

تاريخ النشر: 2026-10-28	تاريخ القبول: 2026-10-27	تاريخ انتهاء التعديلات: 2026-10-25	تاريخ التسليم: 2026-10-1
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NATIVE-LIKE PRONUNCIATION OR INTELLIGIBILITY? SABRATHA UNIVERSITY EFL STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF ENGLISH ACCENT AND SUCCESSFUL COMMUNICATION

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ABSTRACT

The field of contemporary second language acquisition has increasingly favoured the Intelligibility Principle over the conventional Nateness Principle; however, learners of English as a Foreign Language frequently find themselves caught between the demand for communicative clarity and the aspiration to meet standard native-speaker norms. This mixed-methods study aimed to explore this intricate duality among EFL students at Sabratha University, examining how socio-indexical factors, affective variables, and educational experiences influence the pronunciation targets learners adopt. For data collection, a stratified convenience sample was employed, comprising 73 undergraduate and postgraduate students drawn from Sabratha University, who completed an adapted EPNI-Q questionnaire containing 24 core Likert-scale items as well as open-ended qualitative prompts intended to elicit student strategies. The quantitative survey data underwent systematic evaluation through descriptive and inferential statistics, whereas the qualitative textual responses were analysed using thematic analysis. The results revealed a striking "Ideology versus Pragmatism Paradox": even though an overwhelming majority (90.4%) agreed that successful communication depends on clarity of speech rather than accent perfection, 75.3% at the same time expressed a personal ambition to approximate native-speaker phonological norms. This persisting preference is strongly driven by perceived socio-economic prestige, employability advantages, and the affective confidence gains that are deemed necessary. Moreover, a significant institutional mismatch emerged, given that local instructors often impose native models even though 84.9% of students favour assessment rubrics grounded in intelligibility. ultimately, the study highlights an urgent need for higher education curricula in Libya and in broader EFL contexts to reorient pronunciation instruction toward the Lingua Franca Core, to integrate diverse World Englishes, and to validate students' natural bilingual L1 identities..

Keywords: English pronunciation, intelligibility, native-like accent, accent prestige, Libyan higher education, language attitudes

نطقٌ يضاهي المتحدثين الأصليين أم قابليةٌ للفهم؟ تصورات طلاب اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية في جامعة صبراتة حول اللمنة والتواصل الناجح

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المخلص

يميل مجال اكتساب اللغة الثانية المعاصر بشكل متزايد إلى تفضيل مبدأ "القابلية للفهم" على مبدأ "محاكاة المتحدث الأصلي" التقليدي؛ ومع ذلك، غالباً ما يجد متعلمو اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية أنفسهم عالقين بين متطلبات الوضوح في التواصل وبين الطموح إلى مطابقة المعايير القياسية للمتحدثين الأصليين، هذا وهدفت هذه الدراسة، التي اعتمدت منهجية مختلطة، إلى استكشاف هذه الازدواجية المعقدة لدى طلاب اللغة الإنجليزية في جامعة صبراتة، باحثاً في كيفية تأثير العوامل الاجتماعية مثل الدلالية، والمتغيرات الوجدانية، والخبرات التعليمية على أهداف النطق التي يتبناها المتعلمون، ولغرض جمع البيانات، استُخدمت عينة طبقية ملائمة شملت 73 طالباً من مرحلتَي البكالوريوس والدراسات العليا في جامعة صبراتة، حيث أكملوا استبانة تضمنت 24 بنداً رئيسياً وفق مقياس "ليكرت"، بالإضافة إلى أسئلة نوعية مقالية تهدف إلى استكشاف استراتيجيات الطلاب، وتحليل البيانات للحصول على نتائج تدعم هدف الدراسة، خضعت البيانات الكمية المستمدة من الاستبانة لتقييم منهجي باستخدام الإحصاءات الوصفية والاستدلالية، بينما خلّلت الردود النصية النوعية باستخدام التحليل الموضوعي. وكشفت النتائج عن مفارقة لافتة بين "الأيدولوجيا" و"البراغماتية": فعلى الرغم من أن الغالبية العظمى (90.4%) اتفقوا على أن التواصل الناجح يعتمد على وضوح الكلام لا على إتقان اللكنة، إلا أن 75.3% منهم أعربوا في الوقت نفسه عن طموح شخصي لمحاكاة المعايير الصوتية للمتحدثين الأصليين، وتُعزى هذه الأفضلية المستمرة بقوة إلى عوامل مثل المكانة الاجتماعية والاقتصادية المتوقعة، ومزايا التوظيف، وتعزيز الثقة الذاتية التي تُعد أمراً ضرورياً، وعلاوة على ذلك، برز تباين مؤسسي ملحوظ، إذ غالباً ما يفرض المعلمون المحليون نماذج نطق خاصة بالمتحدثين الأصليين، في حين يفضل 84.9% من الطلاب معايير تقييم تركز على مبدأ القابلية للفهم، وفي الختام، تسلط الدراسة الضوء على حاجة ملحة لمراجعة مناهج التعليم العالي في ليبيا وفي سياقات تعليم اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية بشكل عام لإعادة توجيه تدريس النطق نحو جوهر اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة تواصل مشترك، ودمج تنوعات "اللغة الإنجليزية العالمية"، والاعتراف بهوية الطلاب الطبيعية ثنائية اللغة والمرتبطة بلغتهم الأم.

الكلمات المفتاحية: نطق اللغة الإنجليزية، القابلية للفهم، لكنة تضاهي المتحدث الأصلي، مكانة اللكنة، التعليم العالي في ليبيا، الاتجاهات اللغوية

1. Introduction

Pronunciation holds a unique position in second language acquisition since it plays a dual role: it functions both as a mechanical medium for spoken communication and as a clear marker of identity, social positioning, and linguistic affiliation. According to Levis (2005, 2018), English language teaching approaches worked for decades under the implicit assumption that the ultimate aim of teaching pronunciation in a second or foreign language is to fully eliminate the phonological influence of the first language (L1) in favour of standard Inner-Circle native varieties, chiefly Received Pronunciation (RP) and General American (GA). Levis (2005) labelled this orientation the Nateness Principle, and it regards any departure from native phonetic norms as a linguistic deficiency that calls for remedial intervention. Within this framework, advanced language proficiency is equated with speech free of accent, which casts the native speaker as the only legitimate authority on linguistic correctness.

Yet the demographic realities of communication in today's world have made the Nateness Principle progressively outdated. Non-native speakers of English now outnumber native speakers by more than three to one, and the great majority of international exchanges occur among multilingual individuals who use English as a Lingua Franca (ELF).

In these expanding-circle settings, requiring learners to match Inner-Circle native accents is not only pedagogically unrealistic for most adult L2 learners, given critical period constraints, but also

unnecessary in functional terms for attaining mutual intelligibility. As a result, SLA researchers and phonologists have promoted the Intelligibility Principle, which reframes the core aim of pronunciation teaching as maximising communicative clarity, functional effectiveness, and ease of processing for the listener, rather than erasing accent.

Even with this theoretical shift in the academic literature, empirical studies repeatedly show that EFL learners in a wide range of geopolitical settings still display a strong psychological preference for standard native accents. Learners frequently absorb accent hierarchies that elevate RP and GA, regarding their own L1-influenced speech as flawed or inferior. Driven by structural accentism, socio-economic prestige, and conventional educational curricula, this phenomenon produces considerable pronunciation anxiety, weakens learners' self-efficacy, and makes L2 identity negotiation more difficult.

In higher education contexts such as those in Libya, this tension is particularly apparent. EFL students at Libyan universities operate within an educational system in which formal teaching, assessment criteria, and instructional materials have traditionally favoured native-speaker standards, despite the fact that students' primary real-world communication needs involve international, multilingual exchanges (Elabbar, 2011; Tamtam et al., 2011). While recent localised studies have

examined segmental errors and phonological difficulties among Libyan learners, empirical research on how Libyan university students conceptualise English accents, negotiate identity, and balance intelligibility against native-likeness is still scarce.

1.2 Research Questions and Research Objectives

To tackle the tension between nativeness and intelligibility that shape EFL learners' pronunciation goals, this study sets up the following Research questions and objectives:

Research Questions

1. To what extent does the variance in EFL students' pronunciation targets stem from nativeness-oriented aspirations versus intelligibility-oriented communicative goals?
2. In what ways do socio-indexical factors and affective variables shape EFL learners' preference for standard Inner-Circle accents over intelligible L1-influenced speech?

Research Objectives

1. To assess how far EFL learners at Sabratha University follow the Nativeness Principle rather than the Intelligibility Principle when they set their own pronunciation goals.
2. To examine how socio-indexical factors, affective variables and educational experiences affect learners' accent preferences and pronunciation anxiety.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Framework

The Nateness Principle, holds that L2 speakers have to try to reproduce the phonological systems of native speakers, treating any deviation resulting from first-language (L1) transfer as a linguistic deficiency that needs remediation.

Principle	Nateness	Intelligibility
Objective	Eliminate the L1 accent so as to approximate standard native models	Maximize how well listeners understand and how easily they can process the message
Standard of reference	Received Pronunciation (RP) / General American (GA)	Effective communication in a range of different contexts
Assessment	Binary (native-like versus deficient)	Multidimensional (accentedness, comprehensibility, intelligibility)

During the last thirty years, this paradigm has encountered systematic challenges from both theory and empirical research.

2.1.2 The Conceptual Evolution: Nateness versus Intelligibility Principles

The theoretical basis of research on L2 pronunciation shifted paradigms after the empirical studies of Munro and Derwing (1995), which showed that L2 speech production needs to be assessed through three separate, partly independent constructs:

Intelligibility: how much a listener genuinely comprehends the speaker's intended message (assessed through objective word or sentence transcription tasks).

Comprehensibility: the listener's subjective judgment of how easy or hard the speaker's utterance is to process (assessed with scalar ratings).

Accentedness: how much the speaker's phonological patterns deviate from the phonetic norms of a particular reference variety (assessed through scalar nateness ratings).

Munro and Derwing (1995, 2022) indicated that a speaker may have a strong L1-influenced accent yet still be fully intelligible and highly comprehensible, a result confirmed in more recent listener-based studies comparing native and non-native English varieties (Verbeke & Simon, 2023). As a result, the Intelligibility Principle became the leading pedagogical alternative. It maintains that the main goal of pronunciation teaching is to promote clear, functionally effective communication instead of accent-free speech (Levis, 2005, 2018; Derwing & Munro, 2015).

Construct	What it measures
Accentedness → Perceived different from a reference norm	How listeners perceive it
Comprehensibility → Perceived processing effort	Subjective ease
Intelligibility → Actual decoding of the message	Objective success

There is a key insight which argues that a strong accent does not mean poor intelligibility. According to Jenkins (2000, 2007) and Seidlhofer (2011), this theoretical shift corresponds to the

demographic realities of English as an International Language and English as a Lingua Franca. Nowadays, non-native English speakers greatly outnumber native speakers, and the overwhelming majority of global interactions in English occur among multilingual individuals who use the language as a common medium of communication (Bayyurt, 2018). In such ELF contexts, imposing native-speaker phonological norms, for instance, mastery of the dental fricatives /θ, ð/ or fine vowel quality distinctions, frequently turns out to be unnecessary for successful mutual understanding (Jenkins, 2000).

Even with this pedagogical shift, empirical studies show a lasting mismatch between SLA theory and learner psychology. EFL learners in a wide range of educational settings keep demonstrating a strong preference for standard Inner-Circle accents, particularly RP and GA (Tsang, 2020, 2024; Tsunemoto & McDonough, 2021). This preference is maintained by deeply entrenched socio-indexical factors:

- **Accent prestige and social mobility:** standard native accents are often linked to higher education, professional competence, and social status.
- **Pronunciation anxiety and self-efficacy:** fear of negative evaluation by peers, teachers, or native speakers frequently causes learners to see their L1 accent as a personal failure (Sardegna et al., 2014; Rahimi & Ruzrokh, 2016).
- **Structural native-speakerism:** as Jeong and Lindemann (2025) observe, even instructional models centred on “intelligibility” can quietly reproduce native-speaker ideologies if the standard for what counts as “intelligible” stays tied to inner-circle listening habits.

2.2 Accent Prestige, Employability, and Affective Variables in ELF Contexts

Although applied linguistics theory overwhelmingly supports the Intelligibility Principle, learner attitudes around the world reveal a complex and frequently contradictory sociolinguistic reality. Research carried out in East Asia, Europe, and the Middle East indicates that EFL learners often express a strong wish to acquire standard British or American accents (Nowacka, 2012; Tsang, 2020, 2024; Tsunemoto & McDonough, 2021).

This enduring preference for native models stems from powerful socio-indexical factors:

- **Social Prestige and Status:** Standard Inner-Circle accents possess symbolic capital, which leads listeners to link RP and GA with greater intelligence, better education, and higher social standing (Tsang, 2020; Verbeke & Simon, 2023).
- **Perceived Employability:** Learners often assume that multinational employers judge a candidate's competence by how native-like their accent sounds, and they fear that an L1 accent will result in professional discrimination or limited career mobility (Tsang, 2024).
- **Affective Vulnerability and Pronunciation Anxiety:** Being unable to meet an artificial native standard often produces negative psychological effects, such as speech hesitation, fear of negative

evaluation, lower speaking self-efficacy, and avoidance of oral communication (Rahimi & Ruzrokh, 2016; Sardegna et al., 2014).

To counteract these negative affective patterns, researchers stress the need to foster "international posture" (Sifakis et al., 2018) and to broaden exposure to diverse World Englishes. When learners encounter proficient non-native speakers in global settings, their accent-related anxiety diminishes, and their acceptance of L1-influenced speech grows (Bayyurt, 2018; Tsang, 2020).

2.3 The Local Libyan Context: Phonological Challenges, Pedagogical Norms, and Accent Attitudes

In Libyan higher education, English language instruction holds a crucial strategic role aimed at advancing national development, academic exchange, and global scientific integration. Yet the pedagogical landscape for teaching spoken English in Libyan universities is shaped by distinctive historical, structural, and linguistic conditions (Elabbar, 2011; Tamtam et al., 2011).

From a linguistic standpoint, Libyan EFL learners encounter considerable phonological transfer challenges arising from the systemic differences between Standard Arabic phonology and English phonological structures (Omar, 2026). Empirical studies of Libyan learners' speech production reveal persistent segmental and suprasegmental difficulties:

- **Segmental Substitutions:** Libyan students often replace the voiceless bilabial plosive /p/ with its voiced counterpart /b/, since /p/ does not exist in Arabic phoneme inventories (Aboushi, 2023; Habebi, 2026). Likewise, the labiodental fricative /v/ is commonly substituted with /f/, while the dental fricatives /θ/ and /ð/ are frequently produced as alveolar stops /t/ and /d/ or sibilants /s/ and /z/ (Al-Yami & Athwary, 2021; Aboushi, 2023).
- **Syllable Structure and Epenthesis:** Since Arabic phonotactics strictly control consonant clusters, Libyan learners habitually insert epenthetic vowels (e.g., pronouncing street /stri:t/ as /istri:t/ or /sətəri:t/) to break up complex onset or coda clusters (Habebi, 2026).
- **Vowel Length and Quality:** The reduction of vowels in unstressed syllables creates considerable difficulties, as Libyan learners tend to produce short vowels with full cardinal vowel qualities or to change distinctions in vowel length (Aboushi, 2023; Habebi, 2026).

From a pedagogical standpoint, these phonological difficulties have traditionally been addressed through a rigid deficit perspective in Libyan university curricula. According to Embarek (2026) and Habebi (2026), instruction in Libyan higher education institutions has conventionally emphasized formal grammatical accuracy and mechanical accent reduction rather than communicative fluency and pragmatic effectiveness. Oral assessments in university exams and classrooms often reward native-like pronunciation while penalising phonetic features influenced by the L1, irrespective of whether such features hinder actual listener comprehension (Abukhattala, 2016).

In addition, instructional settings at Libyan universities frequently lack systematic exposure to international varieties of English. As Aboushi (2023) and Baba (2025) note, listening materials in textbooks and teacher modelling in Libyan classrooms depend almost entirely on standard RP or GA audio recordings. As a result, students gain little pedagogical affirmation of their bilingual identity, which leads many to internalise the belief that a Libyan Arabic accent in English signifies academic failure instead of a natural expression of multilingualism. Khalid (2025) highlights how language apps and interactive learning games can enhance EFL learners' motivation to improve their speaking skills. He also notes the importance of listening to native speakers through various media channels to sharpen listening comprehension and pronunciation, helping to reduce the natural influence of a learner's first language.

Recent research on learner attitudes in Libyan tertiary institutions points to an emerging shift. Although Libyan students are strongly motivated to attain high English proficiency for academic progress and employment, initial evidence suggests a rising recognition of communicative clarity as the main prerequisite for real-world interactions (Embarek, 2026). Nevertheless, empirical studies that systematically assess how Libyan university EFL students manage the conflict between native-speaker prestige and communicative intelligibility through validated multi-item scales are still absent.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study used a mixed-methods survey research design to capture both quantitative distributions and qualitative subtleties in Sabratha University EFL students' assessments of English accents and effective communication. Participants' responses on structured subscales measuring nativeness orientation, intelligibility efficacy, accent prestige, identification, affect, and pedagogical experiences were evaluated in the quantitative section. The qualitative component looked at participants' open-ended thoughts on how they characterise a "successful" L2 speaker and how they balance accent targets with clarity.

3.2 Participants

The sample consisted of 73 EFL students enrolled in English language degree programs at Sabratha University. A voluntary, stratified convenience sampling strategy was used to ensure representation across different academic levels (1st through 8th semester, graduates, post-graduates).

Table 1 presents the demographic and language background profile of the 73 participants:

Demographic Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Female	52	71.2%
	Male	21	28.8%

Academic Level	1st – 2nd Semester	12	14.0%
	3rd – 4th Semester	14	21.0%
	5th – 6th Semester	13	23.0%
	7th – 8th Semester	15	20.0%
	Graduates	11	12.0%
	Post-Graduates	9	10.0%
Self-Rated English Proficiency	Elementary / Pre-Intermediate	24	32.9%
	Intermediate	31	42.5%
	Upper-Intermediate / Advanced	18	24.6%
Primary Teacher Accent Model	Mainly British English	28	38.4%
	Mainly American English	21	28.8%
	Mixture of Native Accents	16	21.9%
	Mainly Non-Native English Accent	8	11.0%

Table 1 illustrates that the sample consisted mainly of females (71.2%), mirroring typical enrolment demographics in the English Departments at Sabratha University. Participants represented various academic years, with the greatest concentration in upper-level undergraduate semesters. Significantly, 67.2% of students indicated that their university teachers mainly employed standard native accents (British or American), highlighting the prevalence of Inner-Circle models in formal teaching settings.

3.3 Data-collection Tool

The survey tool was adapted from the EFL Students' Views on English Pronunciation, Accent, Native-Likeness, and Comprehensibility Questionnaire (EPNI-Q): (Educational Process and Networked Learning Inventory Questionnaire). The device consisted of three main parts:

Section A: Demographic and Pedagogical Profile: Documented gender, semester level, self-assessed skill, and main teacher accent patterns.

Section B: Core Quantitative part: Included 24 functional Likert-scale items assessing six primary latent variables, where every Likert item was based on a 5-point scale from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree):

- Orientation towards Nativeness
- Intelligibility and Functional Effectiveness
- Socio-Economic Prestige and Employability
- Accent, L1 Identity, and Global Ownership

- Anxiety Related to Affect and Pronunciation
- Pedagogy and Assessment Realignment

Section C: Qualitative part: Comprised two open-ended qualitative questions requesting participants to describe their strategies for balancing the desire to sound native with the need for clarity, and how they characterise a "successful" English speaker.

3.4 Data Analysis

Descriptive and inferential statistical techniques were used to clean-code and evaluate quantitative data. The central tendency (Mean, M) and dispersion (Standard Deviation, SD) of scale items were evaluated. To assess relative endorsement across subscales, composite construct scores were calculated. High Cronbach's alpha coefficients ($\alpha = .84$ to $.89$ across subscales) for the core battery's internal consistency reliability confirmed the instrument's reliability.

Thematic analysis was used to examine qualitative textual data from the open-ended prompts in accordance with Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase paradigm. To find recurrent thematic patterns of anxiety, professional identity, accent choice, and communicative Effectiveness, responses were inductively coded.

4. Results and Empirical Findings

4.1 Quantitative Results across Core Constructs

The 73 respondents' quantitative results show a complicated duality in learner attitudes. The descriptive statistics (M and SD) for each of the major survey items, categorised by operational construct, are shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics for EPNI-Q Survey Items (N = 73)

Item Code & Construct / Statement	Mean (M)	SD	Agreement (%)
Nativeness Orientation			
1 My primary goal in learning English pronunciation is to sound as close as possible to a native speaker.	3.92	1.04	75.3%
2 A highly proficient EFL speaker should have little to no foreign accent when speaking English.	3.45	1.18	56.2%
3 I feel that my English-speaking capability is incomplete if I retain my native language (L1) accent.	3.22	1.25	46.6%
4 Acquiring a native-like accent is a direct indicator of overall English language mastery.	3.68	1.11	64.4%
5 I would be disappointed if I achieved high fluency while retaining a noticeable L1 accent.	3.51	1.12	58.9%
Intelligibility & Functional Efficacy			
6 As long as listeners understand my message easily,	4.18	0.89	82.2%

sounding like a native speaker is unnecessary.			
7 Successful communications in English depend on speech clarity rather than accent perfection.	4.45	0.73	90.4%
8 Having a non-native accent does not imply that a speaker's English is deficient or inferior.	4.15	0.90	83.6%
Socio-Economic Prestige & Employability			
9 Speaking with a standard British or American accent makes a speaker sound more educated.	3.86	0.98	71.2%
10 Developing a native-like accent significantly improves future career and employment opportunities.	4.05	0.91	79.5%
11 People take an English speaker more seriously if they speak with a native-like accent.	3.79	1.02	67.1%
12 Employers evaluate job applicants' proficiency largely by how native-like they sound.	3.71	0.96	63.0%
13 Standard British and American accents carry higher social prestige than non-native accents.	3.95	0.94	74.0%
Accent, L1 Identity, & Global Ownership			
14 My English accent is an important reflection of my cultural and linguistic identity.	3.64	1.10	61.6%
15 English belongs to all global users who communicate in it, not exclusively to native speakers.	4.26	0.88	86.3%
16 Speaking English with a Libyan/Arabic accent is fully acceptable as long as communication is clear.	3.97	0.95	76.7%
Affect & Pronunciation Anxiety			
17 I sometimes avoid speaking English because I am embarrassed by my pronunciation.	2.88	1.21	34.2%
18 I am confident in my overall speaking ability, regardless of my accent strength.	3.56	1.08	58.9%
19 I would feel significantly more confident speaking English if I possessed a native-like accent.	4.11	0.96	80.8%
Pedagogical & Assessment Realignment			
20 My English teachers have explicitly encouraged me to adopt a specific native English accent.	3.73	1.05	65.8%
21 Pronunciation assessment in university courses should be based on intelligibility, not native norms.	4.22	0.84	84.9%
22 Teachers should validate students who speak clear English with a noticeable L1-influenced accent.	4.30	0.79	87.7%
23 Exposure to diverse non-native English accents makes me less worried about having a native accent.	3.84	0.99	69.9%
24 EFL students should be systematically trained to understand various regional/international accents.	4.08	0.87	78.1%

Note: Scale: 1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree.

Descriptive Means by Latent Construct

- Intelligibility and Functional Effectiveness 4.26
- Pedagogy and Assessment Realignment 4.05
- Accent, L1 Identity, and Global Ownership 3.96
- Socio-Economic Prestige and Employability 3.91
- Orientation towards Nateness 3.56
- Anxiety Related to Affect and Pronunciation 3.52

4.2 Analysis of Key Empirical Findings

4.2.1 The Ideological Paradox: High Nateness Aspiration versus Firm Intelligibility

Support

The coexistence of strong nateness ambitions and almost universal support for the Intelligibility Principle is a crucial finding of this study. On the one hand, 75.3% of participants agree that their main objective when it comes to pronunciation is to sound as similar to a native speaker as possible (1, $M = 3.92$, $SD = 1.04$). However, 82.2% believe that native-likeness is not necessary as long as the message is clearly understood (6, $M = 4.18$, $SD = 0.89$), and 90.4% agree that effective communication depends on speech clarity rather than accent perfection (7, $M = 4.45$, $SD = 0.73$).

This data pattern shows that although Libyan students at Sabratha University understand that functional clarity is a logical prerequisite for communication, they nonetheless have a strong desire to approximate native phonological objectives.

4.2.2 Socio-Economic Prestige and Professional Employability

Support for native accents is closely associated with external social and financial benefits. Standard American and British accents are perceived by a sizable majority of students as having higher social status (13, $M = 3.95$, $SD = 0.94$, 74.0% agreement) and as making a speaker sound more educated (9, $M = 3.86$, $SD = 0.98$, 71.2% agreement).

Moreover, 63.0% of participants are convinced that employers evaluate language proficiency primarily based on accent native-likeness (12, $M = 3.71$, $SD = 0.96$), and 79.5% of participants believe that developing a native-like accent significantly improves future career and employment opportunities (10, $M = 4.05$, $SD = 0.91$). These findings demonstrate that learner desire for standard native accents is not merely an aesthetic preference, but a pragmatic response to perceived labour-market discrimination and social status.

4.2.3 Ownership of English, L1 Identity, and Local Accent Acceptance

In terms of ownership and identity, participants showed a strong connection with ELF and World Englishes concepts. Remarkably, 86.3% of participants agreed that English is not just used by native

speakers but by all users worldwide who communicate in it (15, $M = 4.26$, $SD = 0.88$).

Speaking English with a Libyan or Arabic-influenced accent is completely acceptable in the local context as long as communication is clear, according to 76.7% of respondents (16, $M = 3.97$, $SD = 0.95$). Furthermore, 83.6% disagreed with the deficit model, concurring that a speaker's non-native accent does not indicate that their English is poor or inadequate (8, $M = 4.15$, $SD = 0.90$).

4.2.4 Affective Dynamics and Confidence Boosts

A significant psychological relationship between accent and confidence was found in pronunciation self-efficacy and emotion. An overwhelming 80.8% declared they would feel much more comfortable speaking English if they had a native-like accent (19, $M = 4.11$, $SD = 0.96$), despite the fact that only 34.2% of students said they avoided speaking English because of accent discomfort (17, $M = 2.88$, $SD = 1.21$). This suggests that even for students who are already functionally communicative, native-like pronunciation serves as a significant psychological confidence boost.

4.2.5 Institutional Realignment and Pedagogical Mandates

Data regarding institutional practices highlight a clear call for pedagogical reform. While 65.8% of students stated that their teachers specifically urged them to adopt particular native accents (20, $M = 3.73$, $SD = 1.05$), 84.9% said that intelligibility, not native-speaker norms, should be the basis for university pronunciation assessment (21, $M = 4.22$, $SD = 0.84$).

Furthermore, 78.1% supported systematic training in comprehending global regional and international English accents (24, $M = 4.08$, $SD = 0.87$), while 87.7% maintained that teachers should explicitly validate students who speak clear English with a noticeable L1-influenced accent (22, $M = 4.30$, $SD = 0.79$).

4.3 Qualitative Perspectives: Defining Communicative Success and Balancing Ideals

Deeper context about how students view effective communication and strike a compromise between native accent targets and communicative clarity was revealed by qualitative analysis of the open-ended responses.

Theme 1: Pragmatic Prioritisation of Intelligibility Over Perfection

Participants consistently indicated a hierarchy of requirements when asked how they strike a balance between the desire to sound native and the emphasis on being understood in actual interactions. Clarity is seen as the unavoidable standard, even though sounding native is still the ultimate goal.

“My main goal in genuine interactions is to communicate my ideas effectively so that the other person can comprehend me without difficulty. I never compromise clarity or stop speaking

because I do not sound like a native speaker, but I still strive to make my pronunciation sound more sophisticated.” (Participant 14, Postgraduate)

“Wanting to sound like a native speaker is a long-term personal goal, but in the classroom or in daily life, clarity is what actually matters. If people understand what I mean, communication is successful, regardless of my Libyan accent.” (Participant 42, 7th Semester)

Qualitative Theme Distribution

Functional Clarity and Precision	45%
Confidence and Expressive Efficacy	32%
Native-Like Fluency and Elegance	15%
Sociolinguistic Adaptability	8%

Theme 2: Redefining the "Successful" L2 Speaker

The qualitative replies showed a clear rejection of the conventional native-speaking baseline in favour of functional, self-assured, and adaptable communication when defining what a "successful" English speaker is.

“A successful English speaker is someone who can connect with individuals from other countries, confidently convey complicated concepts, and accurately describe their thoughts. Being easily understood is more important than hiding your origins.” (Participant 29, 8th Semester)

“I define success in English as having a large vocabulary, speaking clearly, and being fluent. A person with a strong accent who effectively conveys smart ideas is more successful than someone with flawless native grammar and accent but is unable to hold a serious intellectual discussion.” (Participant 61, Postgraduate)

5. Discussion

The study's empirical results provide a complex, critical picture of how English accents, pronunciation goals, and communicative effectiveness are perceived by Sabratha University EFL students. What can be called the "Ideology versus Pragmatism Paradox" characterises the complicated psychological state revealed by the evidence.

5.1 The Ideology Versus Pragmatism Paradox

The fundamental psychological and socio-indexical conflict that contemporary English as a foreign language learners face is encapsulated in the Ideology against Pragmatism Paradox. On the one hand, the communicative dimension is represented by Pragmatic Reality, where Intelligibility Efficacy (90%) serves as the main functional driver, emphasizing successful engagement, mutual understanding, and functional clarity in a worldwide English as a Lingua Franca scenario. The Native-

Like Model (75%), on the other hand, continues to be highly sought after due to the social prestige, elevated institutional status, and increased career confidence associated with standard Inner-Circle accents (such as British RP or General American). This reflects deeply ingrained socio-cultural values. The bidirectional arrow between these two poles illustrates an ongoing internal struggle: learners are simultaneously drawn toward native-speaker phonological targets by broader socioeconomic pressures and accent prestige, even though they functionally recognize that intelligibility is more than sufficient for successful real-world communication

- **The Pragmatic-Communicative Plane:** Rooted in the Intelligibility Principle, on which 90.4% of students give priority to functional clarity and 86.3% affirm global ownership of English. On this plane, students acknowledge that within real-world ELF settings, an L1 Arabic accent does not by its nature hinder communication.
- **The Ideological-Prestige Plane:** Driven by deeply embedded sociolinguistic hierarchies, on which 75.3% of students aim for native-like pronunciation and more than 70% link RP/GA accents to higher education, prestige, and employment advantage.

This duality corresponds with global findings by Tsang (2020, 2024) in Hong Kong and Tsunemoto and McDonough (2021) in Japan, where EFL learners endorse intelligibility in theory yet aspire to native models in practice. In the Libyan setting, this paradox is intensified further by structural factors; although students know that global English belongs to multilingual speakers, local academic and corporate markets keep sending signals that favour native-like articulation.

5.2 Local Contextualisation: L1 Identity and Institutional Realities

When contextualized against local Libyan literature, these findings provide important insights into the learner experience. Earlier phonological research in Libya has repeatedly recorded segmental transfer errors, including /p/-/b/ neutralization, /v/-/f/ substitution, and epenthetic vowel insertion (Aboushi, 2023; Habebi, 2026). Traditionally, such phonological features were regarded as pedagogical failures that demanded strict correction.

Nevertheless, the present study indicates that Libyan university students are progressing past this deficit perspective. A striking 76.7% of respondents hold that speaking English with an Arabic-influenced accent is entirely acceptable provided the speech is intelligible. This points to a growing bilingual confidence among Libyan higher education students, who increasingly see their accent as a natural part of their multilingual identity rather than evidence of linguistic incompetence.

Even with this change in student identity, institutional practices at Libyan universities remain behind. More than 65% of participants reported that their instructors still openly require adherence to standard native models. This mismatch between students' communicative realities and institutional demands generates needless pronunciation anxiety, with 80.8% of students stating that their confidence would rise if they had a native accent. As Embarek (2026) argues, striking a balance

among fluency, accuracy, and learner confidence calls for higher education institutions to update their pedagogical paradigms in light of learners' actual needs.

6. Pedagogical Implications for Higher Education

The empirical findings obtained in this study offer actionable directions for reforming English pronunciation instruction, assessment methods, and curriculum planning at Sabratha University and other Libyan universities as well as in wider EFL settings.

• Shift Assessment Frameworks toward Intelligibility and Communicative Effectiveness

The standards used to evaluate students at universities need to be separated from the expectation that learners should sound like native speakers. Rubrics for oral assessment in Libyan higher education ought to measure how clearly a speaker communicates, how well ideas are grouped, where nuclear stress falls, and how efficiently the message is conveyed, instead of deducting marks for L1 phonetic features that do not hinder understanding (for example, replacing /p/ with /b/ in ways that create no ambiguity of meaning within the given context).

• Implement the Lingua Franca Core (LFC) within Pronunciation Curricula

Teaching hours should be redirected away from segmental drills of limited value (such as requiring students to perfect the dental fricatives /θ, ð/) and toward suprasegmental elements that yield the greatest benefit for comprehensibility, including sentence stress, nuclear accent placement, control of speech rate, and clarity of articulation (Jenkins, 2000; Levis, 2018).

• Integrate Diverse World Englishes and ELF Listening Models

In order to reduce accent anxiety and to take apart structural native-speaker bias, the listening materials used at universities must go past the usual RP and GA recordings. When students hear and watch audio and video of highly competent non-native English speakers drawn from a range of regional and international contexts, L1-influenced speech becomes normalised, pronunciation-related anxiety decreases, and learners develop greater flexibility in listening across global situations (Bayyurt, 2018; Tsang, 2020).

• Provide Explicit Training in Strategic Communication and Pragmatic Repair

Pronunciation classes should provide students with explicit strategies for communication and repair, including correcting oneself, restating ideas in different words, adjusting speed, and asking for clarification. Giving learners these pragmatic resources can strengthen their confidence as speakers and allow them to manage breakdowns in communication with assurance, no matter how strong their accent may be.

• Validate Bilingual Identity and Address Structural Accentism

Teachers at universities should encourage classroom discussions regarding language ideologies, the status attached to certain accents, and the global ownership of English. When students' first language is affirmed as something valuable instead of a weakness, they are better able to build a

constructive bilingual identity and to break down the inner obstacles tied to feeling ashamed of their accent.

7. Conclusion

This research examined how EFL students in Sabratha University perceive English accents, what pronunciation targets they hold, and what they regard as successful communication. Survey data collected from 73 participants show that although these learners place functional intelligibility, clarity, and global ownership of English far ahead of other priorities in communicative settings, they still hold a firmly idealised image of standard British and American accents driven by social prestige, perceived employability, and affective confidence needs.

By bridging the global theoretical discourse on the Intelligibility Principle with local empirical realities in Libyan higher education, this study highlights the urgent need to align university instruction and assessment rubrics with contemporary ELF realities. If pronunciation instruction is overhauled to foreground communicative effectiveness, validate L1 identity, and include international English varieties, higher education institutions will be able to prepare confident, highly competent multilingual communicators who can thrive in a globally connected world.

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