

The Effect of Prompt Accent on Elicited Imitation Assessments in English as a Second Language

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ABSTRACT

Elicited imitation (EI) assessment has been shown to have value as an inexpensive method for low-stakes tests (Cox & Davies, 2012), but little has been reported on the effect L2 accent has on test-takers' ability to understand and process the test items they hear. Furthermore, no study has investigated the effect of accent on EI test face validity. This study examined how the accent of input audio files affected EI test difficulty as well as test-takers' perceptions of such an effect. To investigate, self-reports of students' exposure to different varieties of English were obtained from a pre-assessment survey. A 63-item EI test was then administered in which English language learners in the United States listened to test items in three varieties of English: American English, Australian English, and British English. A post-assessment survey was then administered to gather information regarding perceived difficulty of accented prompts. A many facet Rasch analysis found that accent affected item difficulty in an EI test with a separation reliability coefficient of .98—British English being the most difficult and American English the easiest. Survey results indicated that students perceived this increase in difficulty, and ANOVAs between the survey and test results indicated that student perceptions of an increase in difficulty aligned with reality. Specifically, accents that students were “Not at all Familiar” with resulted in significantly lower EI test scores than accents with which the students were familiar. These findings suggest that prompt accent should be carefully considered in EI test development.