THE FEAR OF SPEAKING WITH A NATIVE-LIKE ACCENT: A CASE STUDY OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS IN TETOVO HIGH SCHOOLS

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Abstract

This paper addresses students' fear of speaking English, stemming from concerns that they might be judged for their accent or pronunciation. The objective is to examine how the desire to possess an accent similar to that of native speakers affects students' self-confidence and their willingness to speak English. The paper focuses specifically on the fear of making pronunciation errors, the concern regarding judgment by others, and the importance students place on accurate pronunciation. Furthermore, the distinction between speaking with an accent similar to that of native speakers and speaking in a clear, intelligible manner is explored. The theoretical section reviews previous research on pronunciation, foreign language anxiety, and communicative self-confidence. The study focuses on high school students in Tetovo, aiming to gain a better understanding of how they experience speaking English within the school environment. The practical component involves a structured questionnaire consisting of 17 questions completed by 86 high-school students ages 15-18 regarding their attitudes, experiences, and challenges when speaking. The findings suggest that students may feel pressure concerning their pronunciation and fear negative reactions from others. However, they value clear communication more than sounding like native English speakers. Ultimately, the paper emphasizes the importance of creating a supportive environment where students can express themselves freely, make mistakes, and improve their skills without fear of criticism. The focus is placed on clear communication, self-confidence, and the acceptance of differences in pronunciation as a normal part of learning a foreign language.

Keywords: accent, EFL, native-like accent, pronunciation, language anxiety, student perceptions, fear of judgment, mixed-method research.

1. Introduction

In the era of globalization, a reality overloaded with technology and intercultural communication, knowledge of foreign languages plays a significant role. Among these, English is crucial in bringing us closer to diverse cultures across the globe. Its use has a profound impact on various spheres, including education, technology, travel, and everyday communication which leads it to an inevitable part the growing need to learn and use English among young people, helping them develop better academic and professional opportunities. For this reason, young people aim to use it with the greatest possible confidence and effectiveness. However, mastering a foreign language entails more than just understanding vocabulary and grammar, it also requires meeting other criteria, most notably, accurate pronunciation, which is a key element of effective communication. First and foremost, it is worth noting the distinction between intelligible pronunciation and native-like pronunciation. Intelligible pronunciation refers to a way of speaking that allows the listener to clearly understand what the speaker is saying. On the other hand, "native-like" pronunciation refers to the effort to articulate words in a manner that closely mirrors the speech of native speakers. These two perspectives on pronunciation relate to two significant principles discussed by Levis (2005): the "nativeness principle" and the "intelligibility principle." The nativeness principle suggests that, when learning a foreign language, students should aim for a pronunciation as close as possible to that of native speakers, essentially striving to acquire an accent that resembles, for instance, an American or British one. Conversely, the intelligibility principle prioritizes clarity. According to this approach, the primary goal is not for the learner to sound like a native speaker, but rather

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to pronounce words clearly enough to be understood by others. While being constantly exposed to television and films, they frequently compare their own accents to those they hear in movies, series, or various online materials. When they notice discrepancies between their own speech and that of native speakers, they are likely to view their own pronunciation as inadequate. Young people are constantly exposed to various forms of English, whether through music, YouTube videos, or social media platforms like TikTok. This frequent exposure reinforces the idea that these specific varieties should be regarded as models to be followed, as students tend to imitate them. Consequently, some may come to dislike their own accent, viewing it as a shortcoming to be eliminated rather than a natural aspect of the foreign language learning process. In a study involving 1,300 high school students in Hong Kong, Tsang (2024) examined student attitudes toward standard English accents. He notes that, despite academic discourse prioritizing the intelligibility of pronunciation, rather than exact resemblance to native speakers, many students continue to favor standard British and American accents. In the study's abstract, he writes: "many learners still seem to favour standard British and American accents" (Tsang, 2024). This finding suggests that students' preferences are not merely about how words are pronounced, but also about the value and prestige they associate with these specific accents. Another significant factor that notably influences how students use English during communication is the fear of being judged by others. Many students feel insecure when speaking in front of others. This occurs particularly when students encounter a new, previously unheard word and attempt to pronounce it correctly, yet with great uncertainty, focusing more on how they sound than on the message they wish to convey. Since even a minor mistake can easily become a target for mockery, criticism, or correction by peers or teachers, many students hesitate to speak up when encountering something for the first time. These concerns are also addressed in the study by Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986), which introduces the concept of "Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety." They describe the anxiety experienced during foreign language learning as a distinct state linked to students' perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors within the classroom. The same authors include the following statement in their questionnaire designed to measure foreign language classroom anxiety: "I am afraid that the other students will laugh at me when I speak the foreign language" (Horwitz et al., 1986, FLCAS, Item 33). This statement implies that one of the concerns students may experience during English lessons is the fear of reactions from their peers. Another significant study worth mentioning is that of Young (1991), who examined several sources of anxiety within the foreign language classroom. Among the most significant factors mentioned are the relationships between students and teachers, beliefs regarding language learning, and methods of assessment. This study concludes that the classroom atmosphere and the way lessons are conducted can also influence how the learning experience is perceived.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Pronunciation and the Native-Like Accent

Pronunciation plays an important role in learning a foreign language because it helps people communicate and understand each other. However, many English learners believe that speaking English well means sounding like a native speaker. They may feel that having an American or British accent is a sign of good English, while having a different accent means that their pronunciation is not good enough. Levis (2005), in his study Changing Contexts and Shifting Paradigms in Pronunciation Teaching, explains two important approaches to pronunciation: the nativeness principle and the intelligibility principle. The first approach focuses on helping learners develop pronunciation similar to that of native speakers. The second focuses on clear communication and being understood by others. This difference is

important because it raises a question about what learners should really aim for when learning English: sounding like native speakers or communicating clearly. Derwing and Munro (2005) also discuss the importance of pronunciation in language learning. They argue that pronunciation teaching should mainly help learners communicate successfully rather than focus only on removing their foreign accents. According to the authors, having a foreign accent does not automatically mean that a person cannot communicate effectively.

2.2. Intelligibility and Foreign Accents

It is important to understand that having a foreign accent and being difficult to understand are not the same thing. A person may pronounce words differently from a native speaker but still communicate clearly. For example, an English learner may have an Albanian-influenced accent, but this does not necessarily prevent other people from understanding what they are saying. Munro and Derwing (1995), in their study Foreign Accent, Comprehensibility, and Intelligibility in the Speech of Second Language Learners, examined how foreign accents affect the way people understand spoken English. Their findings showed that some speakers could have strong foreign accents while their speech remained understandable. This suggests that having a noticeable accent does not always create problems in communication. These findings are important because they show that learners should not feel that they must completely change their natural pronunciation in order to speak English successfully.

2.3. Learners' Attitudes Towards English Accents

Although clear communication is considered an important goal in pronunciation teaching, many learners still prefer to sound like native English speakers. American and British accents are often seen as attractive models, and learners may try to copy the way people speak in films, television programmes, music and online videos. Tsang (2024) explored this issue in a study involving 1,300 secondary-school students learning English in Hong Kong. The study examined their attitudes towards standard English accents and pronunciation. The findings showed that many students continued to prefer British and American accents. The research also found that learners' attitudes towards English and language accuracy were related to their preferences for standard accents. This study is particularly relevant because it focuses on secondary-school students, just like the group considered in the present research. A similar issue was explored by Tamimi Sa'd (2018), who studied the attitudes of 51 Iranian English learners towards native and non-native English accents. The findings showed that many participants preferred native-speaker accents and had negative opinions about some non-native accents. Some learners also felt uncomfortable showing the influence of their first language when speaking English. This suggests that accent is not only a matter of pronunciation but can also be connected to how learners see themselves and how they believe others judge them. Tsunemoto and McDonough (2021) also examined the attitudes of Japanese secondary-school students towards English pronunciation. Their study included 62 students and focused on their views about pronunciation, their interest in English sounds and their confidence in their own pronunciation. The results showed a significant relationship between students' confidence in pronunciation and how strongly their accents were perceived.

2.4. Fear of Making Mistakes and Speaking Confidence

Speaking a foreign language can sometimes make learners feel nervous, especially when they are afraid of making mistakes in front of other people. Some students may worry about their pronunciation, grammar or the way their classmates and teachers react when they speak. As a

result, they may choose to remain silent even when they know what they want to say. Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986), in their study Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety, explain that learning and using a foreign language can create feelings of anxiety. Their work shows that students may experience nervousness and fear in language classrooms, which can affect their learning experience. Although their study does not focus only on pronunciation, it helps explain why some learners may feel uncomfortable speaking English in front of others. Overall, the studies discussed above show that pronunciation is not only about producing sounds correctly. It is also connected to learners' attitudes, confidence and willingness to communicate. While some learners aim to develop a native-like accent, others may simply want to speak clearly without feeling embarrassed about the way they sound. These ideas provide the background for examining how high-school students in Tetovo feel about their English accents and whether the fear of being judged affects their confidence when speaking.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Approach and Type

This research is designed as a descriptive, quantitative study aimed at examining the attitudes and perceptions of high school students regarding English pronunciation. Particular attention is given to the desire to achieve an accent similar to that of native speakers, as well as the impact that the fear of making mistakes, and of being judged by others, may have on self-confidence when speaking. Through this approach, the study seeks to gain a better understanding of how students perceive their own pronunciation and the importance they place on how they sound when communicating in English.

3.2. Target Group

The target group for this research consists of 86 high school students in Tetovo, aged 15–18, who are learning English as a foreign language. This group was selected because students at this age are at a stage where the opinions of peers, self-confidence, and the desire for social acceptance can influence how they use a foreign language. Focusing on students in Tetovo also allows for the examination of this topic within a specific educational and linguistic context.

3.3. Research Instrument

A questionnaire consisting of closed-ended questions and one open-ended question was designed as an instrument for data collection. The questionnaire is organized into 4 sections, aimed at exploring various aspects of the students' experience when speaking English. The first section includes general questions regarding age and English language proficiency level. The second section focuses on the importance students place on having an accent similar to that of native speakers, as well as their self-confidence while speaking. The third section addresses the influence of films, social media, and other media content on their pronunciation preferences. Finally, students are asked about any concerns they may experience during communication, and what they consider more important: an accent similar to that of a native speaker, or clear and intelligible pronunciation. The questions are formulated in a simple and direct manner to ensure they are easily understood by high school students.

3.4. Data Analysis Method

For data analysis, the use of descriptive statistics is planned, specifically percentages, as well as tabular and graphical representations. These presentation methods will facilitate the comparison of responses and the identification of the most common attitudes among students. Open-ended responses will be examined separately, focusing on opinions and concerns related to pronunciation, self-confidence, and the fear of being judged.

4. Results and discussions

The questionnaire's findings are presented through quantitative and descriptive analyses below.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for the general information in the research

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Age	15-16	28	32.6%
	17-18	58	67.4%
Gender	Female	46	53.5%
	Male	40	46.5%
English Proficiency	Beginner	18	20.9%
	Intermediate	51	59.3%
	Advanced	17	19.8%

The sample consists of 86 high school students in Tetovo. The majority are 17–18 years old (67.4%), while the largest group rates their English proficiency level as intermediate (59.3%).

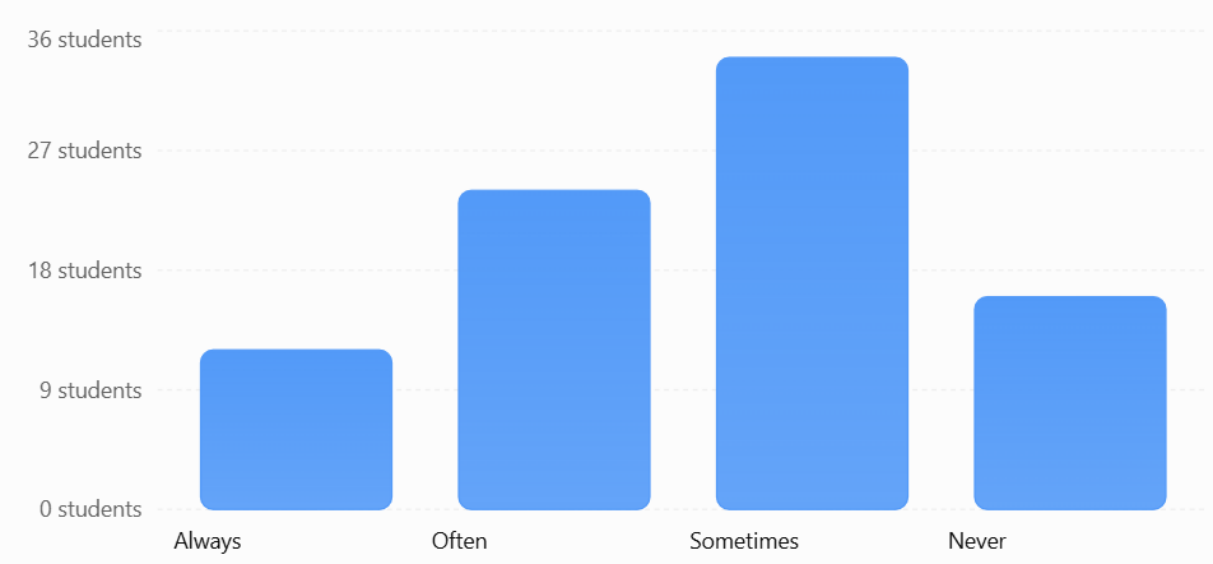

Figure 1. Fear of Being Judged When Speaking English

As shown in Figure 1, the most frequent response was "Sometimes," selected by 34 students (39.5%). This indicates that a considerable number of students experience some level of concern about being judged when speaking English in class, even if this feeling does not occur all the time. Furthermore, 24 students (27.9%) stated that they often fear being judged when speaking English in front of others. When considered together, these responses suggest that fear of negative evaluation is a relevant concern among the participants. Students may worry about how their classmates or teachers perceive their pronunciation, grammar, or overall speaking ability. Such concerns can make them feel less comfortable expressing their ideas and

participating in classroom discussions. Although the results do not suggest that all students experience this fear regularly, they show that the possibility of being judged can influence students' confidence and their overall experience when communicating in English.

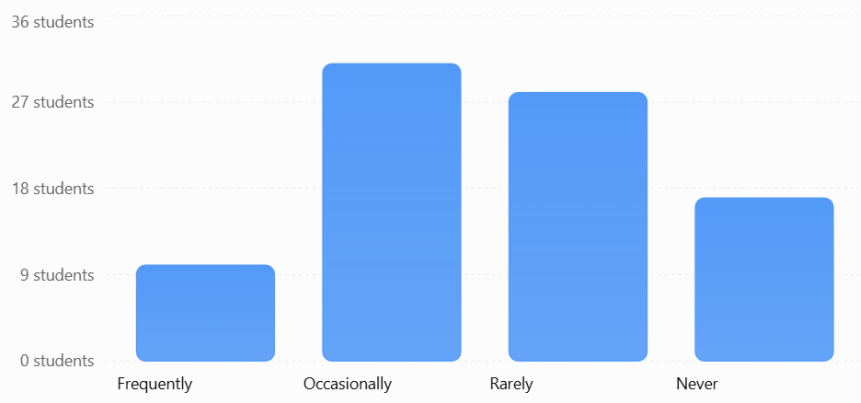

Figure 2. Avoiding Speaking Because of Pronunciation

Figure 2 shows that 31 students (36.0%) have occasionally avoided speaking English due to a fear of mispronouncing words, while 28 students (32.6%) have experienced this situation rarely. These findings suggest that pronunciation-related concerns may influence students' willingness to participate in oral activities, although the extent of this influence differs among participants. In particular, the fact that more than one-third of the students have occasionally avoided speaking indicates that the fear of making pronunciation mistakes can sometimes prevent them from expressing themselves freely. Students may hesitate to answer questions, read aloud, or take part in classroom discussions because they are unsure whether they will pronounce certain words correctly. This hesitation may also be connected to the fear of attracting unwanted attention or receiving negative reactions from others. Although most participants do not report avoiding speaking frequently, the results indicate that pronunciation concerns remain a factor that can affect their classroom participation and speaking confidence.

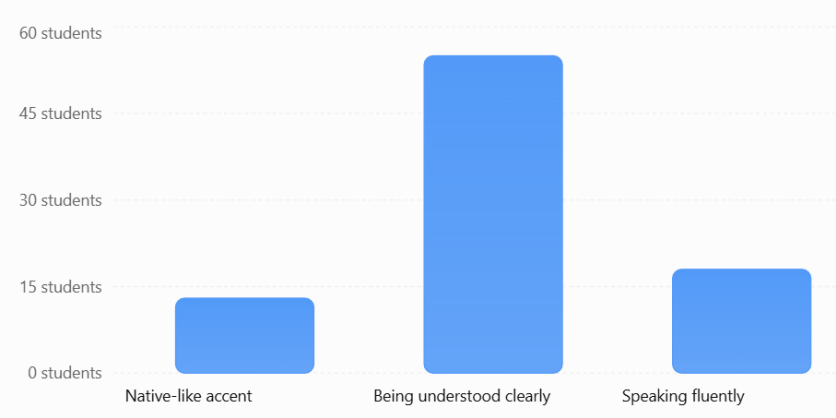

Figure 3. Students' Views on Native-Like Pronunciation

According to Figure 3, the majority of students (55 or 64.0%) stated that being understood is more important than having an accent similar to that of native speakers. In comparison, only 13 students (15.1%) selected a native-like accent as their main priority. These findings suggest that, in this hypothetical example, students place greater value on clear communication than on imitating the pronunciation of native English speakers. This may indicate that, although students are sometimes concerned about their accents, they understand that having a native-

like pronunciation is not necessary for effective communication. Being able to express ideas clearly and understand others appears to be more important to most participants. The results also highlight the difference between speaking English with confidence and trying to achieve a perfect accent.

Conclusions

This paper addressed students' fear of speaking English, stemming from the pressure to achieve an accent similar to that of native speakers. Particular attention was given to the fear of being judged, insecurity regarding pronunciation, and the impact these factors can have on students' self-confidence and their participation in class.

A review of the literature reveals that having a foreign accent does not necessarily mean that a person cannot communicate clearly. The primary goal of pronunciation instruction should be intelligibility and successful communication, rather than the imitation of native-speaker pronunciation. Furthermore, the fear of making mistakes or being evaluated negatively can cause students to hesitate to express themselves, even when they possess sufficient knowledge of the English language.

The findings presented in this paper suggest that the fear of judgment and pronunciation errors can affect students' willingness to speak English. Conversely, the emphasis placed on clear communication indicates that not all students view a native-like accent as the ultimate objective of language learning. In conclusion, it is important for teachers to create an environment where students feel free to speak, make mistakes, and improve without fear of mockery or criticism. Students should be encouraged to develop intelligible pronunciation and self-confidence in communication, while understanding that having a different accent is not an obstacle to becoming a successful speaker of the English language.

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