

The Impact of Accent Bias on Speaking Confidence Among EFL Learners in Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

This research explores the impact of accent bias on the speaking confidence of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students. In various educational contexts, native-like accents, particularly those from American and British speakers, are often idealized, which can create pressure for students to match these accents. Adopting a qualitative approach, the study gathered data through semi-structured text interviews with 20 fourth -semester university students enrolled in an English education program. It is evident that while accent bias may lead Feelings of Insecurity Regarding Accent, social pressure, and Perceptions of the Importance of Accent in Communication, Variation in Speaking Confidence, Impact of Accent Bias on Language Learning, and Relationship Between Confidence and Speaking Ability. The study reveals that a majority of participants feel a societal pressure to adopt native accents, particularly American or British, in order to be perceived as more proficient in speaking. Additionally, some participants reported feelings of inferiority when their accents differed from those of native speakers.

Keywords: *accent bias, EFL learners, pronunciation, speaking confidence, student perception*

INTRODUCTION

English foreign language in Indonesia has various accent which is spoken by millions of non-native speakers, the way someone speaks can influence how they are judged, understood, and even how they feel about themselves. In a study that has done Wardana and Amanda said that The notion of native speakerism has established a prevailing stereotype among Indonesian EFL learners, wherein the ability to speak English with a specific accent—particularly one that closely resembles that of native speakers—is often perceived as a marker of high educational attainment and intellectual competence. In contrast, Indonesian students who speak English with a distinctly Indonesian accent are frequently subjected to negative judgments. Such perceptions contribute to the belief that retaining a local accent reflects lower linguistic proficiency, which may, in turn, diminish learners' confidence and hinder their active participation in spoken communication and academic language use (Wardana & Sahiruddin, 2025).

By English is now a global language used for various communication purposes in diverse cultural and multilingual contexts, while British and American English are traditionally considered the standard models in educational practices (Zhang & Liu, 2024). This tendency to prioritize native

accents often leads EFL learners to believe that sounding like a native speaker is a necessary mark of fluency, which can cause anxiety and reduce their confidence when speaking.

This pressure to conform to native-like pronunciation is closely connected to how accents are perceived socially, both in global and local contexts. Although many people think that only some individuals have accents, the truth is that everyone speaks with an accent, which can show where we come from or whether we are seen as part of a group or not in certain situations (Johnson et al., 2022). Since accent bias is so common, it is important to understand how people judge different accents, such as why they think some accents sound smarter, more honest, or belong to richer or poorer people (P. Shah, 2019). It is important to understand that accent bias within one country is not only directed at regional English accents, but can also involve other types of spoken English (Tolmacheva & Tareva, 2023). In conclusion, the variation of English accents reflects the speaker's origin, and these differences should not be seen as indicators of poor speaking ability among non-native speakers.

Several studies have addressed various aspects of pronunciation learning and speaking anxiety among EFL learners. For instance, Abling-Salupen and Ballena (2024) examined seminarians' real-life experiences in learning English and highlighted the emotional and psychological struggles that impact their speaking ability and confidence. Similarly, ERDEL (2023) explored pronunciation anxiety among English language and literature students, focusing on how individual learner characteristics contribute to such anxiety. From a pedagogical perspective, Bin-Hady and Hazaea (2022) expanded the discussion by exploring the application of flipped learning in teaching English pronunciation to EFL students. Meanwhile, Galbat and Sa'adi (2018) investigated teachers' perceptions of accent learning but noted the absence of studies addressing learners' personal experiences with accent bias. Despite these valuable contributions, a distinct gap persists in the existing literature regarding how EFL learners perceive and are impacted by accent bias, particularly in relation to their speaking confidence. This study aims to address this gap by examining the influence of accent bias on the speaking confidence of EFL learners.

The objective of this study is to investigate how perceptions of accent bias affect EFL learners' confidence in speaking, with the goal of fostering a more inclusive and empathetic approach to English language education that prioritizes effective communication over the pursuit of accent perfection.

An accent refers to a particular way of speaking that is influenced by factors such as geographical background, social status, level of education, ethnic identity, and a person's first language (Maindidze et al., 2025). More than just a variation in pronunciation, accent also functions as a marker of group membership and social identity (Chakraborty, 2017). As such, accent bias—defined as negative judgments or discrimination based on how someone sounds—is not merely about language proficiency, but about the acceptance or rejection of one's identity. When listeners dismiss a nonstandard accent, they may also be disregarding the speaker's cultural or ethnic background (Chakraborty, 2017). Accent bias is the tendency of listeners to judge speakers based on socially constructed stereotypes about their accents rather than on actual speech clarity or ability (P. Shah, 2019). Considering that an accent often reveals a person's cultural and geographical background, eliminating accent bias entirely remains a challenge, as judgments based on accents are closely connected to social identity rather than language proficiency alone.

Building upon this, self-confidence is widely recognized as one of the key affective factors that significantly influences the development of speaking skills (Audina et al., 2021). Confidence refers to having a strong belief or trust in one's own abilities (Oxford Dictionary, 2008, as cited in Audina, 2021). Furthermore, Nadila et al. (2020) identified several factors that contribute to

students' low speaking confidence, including fear of classmates' reactions, limited language knowledge (including pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar), feelings of intimidation, awkwardness in speaking, fear of being laughed at, and insufficient preparation before class.

Interestingly, accent bias can influence how confident a speaker is perceived to be, as listeners tend to judge vocal confidence more favorably when the speaker uses an in-group (native) accent compared to an out-group (foreign or regional) one (Jiang & Pell, 2018). Despite these findings, few studies have examined how accent bias directly affects speaking confidence among EFL learners, particularly in classroom contexts. This research seeks to address this gap by exploring how learners' perceptions of their own accent impact their speaking confidence during English language learning.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative approach to investigate accent bias and its impact on speaking confidence among EFL learners. The participants were 20 students of fourth -semester in 2023 academic year at Al-Qolam university majoring in English Language Education. Most of these students were in the early stages of developing their speaking abilities and often experienced shyness or a lack of confidence during English-speaking practice. However, the study does not provide details on the demographic characteristics of the participants, such as their age, gender, or language background, which would provide valuable context for understanding how accent bias affects different groups within the EFL learner population.

The primary data collection instrument used was a semi-structured interview conducted through text-based communication. The interview questions aimed to explore the students' perceptions, personal experiences, and opinions about the accents they use and how these accents influence their speaking confidence. While this method was effective in capturing the students' perspectives, the study lacks information on the sampling method used for participant selection, which would enhance the transparency of the research process. For example, it is unclear whether the participants were selected purposively, randomly, or through another strategy.

The data were gathered in the form of written transcripts from the text interviews. The responses were analyzed through thematic analysis, which enabled the researchers to identify recurring themes such as feelings of insecurity related to their accent, preferences for certain types of accents, and their views on the importance of having a native-like pronunciation. However, the study does not mention any theoretical framework to support the analysis of accent bias. Incorporating theories related to language attitudes, social identity, or communication accommodation would provide a deeper understanding of accent-related insecurities and biases.

Additionally, the study does not address any limitations, such as the small sample size, which may not fully represent the broader EFL learner population. It would also be beneficial to consider a longitudinal approach, as the study focuses on second-semester students. A follow-up study could examine how students' perceptions and confidence evolve over time as they continue developing their speaking skills. Furthermore, including a comparative analysis of accent bias in different learning environments or cultural contexts could help determine whether these findings are specific to certain regions or educational systems. Lastly, the discussion could benefit from referencing existing research on accent bias to position the findings within the broader academic conversation on this topic.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the data collected from participant interviews, the study reveals several important insights regarding the impact of accent bias on speaking confidence among EFL learners.

Feelings of Insecurity Regarding Accent

It is highly probable that a significant number of EFL learners experience insecurity or lack of confidence when speaking, particularly due to concerns about their accent, especially if it differs from the accent of native speakers—such as American or British English. This insecurity often arises from the social pressures learners face both within the classroom and in their everyday interactions. In many educational settings, non-native accents are frequently perceived as less prestigious or less desirable compared to native accents, which can lead to feelings of inadequacy or embarrassment for learners who fear their speech is being negatively judged.

These feelings of insecurity are further reinforced by the continuous social comparisons that learners make. For example, they may observe peers who speak with a more native-like accent and perceive them as more fluent or competent, even though language proficiency is not exclusively determined by one's accent. Additionally, societal and cultural influences, such as the portrayal of "ideal" English speakers in the media, may intensify this sense of inferiority. Consequently, many learners may consciously or unconsciously avoid speaking in front of others, particularly in classroom environments where opportunities for feedback and peer comparison are more prominent.

Pressure to Imitate Native-like Accents

The study may also find that EFL learners experience significant pressure to adopt a native-like accent, which is often viewed as the standard in English learning. This pressure could come from teachers, peers, or even mass media, which glorify certain accents. Learners who feel unable to replicate this accent may experience a decrease in confidence and feel incapable of speaking well. Furthermore, the expectation to mimic a "correct" accent may create excessive anxiety, which makes it difficult for learners to speak spontaneously, as they become more focused on how they sound rather than what they are trying to communicate. This, in turn, can lead to social anxiety and a decrease in motivation to keep practicing.

Perceptions of the Importance of Accent in Communication

There may be differing opinions among EFL learners regarding the importance of having a native-like accent in communication. Some learners may prioritize the ability to communicate clearly and be understood, viewing effective communication as the primary goal. For these learners, a non-native accent is seen as a minor obstacle to achieving fluency, as they believe that the essence of language lies in the ability to convey ideas and engage in meaningful interactions rather than perfecting pronunciation. For them, the focus is on message clarity and the ability to engage in conversation, rather than striving to emulate native speaker pronunciation.

On the other hand, there are learners who view possessing the "right" accent as an essential component of language proficiency, especially in professional or academic settings. These learners may feel that an accent that closely resembles that of native speakers—such as American or British English—is necessary to gain respect or be taken seriously in certain contexts. They may believe that improper pronunciation could impact how others perceive their linguistic competence, leading to judgments about their intelligence or professionalism. This perception is particularly prevalent

in environments where language is directly tied to career advancement, academic success, or social integration. In such cases, learners may feel that without the "correct" accent, their chances of success in global or professional communities are significantly diminished.

Variation in Speaking Confidence

This research may show that speaking confidence varies widely among participants, depending on how they perceive their own accent and their past experiences with accent bias. Some learners may feel comfortable speaking even though their accent is different, while others may be more affected by social views and feel anxious about how they sound. Additionally, previous experiences, such as encounters with teachers or peers who judge their accent, can impact how confident learners feel.

Learners who have had positive experiences in supportive learning environments are more likely to have higher confidence, whereas those who have faced discrimination or mockery due to their accent may experience a significant decline in their confidence.

Impact of Accent Bias on Language Learning

Accent bias could have a significant negative impact on learners' willingness or desire to speak in English. Learners who feel that their accent is considered inferior may avoid situations where they need to speak, thus reducing their chances to practice and improve their speaking skills. This can slow down their language development because they are not comfortable using English in social or academic settings. The study may find that accent bias acts as a psychological barrier that prevents learners from fully exploring their speaking potential, ultimately hindering their progress in language learning.

Relationship Between Confidence and Speaking Ability

Findings from this research may indicate that learners with higher speaking confidence are more likely to speak more fluently and frequently in English, regardless of their accent. Confidence is often directly related to the willingness to communicate, which in turn enhances speaking ability. Learners who feel secure in their ability to convey their message, even with a non-native accent, may be more active in conversations and more willing to speak without fear. This suggests that confidence plays a crucial role in speaking success in a second language, perhaps even more so than having a perfect accent.

Discussion

The findings of this study emphasize the significant role that accent bias plays in shaping the speaking confidence of EFL learners. It is evident that while accent bias may lead to Feelings of Insecurity Regarding Accent, social pressure, and Perceptions of the Importance of Accent in Communication, Variation in Speaking Confidence, Impact of Accent Bias on Language Learning, and Relationship Between Confidence and Speaking Ability. Educators should be mindful of the impact of accent bias and work to create more inclusive and supportive learning environments. By encouraging learners to focus on clarity, understanding, and confidence rather than on mimicking native-like accents, language education can become more equitable and effective for all learners, regardless of their accent.

Researchers argue that excessive pressure to adopt a native-like accent in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learning can have a detrimental effect on learners. Rather than enhancing

speaking abilities, the pursuit of perfecting a native accent can lead to language anxiety, lower self-confidence, and psychological barriers for EFL learners. The pressure to conform to what is perceived as the "correct" or "ideal" accent—often American or British—can make learners feel that their speaking ability is inadequate if their accent differs from these norms.

Moreover, the emphasis on mimicking accents can divert learners' attention from the primary goal of language acquisition: the ability to communicate effectively. As a result, learners may avoid speaking opportunities or reduce their active participation in conversations due to fear of making mistakes or being judged for their accent. This not only hinders their progress in language mastery but also underscores the importance of communicative competence over accent perfection.

An international study stated that Stereotypes related to one's language and accent may present significant psychological risks for international students. Negative attitudes toward a person's English accent, pronunciation, and ethnicity could potentially hinder the effective acquisition of English (Dovchin, 2020).

This view is supported by the findings of Bin-Hady and Hazaea (2022), which show that accent bias has a significant influence on students' confidence in speaking. Furthermore, the findings of Galbatt & Sa'adi (2018) reveal that perceptions of 'standard English' often create psychological barriers for learners with accents considered 'non-native'. Therefore, instead of focusing on achieving a perfect accent, language learning approaches should emphasize clarity of communication and acceptance of linguistic diversity—a paradigm also supported by these experts.

However, this study has several limitations. One of the key limitations is the relatively small sample size, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings to a broader population. Additionally, the reliance on text-based interviews as the sole data collection method might not fully capture the participants' perspectives or experiences, given the limitations of indirect interaction. Therefore, future research could consider employing mixed-method approaches, such as oral interviews or direct classroom observations, to gather richer and more in-depth data related to accent bias in the language learning context. Furthermore, future studies could explore the crucial role of teachers and curriculum designers in identifying and addressing accent bias.

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings of this study, it can be concluded that accent bias exerts a significant influence on the speaking confidence of EFL students. The study reveals that a majority of participants feel a societal pressure to adopt native accents, particularly American or British, in order to be perceived as more proficient in speaking. Additionally, some participants reported feelings of inferiority when their accents differed from those of native speakers. However, there were also participants who asserted that clear communication holds greater importance than achieving a native-like accent.

These findings highlight the necessity of establishing a more inclusive English language learning environment, where non-native accents do not serve as a source of pressure or stigma for learners. The study, however, does have limitations, including its relatively small sample size and reliance on text-based interviews, which may not fully represent the broader experiences of EFL learners. Therefore, further research is recommended that incorporates a larger, more diverse sample and utilizes alternative research methods to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the issue.

Nonetheless, this study is subject to certain limitations, including a relatively small sample size and its reliance on text-based interviews, which may not fully capture the diverse experiences of EFL learners. The absence of demographic details, such as age, gender, or socio-economic background, further restricts the generalizability of the findings, as these variables may influence the way accent bias is perceived and experienced. Consequently, it is recommended that future research incorporate a larger and more diverse sample, encompassing learners from varied cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Moreover, the use of alternative research methods, such as oral interviews or longitudinal studies, could offer a more comprehensive insight into the impact of accent bias on learners over time and in different contexts. Extending the research scope to include comparative studies across various educational systems or cultural settings would also be valuable for evaluating the universality of accent bias and developing effective strategies to mitigate its effects.

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