



The Ideology of Accent: Investigating Accent-Based Judgments Among Indonesian EFL Students

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Abstract: This study aims to investigate accent-based judgments among Indonesian learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), particularly the preference for native-like English accents over communicative competence. The research employed a mixed-method design involving a questionnaire distributed to 60 English Education students selected through purposive sampling and semi-structured interviews with 15 selected participants from the same cohort at Universitas Sembilanbelas November Kolaka. The questionnaire data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, while interview data were examined through thematic analysis. The findings reveal that most students prioritize native-like accents, especially British English, as the primary indicator of speaking proficiency, even when fluency and grammatical accuracy are weak. This preference contributes to social favoritism in academic contexts and leads to internalized insecurity among fluent speakers with Indonesian-accented English. The study highlights how accent ideology influences peer judgment and learner identity, reinforcing native-speakerism within EFL classrooms. It concludes by advocating an intelligibility-oriented approach to English teaching and the inclusion of diverse English varieties to promote more equitable and inclusive language practices.

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Introduction

English has become a global means of communication, and in many English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts, spoken proficiency is often positioned as the primary indicator of language mastery (Crystal, 2003; Jenkins, 2007). However, judgments of speaking ability are rarely neutral. In practice, fluency and communicative effectiveness are frequently overshadowed by how closely a speaker's pronunciation aligns with native-speaker norms, particularly British and American accents (Lippi-Green, 2012; Matsuda, 2012). In Indonesia, this tendency has contributed to a widespread belief that native-like pronunciation represents the highest standard of English competence, while local-accented English is often perceived as deficient or undesirable (Waloyo & Jarum, 2019; Khazanah, 2023). Such perceptions do not merely reflect linguistic preferences, but are embedded in broader sociolinguistic ideologies that shape how learners evaluate themselves and others in academic settings (Jenkins, 2007; Lippi-Green, 2012).

Previous studies have extensively documented attitudes toward English accents in EFL contexts. Lippi-Green (2012) conceptualizes accent discrimination as a form of linguistic prejudice rooted in social power relations, while Jenkins (2007) and Matsuda (2012) argue that the privileging of native-speaker norms marginalizes the global diversity of English use. Research in Indonesia similarly indicates a strong preference for British and



American accents. Khazanah (2023) and Waloyo and Jarum (2019) report that Indonesian EFL learners frequently associate native-like accents with intelligence, professionalism, and higher proficiency, often viewing their own L1-accented English as inferior. Studies grounded in English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) and World Englishes perspectives further challenge these assumptions by emphasizing intelligibility and communicative effectiveness over nativeness (Derwing & Munro, 2009; Marlina, 2014).

Despite this growing body of research, existing studies largely focus on general attitudes and perceptions toward accents, with limited attention to how accent ideology operates within institutional academic environments, particularly in peer evaluation contexts. Moreover, little empirical work has examined how accent-based judgments influence students' academic visibility, such as being selected for public speaking roles, and how these judgments contribute to internalized linguistic insecurity among fluent speakers with local accents. Psychological dimensions, such as learner self-efficacy, have been discussed in relation to language achievement (Alfian, Khartha, & Bohang, 2024), yet their intersection with accent ideology remains underexplored in Indonesian English Education programs.

The present study was conducted at Universitas Sembilanbelas November Kolaka (USN Kolaka), a regional public university located in Southeast Sulawesi, Indonesia. The institution provides an interesting sociolinguistic context for examining accent-based judgments because most students come from multilingual backgrounds and use local languages such as Tolaki, Muna, or regional varieties of Indonesian in daily communication. For many students, English exposure occurs primarily within formal classroom settings rather than through sustained interaction with international speakers. This linguistic environment may heighten sensitivity toward pronunciation norms and contribute to feelings of linguistic insecurity when students compare their locally influenced English accents with perceived native-speaker standards.

This study offers scientific novelty by moving beyond attitudinal surveys to investigate accent ideology as a mechanism of peer judgment and identity construction within a specific academic setting. By combining quantitative data on students' evaluative preferences with qualitative insights into learners' lived experiences, the study reveals how accent functions as symbolic capital that shapes perceptions of competence, confidence, and legitimacy. Unlike previous research that treats accent preference as an abstract attitude, this study demonstrates how such preferences manifest in everyday academic interactions and contribute to the marginalization of local-accented yet fluent speakers.

Accordingly, this article examines how Indonesian EFL learners evaluate English-speaking competence and how native-speakerism influences peer judgment and learner identity in academic contexts. By foregrounding intelligibility rather than nativeness, this study seeks to contribute to more inclusive and equitable perspectives on spoken English competence in EFL classrooms.

Research Method

This study employed a mixed-method design combining quantitative and qualitative approaches to examine accent-based judgments among Indonesian EFL learners. The quantitative component provided an overview of students' evaluative preferences, while the qualitative component explored learners' experiences and perceptions related to accent, confidence, and linguistic identity. The quantitative component used a descriptive survey to identify students' preferences regarding accent, fluency, and grammatical accuracy in peer evaluations. The qualitative component involved semi-structured interviews to explore

learners' experiences and perceptions related to accent ideology, confidence, and social positioning.

The study was conducted at the English Education Department of Universitas Sembilanbelas November Kolaka, Indonesia. Data were collected over a two-week period in November 2025. The researcher administered the instruments directly and maintained reflexive awareness to minimize potential bias during data collection and analysis. The overall flow of the research process, from problem identification to data integration and interpretation, is presented in Figure 1.

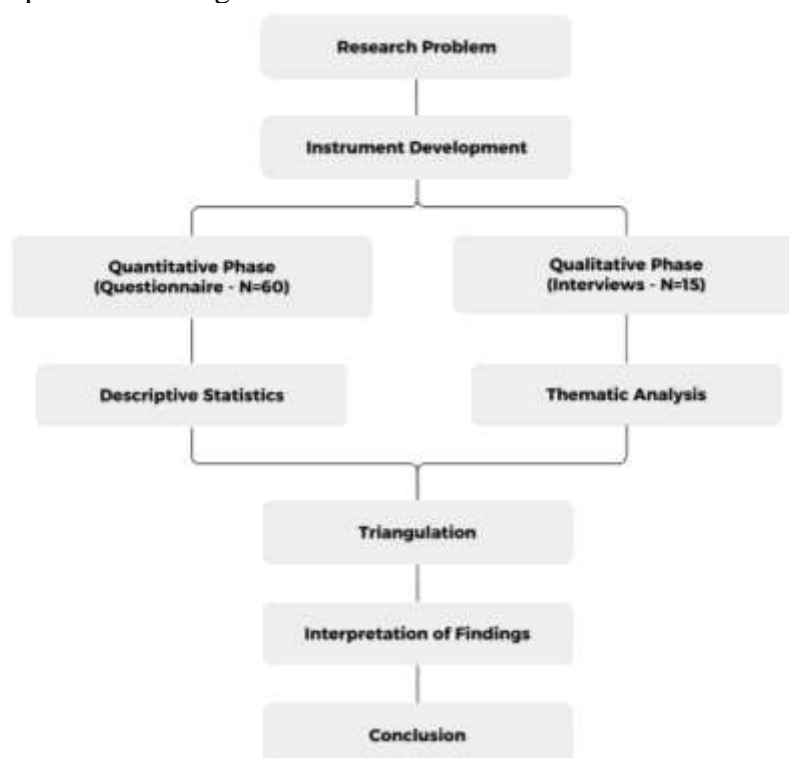


Figure 1. Research Flow of Accent-Based Judgment Study

The population of this study consisted of undergraduate students in the English Education Department at Universitas Sembilanbelas November Kolaka. These students were selected because they regularly participate in English-speaking activities such as classroom presentations, debates, and academic discussions. A total of 60 students were selected as survey participants through purposive sampling. The sample included students from four academic cohorts (2022, 2023, 2024, and 2025), with 15 participants drawn from each cohort. Purposive sampling was applied to ensure that participants had sufficient experience with spoken English in academic contexts, such as classroom presentations, public speaking tasks, debate practices, and English-mediated campus events. This criterion ensured that participants were capable of forming informed judgments regarding accent and speaking competence.

For the qualitative phase, 15 students from the 2022 cohort were selected to participate in semi-structured interviews. This cohort was chosen due to their longer exposure to academic English use and greater familiarity with institutional speaking norms. Interview participants were selected based on their willingness to participate and their ability to reflect on personal experiences related to accent use, peer evaluation, and confidence in English-speaking situations. The diversity of perspectives among participants helped enrich the



qualitative findings and provided multiple viewpoints on the phenomenon under investigation.

Data were collected using two instruments: a self-developed questionnaire and a semi-structured interview guide. Both instruments were designed to align closely with the research objectives and theoretical framework of language ideology, accent discrimination, and English as a Lingua Franca. The questionnaire consisted of Likert-scale items, multiple-choice questions, and scenario-based prompts. These items were designed to measure students' perceptions of English accents, their preferences when evaluating speakers, and their beliefs about the relationship between accent and proficiency. Scenario-based items were included to elicit evaluative judgments in controlled but realistic situations, allowing participants to compare speakers with differing accent and proficiency profiles.

To ensure content validity, the questionnaire was reviewed by two experts in English language teaching and applied linguistics. Their feedback was used to refine item clarity, relevance, and alignment with the research focus. A pilot test was conducted prior to full-scale distribution, and reliability analysis yielded a Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of 0.82, indicating a high level of internal consistency. Following validation, the questionnaire was distributed online via Google Forms to facilitate accessibility and standardized administration across cohorts.

The qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews guided by open-ended questions. The interview guide was designed to explore participants' personal experiences with accent-based evaluation, perceived social expectations regarding pronunciation, and the emotional impact of accent ideology on confidence and identity. Interviews were conducted in person at locations selected by participants to ensure comfort and openness. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and subsequently transcribed verbatim. To enhance research credibility, methodological triangulation was applied by integrating questionnaire data with interview findings. Participants' identities were protected through the use of pseudonyms, and all participants provided informed consent prior to data collection.

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, including frequency counts, percentages, and mean scores, to identify patterns in students' evaluative preferences regarding accent, fluency, and grammar. Questionnaire items were grouped into three analytical categories: Accent Perception, Accent versus Fluency Preference, and Identity-Based Judgments. Qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2006). The analysis involved several systematic stages. First, the interview transcripts were read repeatedly to achieve familiarization with the data. Second, initial codes were generated to capture recurring ideas and expressions related to accent prestige, linguistic insecurity, and peer judgment. Third, the codes were organized into broader themes representing shared patterns of belief and experience among participants. Fourth, the themes were reviewed and refined to ensure coherence and relevance to the research questions. Finally, the themes were defined and interpreted to explain how accent ideology shapes learners' perceptions and identities within the EFL academic context.

To ensure the trustworthiness of qualitative findings, data triangulation was conducted by comparing themes derived from interviews with trends observed in the quantitative results. Reflexive documentation was also used throughout the analysis process to monitor researcher assumptions and maintain analytical transparency. Through this integrative analytical approach, the study achieved a comprehensive understanding of how accent ideology shapes perceptions and identities within the EFL academic context.



Results

The findings of this study reveal that accent plays a dominant role in how Indonesian EFL students evaluate English-speaking competence. Rather than functioning as a secondary phonological feature, accent operates as a primary evaluative criterion that shapes judgments of proficiency, credibility, and authority in academic contexts.

Table 1. Students' Judgments of Speaking Competence Based on Key Aspects

Aspect	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Grammar	46	76.6%
Vocabulary Range	49	81.7%
Fluency	52	86.7%
Accent	53	88.3%
Pronunciation	42	70.0%
Intonation	34	56.7%

As shown in Table 1, accent received the highest prioritization rate (88.3%), surpassing fluency (86.7%), vocabulary range (81.7%), and grammatical accuracy (76.6%). This pattern constitutes a significant scientific finding: learners do not merely value accent alongside other linguistic components, but frequently elevate it above core elements of communicative competence. Scientifically, this indicates the presence of an underlying ideological framework in which auditory nativeness is equated with overall language mastery.

Table 2. Preferred Speaker Profiles

Speaker Profile	Chosen by (f)	Percentage (%)
Fluent speaker with local accent	18	30.0%
Native-accented speaker with weak grammar & fluency	42	70.0%

The second major finding, presented in Table 2, further reinforces this conclusion. When confronted with contrasting speaker profiles, 70% of respondents preferred a native-accented speaker with weak grammar and fluency over a fluent speaker with a local accent. This preference cannot be explained by communicative effectiveness, as the fluent speaker objectively demonstrates stronger functional language ability. Instead, it reflects an ideological bias in which accent serves as a symbolic marker of legitimacy, overriding linguistic performance.

Together, these results demonstrate that accent functions as a form of symbolic capital within the academic environment. Speakers who approximate native-like pronunciation are perceived as more competent regardless of actual proficiency, while fluent speakers with Indonesian-accented English are systematically undervalued. These findings directly address the study's first and second research objectives by showing how accent-based judgments shape peer evaluations of speaking competence.

Discussion

Accent as Symbolic Prestige Rather Than Linguistic Function

From a scientific perspective, the prioritization of accent observed in this study can be explained through sociolinguistic theories of language ideology and symbolic power. According to Bourdieu's concept of symbolic capital, certain linguistic forms gain value not because they are more effective, but because they are socially recognized as legitimate. In this context, native-like English accents, particularly British English, operate as symbols of prestige that signal intelligence, authority, and educational superiority.



This explains why accent was prioritized even when other communicative variables were weaker. Learners are not evaluating speech solely on functional criteria, but through socially inherited hierarchies that position native accents at the top. This finding aligns with Lippi-Green's (2012) argument that accent discrimination is a socially constructed phenomenon rooted in unequal power relations rather than linguistic necessity.

Similar patterns have been documented in previous studies. Khazanah (2023) found that Indonesian learners associate British and American accents with higher professionalism, while Waloyo and Jarum (2019) reported negative attitudes toward L1-accented English. However, the present study extends these findings by demonstrating that such attitudes actively influence peer judgment within academic settings, not merely abstract opinions.

In the specific context of Universitas Sembilanbelas November Kolaka, the strong preference for British-accented English may also be influenced by broader sociocultural and educational factors. Many students are exposed to English primarily through formal classroom instruction, where pronunciation models often reflect traditional British-oriented materials commonly used in Indonesian English textbooks and listening resources. In addition, global pop culture, such as films, music, and online media, frequently portrays native-speaker accents as symbols of sophistication, education, and global mobility. From a post-colonial perspective, these influences contribute to the internalization of linguistic hierarchies in which certain varieties of English are perceived as more legitimate or prestigious than others. Within this environment, students may come to associate British-like pronunciation with academic authority and communicative legitimacy, even when intelligibility and fluency are stronger indicators of actual communicative competence.

Ideological Preference Over Communicative Competence

The preference for native-accented speakers with weak grammar and fluency represents a critical scientific finding because it reveals a disconnection between perceived and actual competence. From an English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) perspective, effective communication depends primarily on intelligibility and comprehensibility rather than accent conformity (Derwing & Munro, 2009). However, the findings of this study indicate that learners frequently privilege accent prestige over communicative substance. This tendency contrasts with recent research emphasizing context-based communicative development, where meaning-making and identity relevance strengthen students' functional language performance (Ashar, Khatha, & Nasir, 2026). When communicative competence is grounded in culturally meaningful content, learners demonstrate increased fluency and confidence independent of native-like pronunciation. The present findings therefore suggest that accent ideology may overshadow more pedagogically meaningful indicators of language proficiency.

This trend may be explained by prolonged exposure to native-speaker norms in English education, media, and assessment practices. Jenkins (2007) argues that traditional EFL pedagogy reinforces the belief that native pronunciation is the ultimate goal of learning, leading learners to internalize unrealistic standards. As a result, students may unconsciously equate accent imitation with success, even when it compromises clarity or fluency.

Compared with studies such as Kung and Wang (2018), which found that learners value accent mainly for intelligibility, the present findings suggest a stronger ideological dimension in the Indonesian context, where accent is perceived as a marker of social distinction rather than communicative necessity.



Internalized Insecurity and Learner Identity

Beyond evaluative preferences, the qualitative findings reveal that accent ideology has profound psychological consequences. Many interview participants reported feelings of insecurity, self-consciousness, and pressure to modify their pronunciation to approximate native norms. For example, one participant stated, “Sometimes I feel embarrassed speaking English because my accent sounds very Indonesian, even when I know what I want to say” (Rina, Interview Participant). Another participant similarly noted, “Students who sound British are usually seen as more fluent, even if they hesitate a lot when speaking” (Alief, Interview Participant). Scientifically, this reflects a process of internalized linguistic inequality, where learners adopt dominant ideologies and apply them to their own self-assessment.

This phenomenon can be explained through Norton’s (1997) concept of language and identity, which posits that learners’ investment in language learning is shaped by how they perceive their legitimacy as speakers. When native-like accents are treated as the benchmark of competence, learners with local accents may perceive themselves as less legitimate, regardless of their actual ability. The findings are consistent with Marlina’s (2014) observation that non-native speakers often feel compelled to suppress their linguistic identities to gain acceptance. They also complement Alfian, Khartha, and Bohang’s (2024) work on self-efficacy by demonstrating how accent-based judgment undermines learners’ confidence and willingness to communicate.

Implications for EFL Pedagogy

The trends identified in this study underscore the urgent need to reconceptualize how spoken English competence is evaluated in EFL classrooms. An intelligibility-oriented approach offers a scientifically sound alternative to nativeness-based standards. By prioritizing clarity, coherence, and communicative effectiveness, educators can align assessment practices with the realities of global English use.

Integrating diverse English varieties into instructional materials can further weaken accent hierarchies and normalize local-accented English. Studies by Matsuda (2012) and Sung (2022) demonstrate that exposure to multiple Englishes fosters greater acceptance and reduces accent-related anxiety. Explicit discussions about accent bias can also help learners critically reflect on their assumptions and resist internalizing harmful ideologies.

Conclusion

The findings confirm that accent functions as a dominant evaluative criterion within the academic context studied. Native-like pronunciation, particularly British English, is frequently perceived as a marker of proficiency and legitimacy, even when other components of communicative competence such as fluency and grammatical accuracy are weaker.

These results demonstrate that accent ideology operates as a form of symbolic power in EFL classrooms, shaping not only peer evaluation but also learners’ self-perception. The preference for native accents reflects an internalized hierarchy in which auditory nativeness is equated with intelligence and authority. Consequently, fluent speakers with Indonesian-accented English may experience diminished confidence and feel pressure to modify their pronunciation to align with perceived norms.

By empirically linking accent preference with peer judgment and identity construction, this study contributes to ongoing discussions in World Englishes and English as a Lingua Franca research. It highlights the need to move beyond nativeness-based standards and adopt intelligibility as a more equitable foundation for assessing spoken English competence.



Promoting awareness of accent bias and integrating diverse English varieties into instruction can help create more inclusive academic environments where linguistic identity is recognized as a legitimate dimension of proficiency rather than a deficiency.

Recommendation

Based on the findings of this study, several pedagogical and research-oriented recommendations can be proposed for lecturers, students, and future researchers.

For lecturers and English language educators, the findings highlight the importance of reconsidering how speaking proficiency is evaluated in EFL classrooms. Teaching practices should emphasize intelligibility, communicative effectiveness, and confidence rather than strict adherence to native-speaker pronunciation norms. Lecturers may incorporate listening materials representing diverse English varieties and encourage critical discussions about accent diversity in the classroom. Such practices can help reduce accent-based bias and create a more inclusive learning environment in which students feel confident using English regardless of their local accent.

For students, it is important to recognize that effective communication in English does not depend solely on native-like pronunciation. Learners should focus on clarity, fluency, and meaningful interaction rather than attempting to imitate specific native accents. Understanding that English is a global language used by speakers from diverse linguistic backgrounds may help students develop greater confidence and reduce linguistic insecurity when speaking English in academic contexts.

For future researchers, further studies should expand the scope beyond a single institutional context to examine whether similar accent-based judgments occur across different regions, educational levels, or sociolinguistic environments in Indonesia. Comparative research involving urban and rural institutions, private and public universities, or cross-cultural settings may provide a broader understanding of how accent ideology operates in diverse academic contexts.

Further investigation is also recommended using inferential statistical methods to identify variables that significantly predict accent preference, such as gender, media exposure, proficiency level, international experience, or prior interaction with native speakers. Experimental designs involving audio stimuli may offer more controlled insights into how listeners evaluate speakers in real-time. Additionally, longitudinal studies could explore whether exposure to World Englishes-oriented pedagogy reduces accent bias over time.

Several barriers may have influenced the results of the present study. The reliance on self-reported questionnaire responses may have limited the ability to capture unconscious bias, as participants might respond according to perceived social expectations. The researcher's dual role as both investigator and peer may also have affected participant openness, despite efforts to ensure anonymity and reflexive transparency. Moreover, the absence of direct classroom observation means that the study captures perceived attitudes rather than observable evaluative behavior in real assessment situations.

Addressing these limitations in future research will contribute to a more comprehensive and empirically robust understanding of accent ideology in EFL contexts. By continuing to explore this issue from multiple methodological and contextual perspectives, scholars can further develop equitable models of English language teaching that recognize linguistic diversity as a resource rather than a deficiency.



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