



Bias on the Tip of the Tongue: Addressing Accent Bias in English Speaking Assessments

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Abstract: This paper examines accent bias within English speaking assessments, drawing on Global Englishes to explain its detrimental effects on students' educational opportunities and overall language acquisition. It explores the psychological and social underpinnings of accent bias, highlighting its negative impact on non-native speakers' confidence, motivation, and engagement in language learning. The paper also addresses systemic adjustments to current evaluation methods, emphasizing the importance of inclusiveness and the recognition of linguistic diversity. Strategies such as specialized training for evaluators and the implementation of holistic assessment criteria are proposed to mitigate accent-related biases and promote a more equitable and supportive environment for all language learners.

Keywords: accent bias, accent discrimination, English speaking assessments, linguistic diversity, educational equity, Global Englishes

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Introduction

Accent bias is the prejudice toward speakers whose pronunciation diverges from a socially favored norm. In language-assessment contexts, such bias surfaces when raters associate so-called 'native-like' pronunciation with overall proficiency, even when intelligibility remains high (Derwing & Munro, 2009; Pantos & Perkins, 2012). Because such ratings restrict access to academic and professional opportunities, they create epistemic injustice (Peled & Bonotti, 2019), and can lead to discrimination in various settings, including classrooms and workplaces (Chin, 2010; Chakraborty et al., 2017). Such bias distorts educational access and daily social interactions, undermining learners' cognitive, affective, and behavioral well-being (Tan et al., 2021). To combat accent discrimination, it is crucial to incorporate accent-related discussions in language pedagogy and promote a more holistic understanding of foreign accents in English language acquisition (Uzun, 2023).

From a sociocultural perspective, the issue becomes clearer. Learning, as Vygotsky (1978) explains, is a developmental process supported by interactions. Traditional pronunciation scales focus on fixed outcomes, rewarding prior privilege rather than future potential. In contrast, dynamic-

assessment models include guidance during the test and emphasize learners' progress in mastering pronunciation features (Daneshfar & Moharami, 2018). These models focus on development instead of results and reveal how accent bias affects judgments of ability.

Sociolinguistic research further explains why such bias persists. Accents reflect social identities; therefore, listeners often favor in-group speech and mark 'other' accents as deficient, a tendency rooted in ethnocentrism (Chakraborty, 2017). Global-Englishes scholarship shows that most English interactions now occur among non-native speakers, making multiple norms not only possible but necessary (Jenkins, 2006). Accent discrimination, however, still limits some identities from being legitimate users of English, limiting their sense of belonging (Uzun, 2023). In short, bias thrives where social hierarchy intersects with linguistic expectations.

Consequently, assessment policies must ask whose pronunciation is being privileged and why. Equitable practice therefore requires three moves: explicit, intelligibility-based rating criteria; metalinguistic-awareness training for raters; and feedback that values communication over nativeness (Derwing & Munro, 2009; Peled & Bonotti, 2019). When assessment acknowledges accent diversity as normal rather than irregular, it can support, not silence, multilingual speakers.

Problem Statement

Within spoken-English assessments, accent bias poses a threat to fairness. Raters often link 'native-like' pronunciation with competence, despite evidence that intelligibility, not nativeness, best predicts communicative success (Derwing & Munro, 2009). Score penalties negatively impact multilingual learners' confidence, motivation, and willingness to participate fully in English-medium settings. Assessment systems therefore require rater trainings, comprehensive assessment criteria that value meaning negotiation, and technology-enabled tools that monitor scoring inconsistencies.

Accent bias is a widespread issue in language assessments, where native-like pronunciation is often unfairly prioritized over clear communication. Changing this discrimination requires viewing English as a global language with many accents. Building on Global Englishes, this paper suggests shifting assessment standards to focus on intelligibility and shared ownership of English, ensuring fair and inclusive evaluation for all speakers.

In the following sections, the paper begins by establishing Global Englishes as a theoretical framework that challenges native-speaker bias and emphasizes listener intelligibility. It then discusses accent bias within this framework, exploring its mechanisms in language assessment. Subsequent parts review the social and psychological impacts of accent bias, followed by a critical evaluation of current rating scales. The paper then proposes four interconnected solutions: reorienting assessment rubrics, enhancing rater literacy, fostering inclusive pedagogy, and using technology to ensure equitable evaluation. Finally, the conclusion synthesizes the arguments and outlines future directions.

Theoretical Framework: Accent Bias through the Lens of Global Englishes

Working Definition

To begin, it should be pointed out that within the scope of this current paper, the term Global Englishes is preferred over World Englishes. This is because Global Englishes serves as a comprehensive concept that combines World Englishes scholarship with studies on English as a Lingua Franca, and English as an International Language. This perspective emphasizes speaker

mobility, negotiated intelligibility, and the critique of native-speaker norms, all of which are elements crucial for analyzing accent bias (Jenkins, 2014).

Building on this perspective, the analysis of accent bias necessitates an exploration of how Global Englishes reshapes our understanding of linguistic identity and competence. By challenging traditional norms centered on native-speaker ideals, Global Englishes provides a lens to critically examine the social underpinnings of accent bias and its implications for inclusive communication and pedagogy. Accent bias is therefore defined as the systematic preference for pronunciation features tied to socially dominant English varieties; it judges competence by accent rather than by actual intelligibility (Jenkins, 2000; Levis, 2020).

Intelligibility Principle and Global Englishes-Informed Pedagogy

Research on Global Englishes has shifted the goal of pronunciation from imitating native speakers to achieving mutual intelligibility. Jenkins' Lingua Franca Core (LFC) identifies a set of segmental and suprasegmental features essential for maintaining intelligibility in international contexts (Jenkins, 2000; Deterding, 2012). Subsequent studies verify that listeners can comprehend accented speech when these core features are preserved, even if other sounds deviate from the norm (Sewell, 2010; Levis, 2020). Consequently, the principle of intelligibility prioritizes communication over nativeness in evaluative criteria.

Researchers have applied the Lingua Franca Core to Asian Englishes, illustrating how local phonetic patterns can still achieve global intelligibility standards (Deterding & Mohamad, 2016). Nevertheless, ongoing debates still question whether a single core can adequately accommodate every communicative context (Berns, 2008; Hung, 2002). Despite these discussions, the core has already impacted test design and classroom practices.

Scholars have also suggested that teaching should represent English's multiple identities. WE-informed pedagogy encourages instructors to present various models, promote positive attitudes toward accent variety, and instruct learners in strategic accommodation (Aoyama, 2023; Matsuda & Matsuda, 2017). Teacher-education programs adopting this approach report improvements in candidates' sociolinguistic awareness and their confidence in using inclusive methods (Vettorel, 2016). Classroom studies also indicate that explicit discussions of World Englishes enhance students' understanding of language politics (Crowther, 2019; Rajprasit, 2021).

Taken together, the intelligibility principle and Global Englishes-informed pedagogy expose accent bias as an ideological problem. Because listeners already achieve comprehension across a range of accents, negative judgments stem from social hierarchies, not communicative deficits (Berns, 2015; Jenkins, 2000). Therefore, assessment practices that penalize 'non-native' pronunciation may violate empirical evidence and perpetuate inequity. Reframing evaluation around intelligibility and diversity should provide the theoretical foundation for the policy and pedagogical reforms advanced in the remainder of this paper.

Impacts of Accent Bias

Assessment Fairness and Academic Impact

The issue of accent biases in the ESL speech assessments is increasingly recognized as an important obstacle to fair assessment, which has an impact on student scores and the overall language acquisition. Research indicates that evaluators can unconsciously prefer native accents, which can lead to lower scores for speakers with non-native accents, regardless of their true linguistic competence (Ruzigul, 2024). Such practices also contradict democratic ideals by denying

these speakers equal epistemic standing in public life (Peled & Bonotti, 2019). The implications of this bias can be deep, affecting the confidence and motivation of learners to engage in English-speaking contexts. These barriers fall especially hard on students of color, whose educational opportunities are already constrained by systemic inequities (Chin, 2010). Studies have also shown that speakers with non-native accents are often perceived as less competent which can disproportionately disadvantage students from various linguistic backgrounds (Hansen & Dovidio, 2016).

Psychosocial Mechanisms and Learner Engagement

The mechanism by which accent bias operates is both psychological and social. It was noted in the literature that biases can come from rooted stereotypes concerning language and culture, where accents are sometimes misinterpreted as indicators of intelligence or capacity (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), a process reinforced by ethnocentrism and social-identity construction around prestige varieties (Chakraborty, 2017). Research indicates that non-native accents typically trigger spontaneous negative biases, regardless of the specific accent type (Roessel et al., 2018). Such stigmatization reduces speakers' sense of social belonging and hinders everyday communication (Gluszek & Dovidio, 2010).

The effects of accent bias extend beyond the results of immediate assessment score. Non-native speakers meeting negative accent assessments may show a drop in self-efficacy, which is essential for the acquisition of a language. Studies have consistently demonstrated that students' perceptions of their accent and language proficiency can considerably influence their willingness to engage in communication within English-language classrooms. Those who view their accent as a hindrance are less inclined to participate in oral exchanges (Gluhareva & Munro, 2022; Zarrinabadi & Khodarahmi, 2017). The implications for language acquisition are therefore disastrous, because commitment to speaking activities is essential for the development of mastery of the language (Dörnyei & Ushoda, 2012).

Classroom Climate, Trust, and Systemic Barriers

The influence of the accent bias is also linked to broader psychosocial results. Freynet and Clément (2019) found that perceived accent discrimination can lead to negative social consequences, including a decrease in self-esteem and reluctance to participate in group discussions. Young learners with marginalized identities are especially vulnerable, as their contributions are more readily dismissed – a form of epistemic injustice (Baumtrog & Peach, 2019). These psycho-social repercussions are particularly outstanding in educational environments where active participation is often essential for language practices and skills development. It should be noted that students who perceive their accents as non-standard can experience a diminished sense of belonging, which, in turn, negatively affects their motivation to interact with their classmates and instructors (Schissel, 2023). This disconnection can create a bias cycle that hinders students' opportunities for significant linguistic practice, essential for an effective acquisition of language.

Moreover, the psychological effects of accent bias can result in a self-fulfilling prophecy, wherein students internalize negative perceptions regarding their linguistic abilities due to their accents. This internalization ultimately impacts their performance in both formal evaluations and informal communicative contexts, while at the same time arouse feelings of insufficiency among the learners of the English language, negatively influencing their self-esteem and their motivation to participate in speaking evaluations. Consequently, these biases not only undermine the confidence of students, but also hinder their desire to engage in communication practices. The internalization of these biases can lead to anxiety during evaluations, which has a negative impact on performance (Hosoda et al., 2023). The impact is moderated by whether learners view accent discrimination as legitimate;

when it is seen as justified, language confidence and identity suffer even more (Freynet & Clément, 2019).

Interestingly, the relationship between trust and language acquisition is notable; as researchers, like Schissel (2023) indicate, trust can enhance students' willingness to experiment with language, make errors, and ultimately improve their skills. Consequently, when stereotypes and biases related to accents influence educational evaluations, they may hinder the language development of ESL students. Similarly, evidence suggests that the stigma of certain accents can create systemic obstacles in educational establishments. Students with non-standard accents frequently signal feelings of alienation and discrimination, which can exacerbate academic challenges. Can (2024) indicates that teachers and learners in initial trainings often have linguistic attitudes that reflect biases against various English accents. Such perceptions can create a hostile learning environment and contribute to a lack of fair opportunities for students, ultimately influencing their global academic success.

Implications for Inclusive Assessment Practices

In summary, accent bias in ESL speaking assessments has extensive negative impacts, diminishing student confidence, motivation, and overall language acquisition. Addressing these issues aligns with Global Englishes principles that prioritize intelligibility and inclusivity over native-speaker norms (Jenkins, 2014). To establish a more equitable and supportive learning environment, it is essential to confront these biases directly. This requires systemic modifications in evaluation practices, with an emphasis on promoting inclusiveness and appreciating linguistic diversity.

Mitigating the Impacts of Accent Bias

To address accent bias, changes are needed in several areas of assessment. Using the Global Englishes framework, the next section recommends the following strategies: (1) adjusting rating systems to focus on communication success rather than native-like pronunciation, (2) training evaluators to understand and accept different English accents, (3) promoting inclusivity to ensure everyone shares the sense of ownership of the language, and (4) using technology to prevent unfair scoring. These steps aim to reduce the influence of native-speaker norms, and create fairer opportunities for multilingual speakers.

Systemic Changes: Re-orienting Rubrics to Intelligibility & Interaction

In light of the impact of accent biases, it is imperative to reform evaluation methods to enhance inclusiveness and acknowledge linguistic diversity. Consistent with the Global Englishes intelligibility principle, assessment criteria should focus more on whether a message is understood rather than whether it sounds 'native-like' (Jenkins, 2014; Levis, 2020). One effective approach is to implement standardized evaluation sections that prioritize content and communicative competence over accent-related aspects. Emphasizing the Lingua Franca Core can guide raters toward interactional success rather than accent policing (Deterding, 2012; Jenkins, 2000). By focusing on message delivery and clarity rather than penalizing specific phonetic features, educators can diminish the perceived significance of accents and foster a more equitable evaluation environment.

It is important to highlight that the systemic nature of the accent bias in educational contexts indicates that it is not an isolated issue, but rather one that is intertwined with broader social values and beliefs about language and communication. Rezai et al. (2022) highlight how systemic biases in educational environments often favor certain accents over others, which reinforces a close notion of linguistic competence. Such native-speaker hierarchies directly conflict with Global Englishes scholarship that frames English as a shared, transnational resource owned by all its users (Matsuda

& Matsuda, 2017). This bias not only disadvantages students with non-standard accents but can also contribute to a hostile learning environment where linguistic diversity is undervalued. It simultaneously undermines democratic ideals by denying multilingual speakers equal epistemic standing (Peled & Bonotti, 2019). As such, students can perceive evaluations as evaluative of the inherent value instead of a measure of their language mastery.

To alleviate these detrimental effects, it is vital to address the ingrained biases within evaluation practices and adopt a systematic approach to ensure fair treatment for all students. The subsequent sections outline strategies aimed at transforming current evaluation methods to foster inclusivity and celebrate linguistic diversity.

Promoting Accent Awareness: Global Englishes-Informed Rater Literacy

Trainings for educators and evaluators are crucial in cultivating the awareness of implicit biases and promote an understanding of the linguistic diversity present among users of Global Englishes. Grounding these trainings in the Global Englishes paradigm emphasizes that English belongs to all its users and that intelligibility, not nativeness, should be the main criterion of successful communication. Assessors need to recognize and mitigate their prejudices through awareness and professional development workshops that emphasize equity and inclusiveness in evaluation. Hosoda et al. (2023) argue that recognition of foreign accents can be a powerful tool to reduce prejudices and promote a more inclusive dialogue in educational contexts. This aligns with Peled and Bonotti's (2019) claim that combating accent bias upholds democratic ideals by granting multilingual speakers full epistemic standing. Such initiatives can allow students to embrace their accents while providing teachers with the tools necessary to assess the evaluations of speech fairly and objectively.

Similarly, Doosti and Ahmadi Safa (2021) assert that systematic training programs for assessors can improve their consciousness of inherent biases and provide them with strategies to focus on linguistic competence rather than accent variations. Such trainings guarantee that assessors recognize their pre-conceived concepts concerning accents, which potentially leads to more equitable assessments which are more closely aligned with the actual capacities of the students.

In addition, Yan et al. (2019) suggest that training evaluators to recognize and contrast their prejudices can play a role in improving the equity of the evaluation. This entails greater awareness of the meaning of the diversity of accents and its intrinsic value in communication. The development of seminars focused on the implicit training of prejudices can allow evaluators to reflect on their judgments and provide fairer evaluations, which can ultimately lead to a more inclusive environment in class.

The efforts to cultivate a positive perception of different accents in ESL contexts can further challenge existing prejudices. Accent awareness training can foster appreciation for linguistic diversity and reduce bias (Tan et al., 2021). Embedding Global Englishes principles into these sessions can emphasize that diverse pronunciations are legitimate manifestations of English in global use. To address this, researchers recommend incorporating accent awareness into ESL curricula and teacher training programs (Kang, 2010). These efforts can promote acceptance of linguistic diversity and enhance mutual understanding in multicultural societies (Eisenclas & Tsurutani, 2011).

Promoting Inclusivity: Shared Ownership of the English Language

The implementation of more holistic evaluation criteria that take into account the communicative efficiency rather than phonetic accuracy could provide a more equitable framework to assess

speech. Romero-Rivas et al. (2021) support the development of more complete evaluation criteria that include a series of pronunciation features rather than adhere to a restricted definition of 'acceptable' speech. Adopting a Global Englishes perspective, evaluation must first ask whether meaning is negotiated successfully, not whether pronunciation mirrors an idealized native norm. These frameworks could incorporate the listener's familiarity with various accents as a basis for evaluation, thus reducing dependence on subjective perceptions related to specific accents while promoting an inclusive approach.

The promotion of institutional policies that actively adopt and celebrate various linguistic history could contribute to a more equitable learning environment. The author believes that institutions should go beyond tolerance and promote accent diversity as an academic resource that broadens classroom discourse. Such measures not only seek to counteract the negative impacts of accent bias but also aim to cultivate a richer and more varied exchange of ideas and experiences in language education.

Moreover, the implementation of evaluation practices that recognize and accept a wide range of accents have been suggested as a means of promoting inclusiveness in English language assessments. Kang et al. (2024) highlight the need to establish benchmarks that reflect linguistic diversity, thus validating different accents as a legitimate aspect of the use of language. Benchmarks grounded in Jenkins's intelligibility principle further ensure that accent variation is treated as normal rather than exceptional. By creating an evaluation framework that adapts to various phonetic representations, educational establishments can reduce the harmful effects of accent biases, thus promoting a fairer environment where students can present their real communication capacities without fear of penalization because of their accent.

Besides, the integration of various linguistic resources can help normalize a variety of accents. A student exhibition presenting a variety of English accents through multimedia resources can enhance the understanding of linguistic diversity and recognize the unique history of students. Can (2024) supports the linguistic attitudes that recognize the value of various accents and promote a more equitable perspective in educational contexts. Such peer-led showcases also reinforce the message that ownership of English is collectively shared, a core principle of Global Englishes. Providing students with opportunities to commit and learn from each other can improve mutual understanding and create a community of language learners who feel valued regardless of their accent.

Aryadoust (2024) also contributes to the discourse by suggesting that the integration of various accents in the materials used for assessments can have a deep effect on the perception of acculturation and the levels of confidence of ESL students. It is important that test developers treat this diversification not as optional but as baseline practice reflective of real-world communication. By integrating various accents into the test equipment, the evaluation can more precisely reflect the communication scenarios of the real world that students can meet, reducing the stigma associated with non-native pronunciation. This not only helps the normalization of various accents, but also encourages acceptance among assessors and students, cultivating a more respectful and affirmative test atmosphere.

Taking Advantage of Technology

Recent research has begun to explore the role of technology in mitigating accent biases. Emerging AI algorithms can lessen unconscious bias by foregrounding objective linguistic features instead of speaker identity cues (Oman et al., 2024). Automated rating systems, designed to account for variations in emphasis, have the potential to reduce human biases in speaking assessments. These systems can be calibrated to evaluate the quality of independent linguistic aspects of accents,

thereby offering an alternative evaluation method that prioritizes communicative efficiency over phonetic conformity. This technological approach, supported by comprehensive algorithm training on diverse vocal datasets, may result in a more objective evaluation system. However, concerns about the absence of human interpretation in spoken language persist.

Addressing accent biases in speech recognition can be achieved through data augmentation and effective training methods to enhance performance for non-native speakers (Zhang et al., 2022). Nevertheless, AI systems may perpetuate racial, gender, and other biases if not meticulously designed and implemented (Straw & Callison-Burch, 2020). In recruitment processes, AI can even assist in reducing bias by concentrating on objective criteria (Oman et al., 2024). Despite these advancements, voice-based assistants may still encounter difficulties with various accents and languages (Lima et al., 2019). Counter-stereotypical conversational agents that expose users to diverse synthetic voices have demonstrated potential to reduce accent prejudice through simulated intergroup contact (Hermann et al., 2025). Addressing these challenges necessitates interdisciplinary collaboration, diverse datasets, and ongoing vigilance to ensure AI fosters inclusivity and fairness (Barnes & Hutson, 2024; Rathore et al., 2022).

Using technology to address accent bias offers effective ways to promote fairness and inclusivity. AI and automated systems can reduce subjective biases by focusing on clear communication and linguistic features. However, it is crucial to monitor these systems carefully to avoid reinforcing existing prejudices. Combining technology with human input and interdisciplinary teamwork can help create evaluation methods that offer equal opportunities for speakers with diverse accents.

Conclusion

Overall, the need for approaches to mitigate accent biases in English speaking assessments is obvious. From a Global Englishes perspective, such efforts should center on intelligibility and shared ownership of English rather than conformity to a single prestige accent. By investing in trainings for assessors, promoting inclusivity, and taking advantage of technology in a thoughtful way, stakeholders can work to improve the equity and validity of the speaking evaluations for the learners of the English language. These initiatives must also foreground students' epistemic agency, ensuring that diverse voices are heard and treated as credible, a core democratic concern highlighted in accent-bias research (Peled & Bonotti, 2019). As the field evolves, the continuous exploration of these strategies will be essential to meet the complex challenges posed through accent. Tackling the prejudice of accents in English as second-language assessments is essential to promote equity and inclusion in educational contexts. The presence of prejudice of accents is manifested not only in the subjective evaluation of the students' language assessments, but also in the wider implications for the self-esteem of students and linguistic development.

Accent bias in the ESL contexts poses significant challenges to the confidence of students and academic results. The negative impact of these biases requires a paradigm shift towards inclusive evaluation methods that celebrate linguistic diversity. Such a shift echoes Global Englishes' calls to recognize every accent as a legitimate manifestation of English in global use (Matsuda & Matsuda, 2017). By implementing fair assessment practices, providing bias training for educators, and integrating various linguistic resources, educational institutions can foster an environment where all students feel encouraged to express themselves authentically, thereby enhancing their success in ESL contexts. Equity must be a fundamental principle to ensure that all students, regardless of their accents, have fair opportunities to be successful in the acquisition of language (Derwing et al., 2014). Future research should therefore examine how human-centered AI, diverse test corpora, and Global Englishes-informed pedagogy can interact to reduce accent hierarchies. Ultimately, tackling accent bias is essential for fostering an inclusive educational environment where all students, regardless of accent, can succeed and thrive in their language learning journey.

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