

## PRONUNCIATION DIFFERENCES IN AMERICAN AND BRITISH ENGLISH: CHALLENGES FOR ESL LEARNERS AT THE PRIMARY LEVEL IN PAKISTAN

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### Abstract

*This study examines the pronunciation difficulties experienced by ESL learners at the primary level in Okara District, Pakistan, with a focus on differentiating between American English (AmE) and British English (BrE). The survey consists of 60 students from 4th grade to assess phonological exposure to different English accents through instruction, textbooks, and media. The results highlight that AmE students faced difficulties in pronouncing vowel sounds, while BrE students struggled with intonation. Both AmE and BrE learners simultaneously faced difficulties in both intonation and stress. Although there were no significant variations in the intellectual load exposed by unreliable pronunciation methods, students experiencing different accents showed a moderate level of struggle with speaking ability or listening comprehension. Preferences for learning tactics may vary, but all emphasized the importance of repetition, audio aids, and teacher-led pronunciation strategies. This study suggests flexible language methods and clear teaching practices to fulfill the requirements of dual-accent situations in Pakistani schools. The limitations and further studies emphasized the need for phonetic and longitudinal analyses.*

**Keywords:** ESL learners, Pronunciation challenges, American English, British English, Pakistan

### 1. Introduction

The emergence of different localized forms of English languages, termed “World Englishes,” leads to the spread of English globally (Seoane, 2016). World Englishes holds a distinct place in sociolinguistics, acknowledging that English is not monolithic, but rather its variations exist, modified according to historical influences, culture, and linguistics (Schneider, 2018). These variants demonstrate the distinct sociocultural systems, communication demands, and unique identities of their users in various areas (Schneider, 2007).

A basic framework was established by Kachru et al. (1985) named “the Three Circles Model of English” to comprehend these variants, consists of the following:

1. The Inner Circle, where English is used as a native language (e.g., USA, UK, Australia),
2. The Outer Circle, consisting of postcolonial countries where English has become institutionalised (e.g., Pakistan, India, Nigeria),
3. The Expanding Circle, contains countries which use English as a foreign language mainly used at International level, including Japan, Russia, and China.

Pakistan is the part of the Outer Circle of this World Englishes model, because it get English from British and use it in media, education, and government (Jabeen, 2020). However, Pakistan presents a unique linguistic scenario where both British English (BrE) and American English (AmE) coexist in the educational system, often without a standardised language policy (Ali, 2025; Shamim, 2008). While BrE has historical roots in formal education, the rising influence

of global media and digital content has popularised AmE among younger learners (Azam et al., 2024).

In this context, ESL learners in Pakistan, particularly at the primary level, are exposed to conflicting pronunciation norms (Khan et al., 2023). Kachru's model is particularly useful in framing this issue: students in Pakistan are not merely passive recipients of Inner Circle English norms but active participants in shaping a localised English pronunciation influenced by both BrE and AmE (Wohra & Roy, 2024). Linguistic hybridization is the major reflection of this phenomenon, where several phonological factors belonging to different Englishes are interlinked and exposed in the speech of learners according to diverse instructional efforts and media revelations (Low & Pakir, 2021).

Stein-Smith (2018) stated that English literacy is the major factor affecting economic authorization and social flexibility. So, ESL learners face many challenges due to limited incomes and socioeconomic biases, mainly in areas like Narowal, Pakistan, to learn the pronunciation of English phonemes perfectly (Akram et al., 2024). Students who belong to backward or poor socioeconomic areas face more challenges regarding pronunciation due to lack of proper learning tools, settings, and professionals (Hannan et al., 2024; Muhammad et al., 2023).

Communication proficiency and intelligibility also suffer due to complexity in English phonology, particularly in sound articulation and distinction (Chan & Li, 2000; Hu et al., 2022). Phoneme articulation is considered the major factor affecting speech fluency and accuracy (Zhang, 2004), and research reveals a solid relation between phonological proficiency and socioeconomic value (Edwards, 2008; Labov, 2006). English is a central element in professional and academic success in Pakistan, where the capability of learners is majorly affected by socioeconomic variables that influence the real articulation of English phonemes (Ghafoor et al., 2024).

Language acquisition is significantly affected by the coexistence of British and American English. Pakistani students should strive to minimize changes in pronunciation, vocabulary, spelling, and grammar, which can lead to low performance and confusion in their academic activities (Hussain et al., 2019; Mehmood et al., 2023). For instance, grammatical changes and spelling alterations such as "colour" vs. "color" demand learners to pay attention to every minor aspect (Anderson, 2025; Scott, 2004). Without a clear national strategy, children are exposed to a range of methods, often impeding their consistency and competency (Shamim, 2008). Therefore, there is a pressing need for a flexible language curriculum that accommodates linguistic heterogeneity and socioeconomic realities. Establishing uniform and comprehensive English instruction in Pakistan can be facilitated by government assistance and cooperation with foreign organizations.

Prioritizing and providing national education policies for children with diverse language abilities is critical, as is identifying the particular difficulties that arise from the coexistence of British and American English. There should be an initiative to promote adaptable language education curricula that work in conjunction with foreign language schools (Sergeant & Erling, 2011).

## **1.2 Statement of the Problem**

Pronunciation variations between American English (AmE) and British English (BrE) provide a considerable problem for ESL learners, particularly in the early grades in ESL countries, such as Pakistan. Variations in vowel sounds, consonant articulation, stress patterns, and intonation can lead to confusion, misunderstanding, and difficulties in language development. ESL students are frequently exposed to various pronunciation models through media, textbooks, and teachers, making it challenging for them to maintain a consistent pronunciation standard. The

purpose of this study is to look at the unique pronunciation issues that primary-level ESL learners have as a result of the differences between AmE and BrE, as well as to consider the consequences for language learning and instruction.

### **1.3 Research Questions**

1. What are the key pronunciation differences between American and British English that affect ESL learners at the primary level?
2. How do these pronunciation differences impact the speaking and listening comprehension skills of young ESL learners?
3. What is the self-reported difficulty score of 4<sup>th</sup>-grade students when exposed to mixed pronunciation models in educational settings?

### **2. Literature Review**

Saeed et al. (2023) explored the complex language difficulties faced by Pakistani pupils as they adjust to the dual influence of American and British English, examining variations in vocabulary, discrepancies in pronunciation, and inconsistent instructional materials. Saeed et al. (2023) emphasized the importance of accuracy and the significant influence that different accents have on spoken communication in professional and academic contexts, suggesting standardized tests that cover both English and other languages, flexible language education programs, and partnerships with foreign language schools.

Ali et al. (2020) supported the results of Saeed et al. (2023) by highlighting the same frequency of both English variants in academic perspectives, regardless of policy selection. While this dual language demonstrates linguistic extensiveness, it also reveals progress in linguistic identity, addressing learners' fluency and pronunciation divergences. Their research revealed the need to consider student preferences when implementing future policies aimed at standardizing Pakistan's accent models.

Pronunciation difficulties are not only sociolinguistic, but they are also basically phonetic. Amin et al. (2024) examined the acoustic phonetics of Punjabi children's pronunciations and revealed significant differences from Received Pronunciation, particularly in the pronunciation of fricative consonants. Amin et al. (2024) revealed reduced intensity and pitch in certain phonemes, such as /v/, /θ/, and /z/, indicating a need for auditory training in students using PRAAT software.

Zahoor and Kausar (2018) examined the effect of cultural identification on learners' preferences for instinctive pronunciation. This study reported a positive attitude among Pakistani ESL learners towards instinctive pronunciation, primarily American and British, despite significant cultural differences. It reveals an intended effort by learners to adhere to global speech standards, driven by logical considerations such as employment and intelligibility.

Azam et al. (2024) reported a promoting preference for AmE among the graduates in Pakistani universities. This research observed a shift in findings regarding the belief that AmE exhibits modernity and global alignment, as well as the dominance of American pop culture and global media. Therefore, students are uncertain about making decisions between new trends and inconsistent ideals of precision in the absence of official educational support.

Akram et al. (2024) conducted a study to investigate the relationship between socioeconomic status and English phoneme articulation among high school ESL learners from Narowal, Pakistan. They reported a significant difference in English pronunciation based on socioeconomic status and highlighted the need for comprehensive policies, emphasizing the importance of effective teaching methods to help ESL learners from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds and ensure fair language learning opportunities. This notion is backed by Hannan et al. (2024) and Muhammad et al. (2023), who highlighted infrastructure

differences and inexperienced teaching personnel as barriers for students from impoverished backgrounds. Such discrepancies have the potential to perpetuate structural imbalances in school and the workplace, given the importance of English in Pakistan's social mobility.

The present inquiry is best contextualised through the Three Circles Model of World Englishes by Kachru et al. (1985), which classifies English use into the Inner, Outer, and Expanding Circles. Pakistan, situated in the Outer Circle, institutionalised English through colonial legacy but now grapples with hybrid influences from both BrE and AmE. Wohra and Roy (2024) emphasize that learners in such contexts are not passive recipients of linguistic norms but active agents forming new, localized pronunciations. Low and Pakir (2021) refer to this as "linguistic hybridisation," where young learners synthesise pronunciation features from various sources, often unconsciously.

Despite the growing literature on pronunciation differences and learner preferences, several critical gaps remain:

1. Much of the existing research, including that of Akram et al. (2024) and Zahoor and Kausar (2018), focuses on learners at the high school or university level. There is limited empirical attention on primary-level learners, particularly Grade 4 students, who are at a critical stage in phonological acquisition.
2. While studies such as Saeed et al. (2023) mention dual exposure, few explore its specific cognitive and educational impact on learners. The current study fills this void by measuring not only learners' self-reported difficulties but also their performance under mixed-accent conditions.
3. Although comprehension is widely discussed in qualitative terms, there is a dearth of statistically grounded analysis regarding how pronunciation differences affect listening and speaking abilities. The present study uses ANOVA to bridge this gap.
4. While the absence of policy-oriented frameworks for early ESL education calls for a unified language policy (Ali et al., 2020), there is a lack of empirical evidence assessing how young learners fare under the current instructional chaos. This research contributes by highlighting the necessity for accent alignment in instructional design.
5. While Amin et al. (2024) successfully used acoustic tools like PRAAT, such methods are rarely applied to younger learners. The current study suggests that this could be a promising future direction, advocating for early phonetic training supported by technology.

### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1 Research Design**

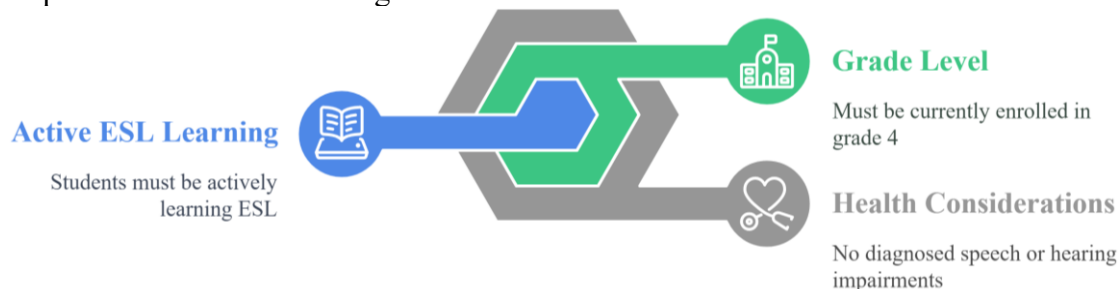
A survey-based approach consisting of a quantitative research design was used in the present study to evaluate the challenges faced by grade-4 ESL learners in distinguishing between American and British English pronunciation. The only tool used to gather data was a structured student survey, which provides a comprehensive picture of students' exposure to, preferences for, and reported challenges with pronouncing words from both varieties of English. Following ethical considerations, consent was obtained from parents and school authorities prior to collecting the data for the present study. A pilot study involving 15 students was conducted to ensure the reliability of the instrument. Matched groups were formed based on demographics to enhance generalizability. Surveys were administered in a calm classroom setting, and completed responses were collected for statistical analysis.

#### **3.2 Participants and Sample Size**

Okara District has a total of 1609 schools; however, data was collected mainly from government schools residing in the central city area of Okara. Students in grade 4 who attend Okara District government schools (Govt. High School New Campus Okara, Govt. MC High



School Okara, Govt. Islamia High School Okara, Govt. Satluj High School Okara, and Government High School Ashraf-ul-Madaris Okara) comprise the study's participants. Sixty students were chosen randomly for the present study. The inclusion criteria for study participants were as shown in Figure 1.



**Figure 1:** Eligibility criteria for the study participants

### 3.3 Study instrument

A structured questionnaire was developed to find the familiarity, difficulties, and perceptions of participants with American and British English pronunciation. The survey consists of multiple-choice questions based on a 5-point Likert scale covering the following aspects:

#### 1. *Exposure to English Accents*

To know which English accent (British or American English) is used more often by students through media, teachers, and textbooks, and which English accent is preferred by them for listening and speaking.

#### 2. *Perceived Pronunciation Challenges*

To know whether students have trouble pronouncing certain words or sounds, their self-evaluation of pronunciation precision, and the degree of assurance in mimicking a native pronunciation.

#### 3. *Preference for Pronunciation Learning*

To know what the students' preferred methods for learning pronunciation are (e.g., repeating words, practicing with teachers, and listening to recordings) and how much they are interested in learning the differences between British and American English.

### 3.4 Validity and Reliability of Research Instrument

To avoid the research instrument becoming complex and imprecise, a pilot study was conducted with 20 students prior to the main study to refine the research instrument, making it straightforward, reliable, and valid. Cronbach's  $\alpha=0.839$  indicated that the instrument's internal reliability was good. Changes were made in response to comments and data collected from the pilot study. Additionally, test-retest reliability was assessed, which was deemed appropriate for the study's execution.

### 3.5 Data Analysis

Descriptive and inferential statistical methods were used to analyse the collected survey data. Students' exposure to British and American English accents and their related pronunciation challenges were assessed using percentage and frequency distributions. Descriptive statistics, such as mean and standard deviation calculations, were used to find out the preferences and confidence levels of the study participants. Moreover, significant associations between students' pronunciation difficulties and their exposure to different English varieties were tested using Chi-square tests.

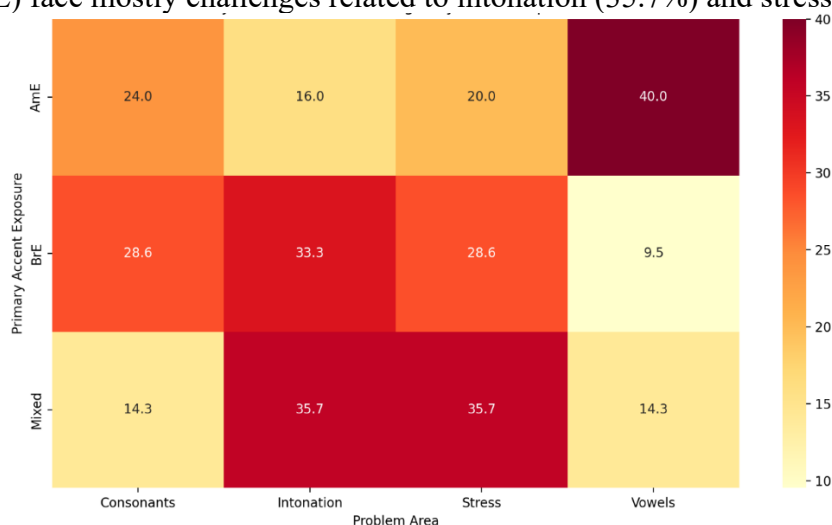
### 3.6 Ethical Consideration

The parents or guardians of the participants granted written permission, and the children who participated in the study gave verbal agreement. Students were assured that their replies and personal information would be kept anonymous, respecting their privacy. Furthermore, students may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

## 4. Results

### *Key pronunciation differences between American and British English*

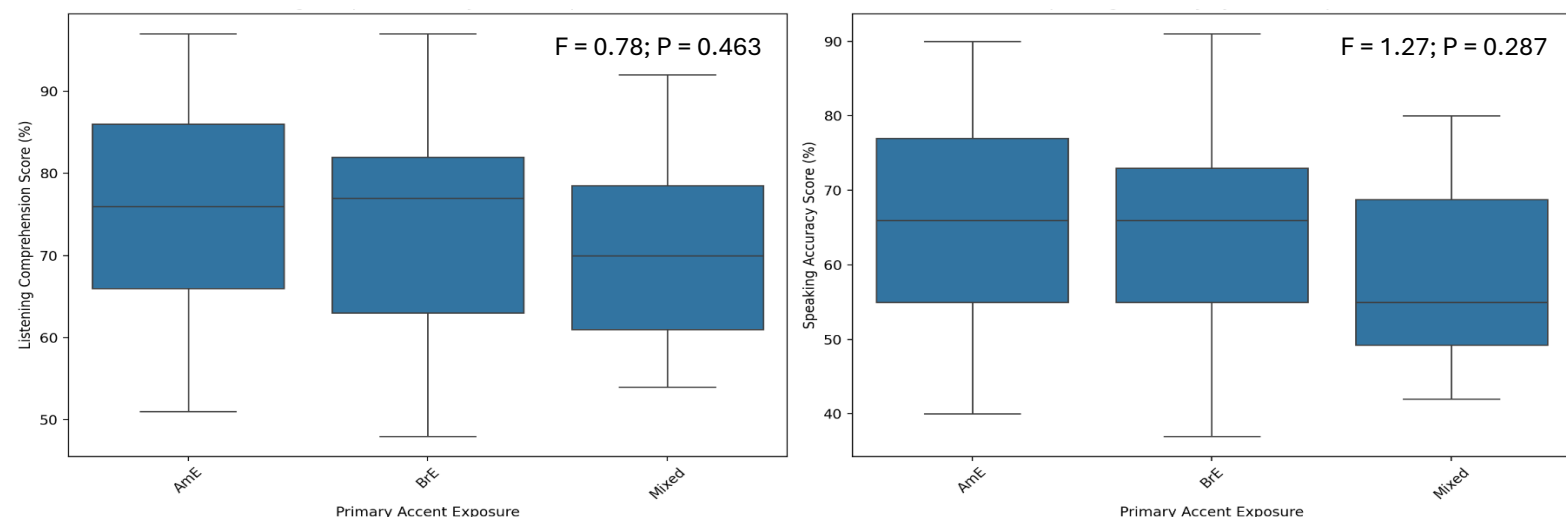
The results for Research Question 1 of the present study, presented in Figure 2, indicate that students in 4th grade encounter different pronunciation challenges due to exposure to various English accents. For example, 40% of students exposed to American English (AmE) primarily face problems related to vowels. In comparison, 33% of students exposed to British English (BrE) face challenges related to intonation. Students exposed to a mixture of both (AmE and BrE) face mostly challenges related to intonation (35.7%) and stress (35.7%).



**Figure 2:** Key pronunciation challenges encountered by fourth-grade students due to accent exposure.

### *Impact of pronunciation differences on the speaking and listening comprehension skills of young ESL learners*

The results for Research Question 2 of the present study show that there were no significant differences in the speaking (P-value: 0.287) and listening comprehension (P-value: 0.463) scores of 4th-grade students based on their exposure to different English accents (Figure 3).

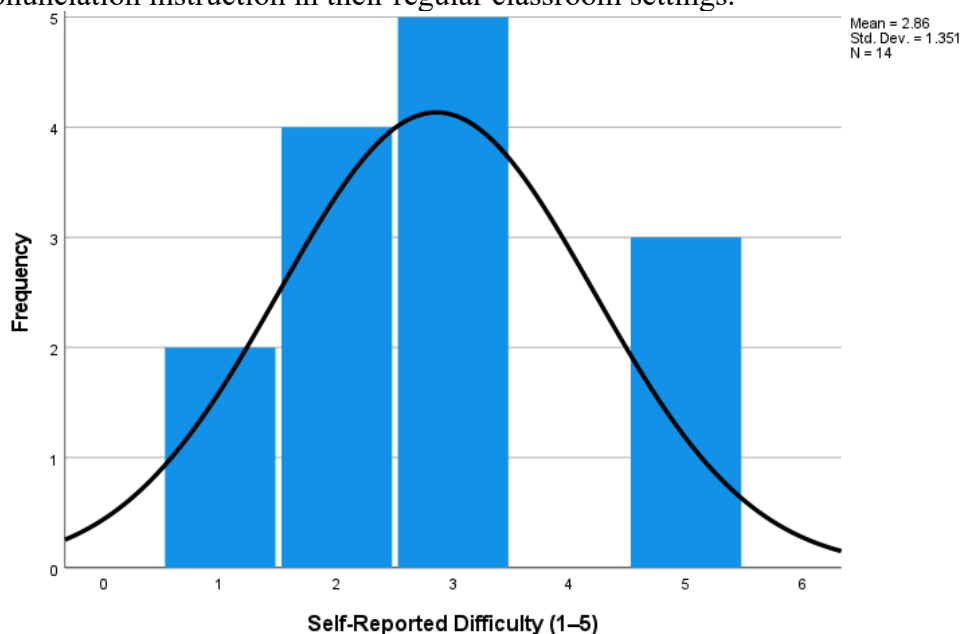


However, both the speaking and listening comprehension scores were slightly higher for BrE-exposed students than for AmE- and mixed-accent-exposed students.

**Figure 3:** ANOVA-based comparison of listening comprehension and speaking scores of 4<sup>th</sup>-grade students based on exposure to different accents

***Self-reported difficulty of 4th-grade students when exposed to mixed pronunciation models***

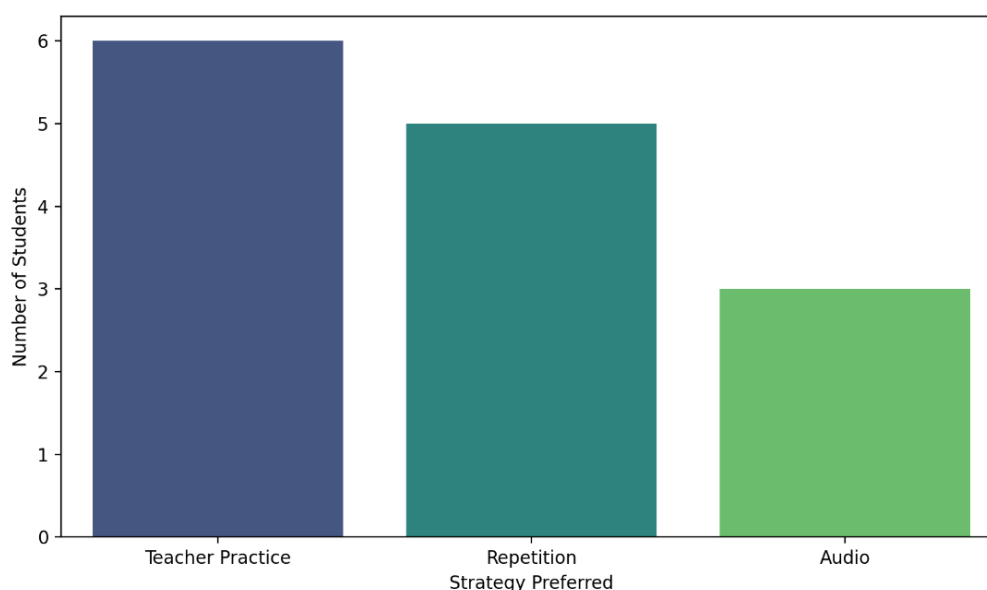
The average self-reported score of the students exposed to mixed pronunciation models was 2.86 (as shown in Figure 4) based on the self-reported difficulty scale. It indicates that these students experienced a medium level of difficulty ( $2.86 \pm 1.35$ ) due to their exposure to mixed pronunciation instruction in their regular classroom settings.



**Figure 4:** Self-reported difficulty score of 4<sup>th</sup> grade students exposed to a mixed pronunciation model based on a difficulty scale (with 1 = lowest or no difficulty & 5 = extremely difficult).

**Preferred Strategies by Accent Exposure**

For mixed accent learners (both BrE and AmE), preferred strategies are more evenly distributed among audio resources, repetition, and teacher practice, as visualised in Figure 5. It indicates that a variety of approaches, rather than a single method, are beneficial for learners navigating multiple pronunciation models.



**Figure 5:** Preferred strategies for Mixed Accent Exposure

## 5. Discussion

This study investigated the challenges faced by primary-level ESL learners in distinguishing pronunciation differences between American English (AmE) and British English (BrE), with a specific focus on grade 4 students in the Okara District. The findings contribute to the growing body of literature on phonological interference in second language acquisition and provide new insights into the cognitive and educational implications of mixed pronunciation exposure among young learners in socio-linguistically diverse environments.

The results revealed that students exposed to AmE predominantly struggled with vowel pronunciation (40%), whereas those exposed to BrE reported more difficulty with intonation (33%). Students exposed to a combination of both varieties faced relatively equal challenges with intonation and stress (both 35.7%). These results reinforce findings from Gomez (2009) and Emara and Shaker (2024), who highlighted how accent-specific features such as intonation and stress contribute to confusion among ESL learners, especially when multiple models are present in instructional settings. It also aligns with Chan and Li (2000) and Al-Asi (2024), who reported that ESL learners from non-native backgrounds struggle with phonological elements when exposed to inconsistent pronunciation models.

Although students may experience subjective difficulties, this does not always translate into quantifiable performance deficits at this early stage of language acquisition, as evidenced by the lack of statistically significant differences in speaking and listening comprehension scores across the three accent exposure groups (AmE, BrE, and mixed). This observation contradicts the findings of Hu et al. (2022) and Miao (2023), who discovered a stronger correlation between oral comprehension and accent familiarity among older ESL learners. The study's participants' age and developmental stage could account for the discrepancy, suggesting that younger students may be more able to adjust to phonological variation or, conversely, may not have acquired sufficiently sophisticated skills for the variations to have an impact on performance.

The demand for multimodal, adaptive teaching strategies is evidenced by the desire of students exposed to varied accents for a range of pronunciation learning aids, including instructor modeling, audio resources, and repetition. It supports the results of Amin et al. (2024), who emphasized the importance of tailored pronunciation practices according to the linguistic backgrounds of ESL learners and suggested using PRAAT and other relevant



techniques to enhance auditory feedback. Moreover, the present study highlights the need for assistance at the primary level in schools when core pronunciation methods are introduced.

The self-reported difficulty level of 2.86 out of 5 indicates that learners exposed to a variety of accents face modest intellectual challenges while interacting with mixed pronunciation contributions. The current study supports the results of Saeed et al. (2023), who examined a significant level of fatigue, anxiety, confusion, and stress among Pakistani children when they experienced unreliable language methods with no standardized teaching practices and policy.

The results of the present study reveal extensive sociolinguistic variation in Pakistan, where BrE and AmE coexist without government regulation (Ali et al., 2020). Students are significantly influenced by educational materials that mix two languages unevenly, fragments of educational institutions that prefer BrE, and global media that prefer AmE. Azam et al. (2024) highlighted that the growing preference for American English may cause pronunciation models to evolve over time due to the impact of media. However, in the absence of strong institutional direction, this organic transformation may continue to be uneven and disorganized, particularly in early education, where formal monitoring is crucial.

Future research should expand the sample to include private schools, as well as rural and urban settings, and a range of socioeconomic groups, to provide more detailed insights. Phonological input and reproduction may be better understood through qualitative approaches, such as classroom observations, teacher interviews, and speech analysis. Testing conventional AmE, BrE, or hybrid pronunciation training, as well as evaluating instructors' accent models and how they affect students, can also give information on successful early ESL teaching approaches in multilingual countries (i.e., Pakistan).

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