

The influence of the British academic environment on the English pronunciation of Saudi PhD students with an American English education background

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Abstract

This study examines variation in the production of English /r/ among Saudi PhD students studying in a British academic environment. It investigates whether the participants' pronunciation reflects variation associated with speech task and word position, and considers the extent to which British, American, and Saudi patterns occur in their speech. The study also examines whether the participants' current exposure to British English is reflected in their use of /r/ alongside patterns associated with their previous English-learning experience.

The study adopts a sociophonetic approach, combining auditory and acoustic analysis of /r/ productions across different speech tasks and word positions. The analysis considers individual speaker variation and examines selected acoustic characteristics of overt /r/ realizations, particularly formant structure and segment duration.

The findings show that the American realization remains the dominant pattern, while British and Saudi realizations occur alongside it. Variation was observed across speech tasks, with the British realization occurring more frequently in the more controlled speaking conditions. However, word position did not show a systematic relationship with the choice of /r/ variant. The analysis also revealed considerable variation between individual participants, indicating that the overall pattern does not represent a uniform pronunciation behaviour.

The findings suggest that exposure to a British academic environment may contribute to the availability and use of British-like /r/ realizations without necessarily resulting in a complete shift towards British pronunciation. The study therefore highlights the dynamic and variable nature of second-language pronunciation and demonstrates the importance of considering speaking context and individual speaker behaviour when examining phonetic variation in L2 English.