

Accent Anxiety Among Efl Students

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore the experiences and perceptions of EFL (English as a Foreign Language) students towards accent anxiety or anxiety due to non-native accent in English language learning. The research was conducted on five students of English Education Study Program in University of Kuningan using descriptive qualitative method through interviews. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis approach method. The results showed that most of the participants experienced anxiety, insecurity, and fear of negative judgment because their accents were considered not up to native speaker standards. This anxiety was also triggered by the difficulty of understanding other accents, the desire to imitate certain accents (such as American and British), as well as the perception that accents could affect others' judgment of their English proficiency. Although most of the participants prioritized clarity of communication, they still hoped to sound like native speakers. Support from the surrounding environment, especially lecturers and friends, proved to play an important role in reducing anxiety. This study confirms the importance of the World Englishes approach in English language teaching, which emphasizes clarity and acceptance of accent diversity.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In the era of globalization, English has become an international language used in various contexts of education, business, and social communication. This phenomenon has brought with it a diversity of English accents from different regions, both from native speakers such as Americans and British, as well as from non-native speakers. In the context of learning English as a foreign language (EFL), this accent diversity becomes an important factor that not only affects linguistic understanding, but also learners' psychological conditions, especially in terms of speaking anxiety. One of the psychological issues that arise in foreign language learning is accent anxiety. This anxiety refers to a sense of worry, insecurity, or fear of being judged negatively due to the way students pronounce English with a non-native accent. According to Coppinger and Sheridan (2022), non-native accents can be a major source of speaking anxiety, which ultimately decreases students' participation in class and limits the development of their speaking skills.

Furthermore, research conducted by Mari et al. (2024) showed that even university-level students still experience high levels of anxiety in the context of speaking English. They identified several contributing factors such as fear of negative evaluation, communication anxiety, and test anxiety. This is reinforced by Horwitz,

Horwitz, and Cope's (1986) findings that anxiety in foreign language learning is situational and can be highly debilitating, depending on the learning context and social expectations. Accent anxiety is also exacerbated by EFL students' tendency to hold native speakers' accents as an unattainable ideal standard. As Wong (2018) reveals, prospective EFL teachers in Hong Kong show a strong preference for the British or American accent as a model in teaching and learning, and consider local accents as a form of pronunciation that is "less precise" or "confusing". This preference not only arises from exposure to media, but is also influenced by the grading system, the use of native speaker standardized textbooks, and the social perception that native accents are a symbol of professionalism and intelligence.

Research in Indonesia by Fransisca and Subekti (2022) shows a similar trend, where high school students tend to prefer native accents because they are considered more 'standard' and acceptable. However, this perception can create pressure for students who are unable to mimic the accent. When local accents are perceived as inferior, students can feel inferior, reluctant to speak, and even choose to remain silent in learning situations. This can have a negative impact on the development of their speaking skills and confidence as English language users. Matsuda (2003) suggests that in English language teaching, the approach should accommodate the World Englishes perspective. That is, English proficiency should not be measured by how close one is to a native accent, but rather by the effectiveness of communication and understanding between speakers. By introducing various accents from different backgrounds, students can develop a more open attitude towards linguistic diversity and feel more comfortable with their own accents.

Based on the above phenomena, it is important to explore in depth how EFL students feel and respond to accent anxiety in an academic context. This study aims to explore students' emotional experiences and perceptions of their own and others' accents, and how it affects their confidence and participation in English language learning. By understanding accent anxiety from the students' perspective, it is hoped that the results of this study can contribute to the development of a more inclusive approach to English language learning. Such an approach not only values accent diversity, but also helps students build their own linguistic identity with greater confidence.

1.1 Definition of Accent

Accent is an essential part of English language acquisition since it expresses social and cultural identity. Accent is also a significant aspect in international Englishes, according to Andersson and Trudgill (1990) in Maryana and Yuliani (2017) said that the term "accent" is often used to describe how individuals pronounce or pronounce language. This accent can be used as a marker of where the person comes from (Crystal, 2003 in Maryana & Yuliani, 2017), because the accent in each part of the place is indeed different because it is influenced by geography, culture and habits of the surrounding community. Let alone different cities or districts, different villages, sometimes the pronunciation of words and intonation are often different.

Accents in the English language not only reflect a person's geographic origin, but also play a crucial role in shaping their social and cultural identity. The background of culture, history, and social environment where someone grows up influences the uniqueness of every accent. In English learning, accent can influence understanding and communication between speakers. According to Coupland (2007), accent is an important element in social interaction because it can persuade people's perception of the speaker. For instance, the accent that is dominant or different can create a stereotype or prejudice, which can affect how people interact and receive information. Therefore, understanding an accent and the diversity of pronunciation can help students be more confident.

1.2 Contextualizing English Accent in Education

In learning English as a foreign language (EFL), accent is one of the linguistic aspects that is often not only seen as a pronunciation variation, but also as a symbol of identity, status, and even language competence. In many educational contexts, native accents such as British and American English are still considered the ideal "standard" model, while non-native accents are often perceived as inappropriate or confusing (Yuwita & Ambarwati, 2023). This causes most students to admire native accents more than their local or regional accents.

Research by Saipullah et al. (2021) shows that although non-native accents are sometimes considered challenging in terms of comprehension, students also benefit from cross-cultural and linguistic understanding of the variations. Therefore, accents should not only be seen as a challenge, but also as an opportunity to broaden students' perspectives in global communication. Unfortunately, students' exposure to accent varieties in the classroom is often limited. According to Candan and Inal (2020), interaction with various dialects actually helps students to develop acceptance and reduce prejudice. This is supported by Fransisca and Subekti (2022), who found that students who are more frequently exposed to accent variations have a more open outlook and tend to see accents as an effective means of communication, not as a measure of linguistic superiority.

In practice, however, the expectation of an "ideal accent" can create social and psychological pressures for learners. Tan et al. (2021) note that social perceptions of non-native accents can stigmatize students, leading

to a decline in their confidence and engagement in the classroom. This is the background for the emergence of the phenomenon of accent anxiety, which is anxiety that arises from the fear of being judged or laughed at because of an accent that is considered not up to standard. This is reinforced by the findings of Coppinger and Sheridan (2022), who mentioned that non-native accents can be a major source of speaking anxiety among EFL students, even making them reluctant to actively participate in learning. Wong (2018) also revealed that prospective EFL teachers in Hong Kong prefer British accents to local accents because they are seen as more professional and classy. However, interestingly, many of them were unable to recognize the accent they idolized when listening to the voice samples. This suggests that the idealization of native accents is not always based on real linguistic competence, but rather on social perception.

The same phenomenon was found in a study by Xue and Noels (2024), who looked at the relationship between accent anxiety and oral production skills in English. They found that the higher the accent anxiety, the lower the students' reported speaking ability. Even in academic contexts, where the use of English is mandatory, accent anxiety remains a significant barrier. In addition to environmental and social factors, the education system also reinforces the dominance of native accents. Teaching materials, exams such as TOEFL or IELTS, and teachers' expectations often implicitly set native accents as the main benchmark. However, approaches such as World Englishes have long encouraged acceptance of linguistic diversity and emphasized the importance of intelligibility over imitation of a particular accent (Kızıllı, 2022).

Thus, understanding the context of accent in English education means also understanding the social pressures, perceptions of identity, and psychological barriers that come with it. Especially in the Indonesian context, where exposure to both local and global accents is still very limited, it is important to revisit teaching approaches that are overly centered on native accents. This study attempts to delve deeper into how EFL students experience and make meaning of their accent anxiety, and how it impacts their overall learning process. Accents should not be understood as indicators of errors or weaknesses in language, but rather as part of a learner's linguistic identity. This understanding is important in creating learning spaces that support students' confidence in speaking, as well as reducing anxiety due to pressure to match a certain accent standard.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 Research Method

This research adopts a qualitative descriptive method to explore accent anxiety among EFL students. The qualitative approach is chosen to gain in-depth insights into students' emotional experiences and perceptions related to speaking English with a non-native accent. As discussed by Coppinger and Sheridan (2022), concerns about sounding non-native can lead to anxiety and fear of negative evaluation, affecting students' confidence and willingness to speak. The issue is also highlighted by Xue and Noels (2025), who emphasize that accent anxiety involves emotional responses shaped by social and linguistic expectations.

2.2 Site and Participant

This research took place at the English Education Department of Kuningan University. The participants were selected from sixth-semester students who are actively engaged in English language learning, particularly in speaking-related courses. This academic stage was considered appropriate because students are assumed to have had ample exposure to both formal and informal English-speaking situations, allowing them to reflect on their personal experiences regarding accent and anxiety. The choice of site was based on the accessibility of participants and the relevance of the context to the issue of accent anxiety among EFL learners.

A total of five students were involved in the study, selected through purposive sampling. The criteria for selection focused on students who had expressed or demonstrated discomfort or lack of confidence when speaking English due to their non-native accents. This selection aligns with the aim of qualitative research to explore specific phenomena in depth, rather than to generalize findings. Limiting the number of participants allows the researcher to conduct more detailed interviews and gather richer data regarding the emotional and psychological dimensions of accent anxiety in EFL learning contexts.

2.3 Data Collection

Data for this study were collected using a structured interview format. Conducting the interviews orally provided greater flexibility and comfort for participants while allowing them to share detailed, reflective responses about their experiences with accent anxiety. The research tool consisted of ten open-ended questions that explored students' feelings and perceptions about speaking English with a non-native accent. Topics included their level of confidence, social experiences, and attitudes toward different accents.

The questions were designed based on theoretical insights and previous studies, including those by Coppinger and Sheridan (2022) and Xue and Noels (2025), which emphasize the psychological impact of accent on learners' speaking confidence. Participants responded in writing at their own pace, helping to reduce performance pressure and allowing for more thoughtful answers. Responses were then collected and organized

for analysis. To ensure ethical compliance, the form included informed consent information, and participants' identities were kept confidential throughout the research process. The following questions were asked to the participants:

Table 1. The interviews' questions

NO	QUESTIONS
1	Can you describe how you feel when listening to English speakers with different accents (e.g., American, British, or other non-native accents)?
2	Have you ever found it difficult to understand someone because of their accent? Can you tell me more about that experience?
3	Do you feel nervous, anxious, or unsure when speaking English in front of others because of how your accent sounds? Please explain.
4	In your opinion, do some accents sound "better" or more "correct" than others? Why or why not?
5	How do you think your accent affects the way others perceive your English proficiency?
6	Have you ever been corrected or judged because of your accent? If yes, how did that make you feel?
7	When learning or practicing English, do you try to imitate a specific accent? Why do you choose that one?
8	Do you think your level of confidence in using English changes depending on the accent of the person you're speaking with? Please give an example.
9	Do you receive any support or encouragement from teachers or peers related to your accent or speaking confidence? What kind of support helps you most?
10	If you could change anything about your accent or pronunciation in English, what would it be and why?

2.4 Data Analysis

The data obtained from the participants' written responses were analyzed using thematic analysis, a method commonly used in qualitative research to identify, analyze, and report patterns within data. Thematic analysis was selected because it allows the researcher to systematically interpret the underlying meanings and emotions expressed by participants regarding their experiences with accent anxiety. This approach is appropriate for exploring psychological and social constructs that are embedded in narrative data, such as feelings of insecurity, fear of judgment, or lack of self-confidence when speaking English with a non-native accent.

Following the procedures outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), the analysis began with reading all responses thoroughly to become familiar with the content. Then, initial codes were generated based on recurring ideas or emotional expressions found in the text. These codes were grouped into larger themes such as "fear of negative evaluation," "self-consciousness about accent," and "influence of social environment." These themes were developed with reference to findings from Coppinger and Sheridan (2022) and Xue and Noels (2025), who highlight similar patterns in accent-related anxiety among EFL learners. The final stage involved interpreting these themes in relation to the research questions and presenting the findings in a narrative format supported by participant excerpts.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the interviews with five English Education students, various experiences and perceptions related to accent anxiety in English language learning were found. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis approach in accordance with Braun and Clarke's (2006) method, and resulted in several main themes as follows:

1. Feelings of Nervousness and Insecurity When Speaking with a Non-Native Accent

One common theme that emerged was the experience of anxiety, nervousness, or self-consciousness when producing English speech, particularly due to the sound of their own accent. Most of the participants experienced fear of being judged or misconstrued on the basis of their non-native pronunciation. For instance, Respondent 1 admitted, *"Yes, because I afraid if I make false response for them,"* and Respondent 5 responded, *"Saya khawatir aksen saya terdengar tidak natural... takut orang lain tidak memahami apa yang saya katakan."* Both these comments indicate students shouldering the emotional burden when they experience communicating in English, particularly in public or academic situations. These explanations support Coppinger and Sheridan (2022), who are of the opinion that foreign accents are one of the primary reasons for anxiety while speaking that discourages classroom participation and oral communication.

2. Difficulty Understanding Others Due to Accent Differences

All five participants unequivocally concurred that they had indeed experienced significant difficulties in understanding speakers who employed unfamiliar accents or ones that were exceptionally strong. An issue

that consistently emerged from their accounts was the intelligibility, or understandability, of regional or non-standard forms of accents, with a particular emphasis on British regional accents such as those of Scotland or Yorkshire. For example, Respondent 3 exclaimed in frustration: *"I swear to God I only understood a few words,"* in trying to understand a Yorkshire speaker. This background depicts not just the variety of linguistic problems experienced by students but also corroborates the high degree of psychological stress that these students experience every time they encounter communication breakdown. The issue of intelligibility is extensively examined in Saipullah et al.'s (2021) study, and they determined that unfamiliar accents routinely lead to a decline in learners' overall understanding and also confidence levels.

3. The Influence of Accent Perception on Confidence and Proficiency Judgments

Some respondents also expressed their thoughts and experiences concerning how they felt others would judge or measure their English competency, especially keeping in mind the existence of their accent. For example, Respondent 2 explained their apprehensions by stating, *"Some may think I'm less competent if I don't sound like a native speaker,"* which shows that their accent would make them assume negative things about their language competence. On the other hand, Respondent 3 revealed that there are people who consider them to be very competent in English due to their accent, which is remarkably similar to that of a native English speaker; however, this respondent also revealed that, in their own mind, they don't have the same amount of confidence regarding their proficiency.

These findings serve to confirm the hypothesis that listeners perceive accent not so much as a phonetic feature of speech, but rather as a significant social marker that can reflect the degree of competence in an individual. This position is in complete agreement with the findings of Tan et al. (2021), who point out the manner in which linguistic prejudice can work to influence what individuals think about and believe, such that they associate native accents with greater intelligence or greater proficiency in the use of language.

4. Preference for Certain Accents and Pressure to Conform

An overwhelming majority of the students showed a clear preference for American or British accents. This is usually driven by exposure to the accents, formed by some media they watch or listen to or by a perception of social status attached to them. The interviewees clarified that these particular accents sound "clearer," "cooler," or more "standard" than other ways of speech. They clarified that regional or non-native accents are generally perceived to be more difficult to imitate or fully comprehend. Although some of the students are aware that there can be no objective determination of the "better" accent, they also admitted that social exposure, as well as the structure of educational systems, has subtly encouraged imitation of native accents. This particular phenomenon has been thoroughly investigated and largely discussed in the work of Wong (2018), who discovered in his research that English as a Foreign Language (EFL) pre-service teachers tend to prefer either British English or American English. The reason for their preference is the fact that they consider that these varieties are more professional compared to local varieties or non-native English.

5. Accent as a Barrier or Motivation in Learning

Whereas anxiety was common, nevertheless, a few of the students viewed accent diversity as an interesting and even exciting impact on their learning process. One interviewee explained how trying to mimic different accents helped them understand English use around the globe. Respondent 3, for example, explained their experience of trying to imitate a number of accents: *"I also some time trying to imitate LA, black people accent, Singaporean, Indian, Japanese."* *"because I think it is kinda fun."* This response shows the interesting dualistic nature of exposure to accent, while it can be daunting to some students, it can encourage others, depending largely on the specific learning environment they are enrolled in and the individual attitude they have towards learning.

6. The Role of Social Support and Classroom Environment

The support and guidance that is both from peers and teachers is very significant in terms of reducing the anxiety that many people have when they have an accent.

Respondent 2 further commented that receiving encouragement that is centered on clarity rather than perfection was particularly helpful in boosting their confidence: *"The best support is when they emphasize understanding and not correcting every little thing."* Respondent 5 contributed to the discussion by stating, *"Dukungan terbaik adalah saat mereka memberi semangat dan mengoreksi dengan cara yang positif."* These findings clearly point to the extremely significant role of having inclusive classroom practices that validate the diversity of different accents and recognize the precedence of communicative effectiveness in the classroom setting. The integration of World Englishes' perspective in educational processes can play a significant role in enabling students to develop a healthy and robust sense of their own linguistic identity.

7. Contextual Sensitivity: Confidence Changes Depending on Listener's Accent

Some of the respondents indicated that their level of confidence when speaking in English was not constant, and this fluctuation was directly related to the particular accent of the person with whom they were communicating. When such respondents were in a conversation with someone who had an accent that they identified with or considered to be "neutral," like the widely spoken American accent, they felt more at ease and comfortable in communicating. However, when they tried to communicate with people who used accents that were foreign to them or those that had a distinct regional variation, they tended to experience sentiments of hesitation and an apparent drop in their general confidence level. This finding alone lends strong confirmation to the study by Xue and Noels in 2025. Their study highlights that accent anxiety has a negative influence on the oral production skill of students, including their confidence. This negative influence is witnessed even in students who are deemed advanced learners of language proficiency.

The findings of this study clearly demonstrate that accent anxiety is a significant psychological factor that shapes students' confidence, performance, and participation in English learning contexts. Students not only struggle with being understood or understanding others due to accent differences, but they also feel pressure to conform to idealized accent models often shaped by media, education, and social norms. Despite recognizing the value of accent diversity, many still internalize native accent superiority, which aligns with Horwitz et al.'s (1986) theory of language learning anxiety being situational and socially influenced.

Furthermore, while students express insecurity about their pronunciation, their ability to reflect critically on accent variation and seek support shows their awareness and resilience. This underscores the importance of educational settings that promote acceptance of all accents and prioritize mutual understanding over native-likeness.

4. CONCLUSION

What the five participants experienced shows that EFL students' accent anxiety is a complex problem. It is caused by social expectation, language contact, and classroom settings. To solve the problem, the language and pedagogy must be considered by people. Educators must build safe and supportive environments in which students feel comfortable expressing themselves despite their accent and where diversity of languages is fostered instead of derogated. Through using the standard of World Englishes and with the concern for being understandable and clear, we can start to break down the psychological obstacles to students speaking proudly and confidently in their own voice.

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