial to assess how diversity is reflected and managed within companies.

Another promising avenue for research is studying how international stakeholders perceive Malaysian corporate workers through their accents. This could provide an alternate perspective—whether from native or fellow non-native English speakers—on the Malaysian variety of English. Such studies could highlight how accents impact professional credibility and effectiveness in international business contexts. An example of a multinational corporation viewing accents as a reflection of cultural diversity and a strategic advantage in global markets is IBM. IBM places a strong emphasis on diversity and inclusion as part of its strategy to enhance its global presence. Recognizing the value of a diverse workforce, including employees with different accents, IBM views this diversity as a strategic advantage. The company believes that having employees from various cultural backgrounds helps them better serve clients and adapt to global market demands. (GlobalData, 2021).

Several recommendations are proposed across policy, educational, and organizational domains. It is crucial to advocate for the implementation of anti-discrimination policies that specifically address linguistic bias, ensuring that discrimination based on accents is prohibited in areas such as hiring, promotions, and performance evaluations. In the educational domain, English language teaching should be restructured to emphasize clarity and mutual comprehension rather than conformity to native-like accents. Schools should also implement programs that focus on reducing bias against local accents, fostering an environment that values linguistic diversity. Similarly, organizations can complement these efforts by introducing training programs that empower employees to embrace and confidently use their natural accents. Leadership should lead by example, emphasising that clear communication and competence should be prioritised over accent conformity, thus creating a supportive and inclusive work environment.

By addressing these areas, future research can contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the sociolinguistic dynamics in Malaysian workplaces, fostering greater appreciation for linguistic diversity and its role in corporate success.

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