

## PINGLISH IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING: AN EXPLORATION OF LEARNERS' ATTITUDE TOWARDS NON-NATIVE ENGLISH ACCENTS

**Rabail Saeed**

MS Scholar, Department of English, University of Sialkot, Punjab, Pakistan

Email: [rabailsaeed241@gmail.com](mailto:rabailsaeed241@gmail.com)

**Nida Akhtar**

MS Scholar, Department of English, University of Sialkot, Punjab, Pakistan

**Muhammad Sabboor Hussain**

Professor, Department of English, University of Sialkot, Punjab, Pakistan

Email ID: [dr.muhammadsabboorhussain@uskt.edu.pk](mailto:dr.muhammadsabboorhussain@uskt.edu.pk)

### ABSTRACT

*This study aims to investigate students' attitudes towards non-native English accents in EFL classrooms. The study examines students' perceptions of the intelligibility and competence of non-native English varieties. However, it also highlights research gaps regarding school students' preferences for native or non-native English accents. For this purpose, the study used a quantitative research design and administered two questionnaires: one for teachers and the other for students. Students' questionnaires complemented those of teachers. Five teachers and twenty students were selected based on convenience sampling. The study found that almost all students and teachers prioritize non-native accents in EFL classrooms because they are perceived as easier to comprehend. The study finds students' interest in non-native English accent (known as Penglish, in Pakistan). The findings suggest that Pakistani middle school students prefer to speak and listen to Penglish in their classrooms to enhance their understanding and learning of English. Moreover, this accent is easier for them to adopt than native accents. Students feel more comfortable speaking in a non-native accent.*

**Keywords:** accents; EFL; attitude; perception; intelligibility; competence

### INTRODUCTION

English has become a global language and is now used for communication in almost every part of the world. It is no longer limited to countries like the United Kingdom or the United States. Today, it is spoken by more non-native speakers than native speakers. Because of its worldwide use, different varieties and accents of English have developed in different countries. Scholars such as Kachru (1992) explain that English exists in multiple forms around the world and cannot be owned by only one group of native speakers. His model of World Englishes shows that English has developed differently in Inner Circle, Outer Circle, and Expanding Circle countries. In countries like Pakistan, English has an important role in education, administration, and professional life. Despite often being placed in the outer circle, English is mostly taught as a foreign language in Pakistani schools. Students learn this foreign language through textbooks or teachers who are non-native English speakers themselves. However, the main focus of these teaching guides is the British or American accent. Due to this focus, EFL students might develop certain beliefs about the clarity, accuracy, and perfection of accents.

The notion of native-accent superiority has been under strong attack in recent years. Scholars such as Jenkins (2000) argue that in the modern world, English is a lingua franca, meaning non-native English speakers use it to communicate with one another. In this scenario, having a native accent is the least important factor. Rather than sounding like a native speaker, one should work on their language fluency, understandability, and accuracy. Despite ongoing discussions about accents, many EFL students still prefer native English accents such as Received Pronunciation or American English. There is a common misconception that accent is just about pronunciation. Accent is more than just pronunciation; it also carries social context. Rosina Lippi-Green (2012), in her book *English with an accent*, says that identity, societal judgements, and power are all related to the accent. The association of accent with intelligence,

education level, and social class can affect a student's attitude towards English accents. This influence changes the way they feel in the EFL classroom and their motivation to participate.

In classrooms where English is taught as a foreign language, students encounter accents through their instructors, audiovisual resources, social media, and other online platforms. They find some accents easier to understand because of their familiarity with the non-native accent. Some may sound prestigious due to their media influence. Research conducted by Domyei (2009) on second-language learning states that a learner's confidence, motivation, and willingness to communicate in a foreign language are influenced by the varieties of a language.

In Pakistan, EFL classrooms mainly exhibit interaction between non-native English teachers and students. If learners perceive only native accents as correct and acceptable, it might affect their confidence and participation in the classroom. On the other hand, they would feel more comfortable and confident participating in EFL classroom discussions if they believed that different varieties of English were legitimate. Students' attitudes towards language varieties and their perceptions are very significant in this study. It focuses on studying these attitudes and perceptions in the Pakistani middle school context. This study explores students' perceptions of non-native accents, their perceptions of intelligence and clarity in relation to accent, and their preferences for native or non-native accents. It also studies how their attitude towards accents influences their learning engagement.

### ***Scope and Significance of the Study***

After analyzing teachers' and students' responses to the questionnaires, this study contributes to the understanding of accent perception in Pakistani middle school EFL classrooms. It also discusses the concept of World Englishes and questions the traditional narrative that the model accent in EFL classrooms should always be the native accent. By understanding how these accents influence EFL students' learning, teachers may design strategies to enhance students' communication and confidence. It also reduces biases by promoting awareness of World Englishes, and can motivate and enhance learners' confidence. This study hopes to contribute to healthy discussions on linguistic diversity and practical strategies that, in turn, encourage students to engage in effective English communication in EFL classrooms.

### ***Research Objectives***

- **To identify** students' general attitudes toward non-native English accents in EFL classrooms.
- **To evaluate** students' perceptions of intelligibility and comprehensibility of non-native accents.
- **To compare** students' preferences between native and non-native English accents.
- **To explore** how students' attitudes towards non-native English accents affect their motivation and participation in classrooms.

This study aims to investigate the following research questions:

### ***Research Questions***

1. How does a non-native English accent change school students' behaviour in EFL classrooms?
2. What are the perceptions of students towards intelligibility and clarity regarding non-native accents?
3. Which accent is preferred by EFL learners in their classrooms, the native or non-native one?
4. How is the motivation and participation of EFL learners affected by their attitude towards non-native accents?

### ***Limitations and Future Studies***

This study was conducted with the middle school students from a single city, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other regions or educational contexts. Future research should examine broader and more diverse populations to validate and extend these results.

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

English has grown far beyond its native-speaking region in the past few decades and has become a global language with several varieties. It has been divided into three major circles by Kachru (1992), termed the inner circle, the outer circle, and the expanding circle. The inner circle countries include the United States of America and the United Kingdom, both of which are native English-speaking countries. In the outer circle, English is used as an official language in offices and schools. This circle includes countries like Pakistan and India. The last circle, called the expanding circle, includes countries like China and Japan, where English is used solely as a foreign language. This three-circle model demonstrates how social, cultural, and historical backgrounds modify the English language, resulting in a variety of accents, vocabulary, and grammatical patterns.

Non-native varieties of English, for example, in countries in the outer and expanding circles, have developed distinct pronunciation, lexical, and syntactic features. Though these varieties follow the linguistic rules, they are perceived as less correct than native accents. According to Kubota and Ward (2000), teaching students about worldwide varieties can help them recognize linguistic diversity and appreciate non-native accents. Even if media and textbooks use British and American accents as the standard, in EFL classrooms, it is easier for students to understand their teachers' non-native accents than unfamiliar native accents. For example, learners in Pakistan easily understand the Penglish pronunciation. On the other hand, the British accent in an audio recording is difficult for them to understand. To encourage students' language use, it is important to reduce bias by recognizing the validity of local accents.

Elements such as social and cultural significance are also involved in accents, along with linguistic meaning. According to Lippi-Green (2012), societal hierarchy, eligibility, and intelligence are associated with certain accents by speakers and listeners. These accents mostly include American and British accents; other non-native accents are unfairly judged as less prestigious or inferior to these accents. These taboos highly influence learners in EFL classrooms. When students try to imitate native accents to gain social approval, they may feel insecure and unable to participate in discussions. Media, films, and textbooks often reinforce native accents as the "ideal" form of English, shaping students' attitudes towards pronunciation. (Jenkins, 2000) For instance, in EFL classrooms in Pakistani middle schools, students may hesitate to answer questions, believing their accents are wrong compared to the British accent, as non-native accents influence their English pronunciation. However, they can develop confidence through continuous interaction and familiarity with the language. Students feel comfortable with their teacher's non-native accent, even if they consider a native accent to be prestigious. This shows that interaction with the language can increase understanding and confidence in communication.

Intelligibility and comprehensibility are the two significant concepts in accent research. Intelligibility is defined as the ability of a listener to understand the speech. On the other hand, comprehensibility is defined as a listener's ability to understand the message. Research shows that intelligibility is not automatically affected by non-native accents. Instead, comprehensibility is affected by exposure, listening exercises, and interaction with the speaker's accent. In Pakistan, EFL learners comprehend their teacher's non-native accent more easily than unfamiliar native accents. For instance, students may understand instructions given by a teacher who uses 'Penglish' as a non-native accent. Still, they may find it difficult to comprehend the same instructions in a video with a British accent. Despite the understanding factor, some learners may still prefer a native accent due to its prestige. This confusion causes

anxiety and hindrance in communication. As a result, complexity arises in students' attitudes toward accents. In EFL classrooms, such strategies should be devised to encourage students to focus more on understanding than on imitation. This will reduce anxiety and improve overall communication.

According to Lippi-Green (2012), native-speakerism is the belief that native speakers are perfect models for language learning. This belief influences teaching sources, classroom practice, and learners' expectations. Many students expect only native speakers to use correct accents, which can undermine their confidence and cause anxiety about their communication skills. In EFL classrooms, especially in the Pakistani context, mostly English instructors use a non-native accent, highlighting the value of local accents. They encourage learners to value a variety of accents, which can help in developing active participation and motivate them in their communication. For example, when a teacher openly appreciates students for using local accents and approves their pronunciation, they participate more freely in their class activities. Recognizing local varieties also helps eradicate the notion that native accents are superior, increasing students' interest in effective communication rather than imitation.

Many researchers believe that learners' perceptions of accents are directly linked to their motivation to learn the language. Dörnyei (2009) demonstrates that students with a positive perception of language and its varieties are more interested in participating in and practising language than those who are stuck in imitating native accents. It is evident that students with a negative perception of language fear judgment, which restricts their active participation and practice. Research shows that in classrooms, wide-ranging teaching strategies that give students enough independence to use a variety of language lead to higher engagement. For instance, Pakistani middle school students participate more in class discussions when they are confident that their Pakistani English pronunciation is correct and valued. It is up to teachers who instil confidence in their students to communicate, regardless of fear of an accent. Such students confidently use their local accents and are motivated to practice both speaking and listening. This shows how important it is to address accent perception in the EFL context to improve learners' communication, participation, and confidence.

### ***Research Gap***

Although accent attitudes have been widely studied, most research focuses on university or adult learners. Few studies examine middle school students in Pakistan, particularly their perceptions of non-native English accents. This study aims to fill that gap by exploring how students perceive British, American, and Pakistani English (Penglish) accents.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

### ***Participants***

The participants in this study are native Pakistani students and teachers. There were 5 female EFL teachers. There were 15 female students. The student and teacher samples were drawn from Pakistani middle school teachers and students. The samples of teachers and students were obtained through convenience sampling.

### ***Research Instruments and Procedures***

This study attempted to approach the research questions using a quantitative paradigm. Thus, the study used two questionnaires: one for students and one for teachers. The students' questionnaires were developed based on the research questions to assess students' attitudes towards English accents. The questionnaire items were designed with a focus on students' understanding of the non-native English varieties used in their classrooms. The questionnaire consisted of three sections. Section A consisted of three statements about students' general feelings regarding different accents, rated on a five-point Likert scale. Section B also used statements on a five-point Likert scale focusing on students' ability to listen to and understand native and non-native varieties, with students provided with three different accents (British,

American, and Penglish). Section C consisted of open-ended questions in which they had to state their answers with a reason regarding their understanding.

The teachers' questionnaire consisted of four sections with open-ended questions: Section A focused on their general attitude towards accents in EFL classrooms; Section B focused on classroom experience (challenges and students' responses); Section C focused on pedagogical perspectives; and Section D focused on perceptions and Identity.

Both questionnaires focused on the effect of accent on students' learning in EFL classrooms. Since Urdu is the language used by Pakistani students for most of their affairs, they tend to find everything easy and comprehensible in Urdu. Therefore, most of the time, they translate the English text into Urdu to understand it properly. As a result, teachers find it difficult to teach in English during lectures, and students hesitate to communicate fully in English. The following tables summarize students' insights regarding non-native English accents in EFL classrooms. Answers were collected using a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 'Strongly Agree' to 'Strongly Disagree.' The distribution of responses offers insight into learners' attitudes toward listening and speaking with different accents.

**Table 1: General Feelings**

Statements	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Enjoy listening to different accents	6 (30%)	12 (60%)	2 (10%)	-	-
People with a non-native accent are good teachers	14 (70%)	-	-	6 (30%)	-
Feel comfortable while speaking with a non-native accent	4 (20%)	6 (30%)	8 (40%)	2 (10%)	-

**Table 2: listening and speaking**

Statements	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Non-native accents are easy to understand	18 (90%)	-	-	2 (10%)	-
Prefer listening to native accents	2 (10%)	10 (50%)	2 (10%)	2 (10%)	2 (10%)
Meanings are focused on during non-native accents	18 (90%)	-	2 (10%)	-	-

As for the third section, students were provided with recordings of three English accents: British, American, and Penglish. The first question was concerning the easiest accent to understand for the students. Almost all the students found that Penglish is more understandable in EFL classrooms as the Vocabulary is easy, the speed is not very fast, and every letter is pronounced clearly. The second question asked about the most difficult accent to understand. 80 per cent of students found the British accent difficult to understand due to its fast speech and the omission of some sounds, which made it difficult for them to identify words.

20 per cent found the American accent difficult to understand due to its fast speed and the lack of interaction in daily life.

Responses from five EFL teachers have been collected using a questionnaire with the following open-ended questions.

**Table 3: Questionnaire for EFL Teachers**

Sr. no	Questions
1	How do you personally feel about non-native English accents in the class?
2	Do you think non-native accents affect how students perceive learning English? Why or why not?
3	In your opinion, should teachers aim for native-like pronunciation, or is intelligibility more important?
4	Have you noticed any challenges students face when listening to non-native English accents?
5	How do students usually respond when exposed to different English accents (native and non-native)?
6	Can you share an example where accent differences influenced classroom communication?
7	Do you believe non-native accents can enrich students' learning experience? How?
8	How do you address accent-related issues in your teaching practice?
9	What strategies do you use to help students understand diverse English accents?
10	Do you think teachers' accents influence students' attitudes toward learning English?
11	How do you balance maintaining your own accent with meeting students' expectations?
12	In your view, how important is accent in defining a "good" English teacher?

## DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The data collected through the Likert scale suggests a rich understanding of students' perceptions of English accents in the EFL classroom. Table 1, which focuses on general feelings, shows that a majority of students enjoy listening to different accents, with 90% either agreeing or strongly agreeing. This suggests that students appreciate their exposure to a wide variety of accents, reflecting their positive perception of linguistic diversity. Such an attitude is highly important in contexts where English is used in diverse phonological features. These revealed student attitudes align with recent research by Jenkins (2021) and Galloway & Rose (2022), which emphasize the importance of exposure to multiple English varieties in developing global communicative competence.

In Table 1, the statement about *whether people with non-native accents can be good teachers* shows a difference in perception. While 70% strongly agreed that such people can be good English teachers, 30% disagreed. This shows that the majority of students understand and appreciate the competence of on-native teachers; a notable minority still holds doubts. This difference in percentages indicates that some students exhibit native-speaker bias, a phenomenon well documented in language education research, including Rao's (2020) study on native speakerism and Fang's (2021) study on Global Englishes attitudes.

A balanced perception is evident in speakers who are comfortable with a non-native accent. Only half of the respondents agree or strongly agree with this perception, whereas 40%

remained neutral and 10% disagree. This finding shows the confusion existing among the learners regarding their comfort level in speaking. It may indicate linguistic self-doubt, in which students feel hesitant to use their local accent due to perceived social pressure. This necessitates pedagogical strategies that build confidence and normalize English diversity.

Table 2 highlights perceptions regarding listening and speaking, providing further insights into the diversity of language. A large percentage of participants (90%) believe that non-native accents are easy to understand. This is an outstanding result which challenges the concept of native speakerism. Students preferring non-native accents may do so due to familiarity with local varieties of English from increased interaction, which may be marked by slower speech but clearer articulation. The focus on meaning rather than accent facilitates comprehension of a non-native variety by reducing intellectual drain. Interestingly, when students were asked about their preference in listening to native accents, their responses were more diverse than expected. Half of the students agreed to listen to a native accent, while the rest were distributed across the other options. The reason behind this response is that half of the participants believe that listening to native accents will enhance their pronunciation and fluency. Also, this diversity of responses shows the influence of the notion that the native accent is considered prestigious. They carry the symbolic value associated with status, even though they may not be accessible to learners. Comparing this response with the previous ones reveals the complexity of the relationship between proficiency and ease of understanding.

Students reported that the local English accent is the easiest to understand, with clear pronunciation. On the other hand, they find the British accent difficult due to its fast pace and sound omissions, while 20% struggle with the American accent for similar reasons. These results show that using a native accent does not determine intelligibility; rather, it determines clarity and familiarity. This finding shows a positive attitude of students towards non-native accents, as they find them easier and meaningful. However, uncertainty remains regarding comfort in adopting a non-native accent and perception of teaching competence. These findings underscore the importance of appreciating accent diversity in EFL contexts, challenging native-speaker bias, and fostering learners' confidence. By accepting linguistic diversity, learners can create more comprehensive and effective learning environments that mirror the realities of English as a global language.

The questionnaires completed by teachers provide valuable insight into perceptions of non-native English varieties in EFL classrooms. As far as their general attitude is concerned, all of them appreciated the non-native English accent as being understandable and acceptable. Their opinions on the second question differed in wording but conveyed a similar theme: yes, a non-native accent affects their perception. Even if they sometimes think native accents are preferable, with proper guidance, they will know that effective communication can come from non-native accents. The third question asked whether teachers should aim for native-like pronunciation or prioritize intelligibility. One of the teachers favours a native accent because, in her opinion, learning a native accent is also important for students who aim to study abroad. Others preferred understanding and intelligibility over native accent, as the purpose is to gain knowledge, not to copy someone's style. Derwing & Munro's (2020) pedagogical research also advocates intelligibility as the primary goal of pronunciation teaching rather than native-like accuracy.

Section two of the questionnaire focused on teachers' classroom experience, in which the majority reported that students faced no challenges when dealing with non-native accents. The minority is concerned about some students who suffer from difficult vocabulary or stress patterns. When students are exposed to different accents (native and non-native), they feel confused or sometimes unbothered by the native accent, as they often cannot comprehend what is being said. With the non-native one, they focus on the meaning and respond appropriately.

Teachers also reported different classroom experiences when students could not understand or did not pay attention due to the use of different English varieties in class. This finding is supported by Harding (2022), who states that unfamiliar native accents can be more challenging than familiar non-native ones.

Section three addressed teachers' pedagogical perspectives on non-native English varieties. When asked about the enrichment of students' learning from non-native accents, they responded positively, as it increases their exposure to different varieties of English. Regarding accent-related issues in their teaching practice, they use different approaches to address them. One of them solved it by correcting the student's pronunciation, and the other teachers resolved these issues by not correcting on the spot but later, in private, to maintain the student's confidence.

The last section discusses students' perceptions and identities, in which teachers have to describe the effect of their accent on students' attitudes. They have responded positively in this regard. According to their opinion, a teacher's accent has a powerful impact on a student's attitude towards English learning. If a student understands the teacher's accent well, they will learn the concepts easily. This aligns with recent research challenging the notion that native-like pronunciation is essential for effective teaching (Selvi 2021). When asked about their ability to maintain a balance between their accent and students' expectations, they gave satisfactory answers, stating that, as non-native speakers, they speak slowly, use simple vocabulary, and have an accent that is easily comprehensible to students. Lastly, they were asked about the association of being a good teacher with having a good accent. They responded with different answers; two of them said that an accent does not define a teacher's excellence. Whereas three of them agreed that a good English teacher should have a good accent, it is obviously not the only quality of a good EFL teacher.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study explored the influence of accent on students' learning and behaviour in EFL classrooms, conducted at a middle school in Pakistan. The study reveals that a non-native accent is easier for students and teachers to understand and more comprehensible from a pedagogical perspective. The students felt comfortable speaking and listening to a non-native English accent in EFL classrooms. This study has also revealed that when students interact with a non-native speaker, they focus more on meaning than on accent. But when they are exposed to native accents, they focus more on the accent than on the meaning, which causes confusion and a lack of understanding.

The study suggests that teachers should have a good non-native accent and accurate pronunciation, but their speaking speed should be slow so students can understand and grasp the concepts. The findings of the study suggest that non-native English varieties are helpful for students in their academic learning. Therefore, they should be appreciated and accepted in EFL classrooms. This will boost students' confidence in language fluency, as well as their understanding and learning.

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