

RECEPTION OF ACCENT VARIATION IN ENGLISH: SOCIOLINGUISTIC INSIGHTS FROM VIETNAMESE ESL LEARNERS AND TEACHERS IN DA LAT

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ARTICLE INFO		ABSTRACT
Received:	24/6/2025	This study explores how Vietnamese learners and teachers of English in Da Lat receive non-standard English pronunciation. Reception is examined through two dimensions: comprehension (intelligibility) and acceptance (attitudinal evaluation). A mixed-methods approach was employed, involving 130 participants from four groups: English majors, non-English majors, Vietnamese English teachers, and foreign teachers. Using a structured questionnaire and open-ended interview, participants rated a non-native English speech sample on pronunciation features such as stress, rhythm, and intonation. Quantitative data were analyzed through descriptive statistics, ANOVA, and correlation tests. Results revealed that teachers demonstrated higher comprehension and acceptance than students, with foreign teachers being the most receptive. Non-English majors were more accepting of non-standard accents than English majors. A moderate positive correlation ($r = 0.48$, $p < 0.01$) was found between comprehension and acceptance. Qualitative feedback emphasized the importance of intelligibility over accent conformity. These findings suggest a pedagogical shift in Vietnamese English education: from promoting native-like accents toward fostering intelligibility, sociolinguistic awareness, and intercultural communication.
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Reception
Accent variation
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TIẾP NHẬN SỰ ĐA DẠNG GIỌNG TIẾNG ANH: GÓC NHÌN XÃ HỘI HỌC NGÔN NGỮ TỪ NGƯỜI HỌC VÀ GIÁO VIÊN TẠI ĐÀ LẠT

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THÔNG TIN BÀI BÁO		TÓM TẮT
Ngày nhận bài:	24/6/2025	Nghiên cứu này khám phá cách người học và giáo viên tiếng Anh tại Đà Lạt tiếp nhận cách phát âm tiếng Anh phi chuẩn. Khái niệm "tiếp nhận" được phân tích qua hai khía cạnh: khả năng hiểu (mức độ dễ hiểu) và mức độ chấp nhận (đánh giá thái độ). Nghiên cứu sử dụng phương pháp hỗn hợp, với 130 người tham gia thuộc bốn nhóm: sinh viên chuyên ngành tiếng Anh, sinh viên không chuyên, giáo viên tiếng Anh người Việt, và giáo viên bản ngữ. Thông qua bảng hỏi có cấu trúc và phỏng vấn trên các đặc điểm phát âm như trọng âm, ngữ điệu và nhịp điệu. Dữ liệu định lượng được phân tích bằng thống kê mô tả, ANOVA và hệ số tương quan. Kết quả cho thấy các nhóm giáo viên thể hiện mức độ hiểu và chấp nhận cao hơn so với sinh viên, trong đó giáo viên bản ngữ là nhóm tiếp nhận cao nhất. Sinh viên không chuyên thể hiện mức độ chấp nhận cao hơn sinh viên chuyên ngành. Một tương quan dương vừa phải ($r = 0,48$, $p < 0,01$) được ghi nhận giữa khả năng hiểu và mức độ chấp nhận. Dữ liệu định tính nhấn mạnh tầm quan trọng của tính dễ hiểu thay vì sự tuân thủ tuyệt đối theo giọng bản ngữ. Những phát hiện này gợi ý một sự thay đổi định hướng trong giảng dạy phát âm tiếng Anh tại Việt Nam: chuyển từ việc theo đuổi giọng bản ngữ sang nhấn mạnh sự dễ hiểu, nhận thức xã hội học ngôn ngữ và năng lực giao tiếp liên văn hóa.
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TỪ KHÓA

Tiếp nhận
Sự đa dạng giọng
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1. Introduction

The global spread of English has resulted in the emergence of diverse English varieties, many of which differ from traditional native speaker norms in terms of pronunciation, rhythm, stress, and intonation [1], [2]. In this context, the notion of *non-standard English pronunciation* that is, English spoken with noticeable deviations from so-called “inner-circle” accents has become a focal point in discussions about linguistic equity and intelligibility in international communication. While such pronunciation diversity reflects global linguistic realities, it also poses sociolinguistic and pedagogical challenges in English as a second language (ESL) settings, where native-like speech has long been upheld as the ideal.

This study investigates how Vietnamese ESL learners and teachers in Da Lat receive non-standard English pronunciation. The term reception in this study is conceptually framed as a multidimensional construct encompassing both comprehension (i.e., the listener’s ability to understand speech linked to intelligibility) and acceptance (i.e., the listener’s attitudinal or evaluative response to the speaker’s accent). This dual construct aligns with existing sociophonetic and English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) research (e.g., [3], [4]), but has rarely been applied in the Vietnamese English as a foreign language (EFL) context, especially outside of major urban centers. Clarifying these conceptual distinctions is crucial not only for analytical precision, but also for evaluating the pedagogical implications of accent variation in English instruction.

Although research on ELF has emphasized the legitimacy of diverse English accents [5], [6], a notable gap persists in understanding how reception of such accents is mediated by sociocultural factors particularly in local, underexplored contexts such as Da Lat. Previous Vietnamese studies (e.g., [7], [8]) have addressed issues of pronunciation or native-speakerism in broader terms, but have not specifically examined how different groups (e.g., English majors, non-English majors, Vietnamese English teachers, and foreign teachers) perceive and evaluate non-standard accents in actual listening tasks. This study fills that gap by providing empirical data from both students and instructors within the same geographic and educational environment.

Da Lat, a growing educational hub in Vietnam's Central Highlands, provides a meaningful site for this study due to its diversity of English users including both locally trained Vietnamese teachers and foreign English-speaking instructors from varied backgrounds. By focusing on this locale, the study offers contextualized insights that are currently underrepresented in Vietnamese applied linguistics literature. The selection of Da Lat is not incidental, but strategic representing a microcosm of wider national dynamics in English language teaching while also reflecting unique regional characteristics in terms of teacher training, student expectations, and exposure to accent diversity.

The sociolinguistic framing of this study further considers how educational background, language exposure, and social role shape listener judgments. Accent reception is rarely neutral; it is influenced by perceptions of intelligibility, status, fluency, and even speaker identity [9], [10]. For learners and teachers alike, these judgments carry real-world consequences: from classroom participation and testing outcomes to employability and intercultural communication [11], [12]. As such, understanding how individuals navigate these linguistic differences is not only theoretically relevant but also pedagogically urgent especially in the Vietnamese university context, where curricula still often prioritize native-like pronunciation despite the global shift toward intelligibility.

This study is guided by four research questions:

1. To what extent do Vietnamese ESL learners and teachers in Da Lat comprehend and accept non-standard English pronunciation?
2. Are there significant differences in comprehension and acceptance across different participant groups (English majors, non-English majors, Vietnamese teachers, foreign teachers)?
3. What is the relationship between comprehension and acceptance of non-standard English accents?
4. What attitudinal differences can be observed across participant groups in their evaluative feedback on non-standard English pronunciation, and how do these relate to their roles as learners or teachers?

In addressing these questions, this study offers novel theoretical and practical contributions to the fields of pronunciation pedagogy and sociolinguistics in Vietnam. It supports ongoing efforts to reform English language instruction by emphasizing intelligibility, sociolinguistic awareness, and accent inclusivity, rather than rigid adherence to native-speaker models.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants

This study involved a total of 130 participants from four distinct groups in Da Lat, Vietnam: 50 English majors (EMs), 50 non-English majors (NEMs), 20 Vietnamese English teachers (VTs), and 10 foreign English teachers (FTs). Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure variation in educational background, teaching experience, and exposure to different English accents. This composition allowed for comparative analysis of both learner and teacher perspectives within the same regional educational context.

2.2. Instruments

The primary research instrument was a structured questionnaire designed to measure participants' reception of non-standard English pronunciation, comprising two subscales: comprehension and acceptance. Each subscale included 9 Likert-scale items (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree). Comprehension items focused on intelligibility-related aspects (e.g., rhythm, stress, clarity), while acceptance items targeted attitudinal responses (e.g., perceived fluency, appropriateness, professionalism). Example items include:

"I could follow the speaker's main ideas." (Comprehension)

"The speaker's accent is appropriate for academic settings." (Acceptance)

The questionnaire was adapted from previous studies on intelligibility and attitude toward accents [3], [4], [10], and informed by ELF and sociolinguistic frameworks [5], [6]. The speech stimulus used was a 45-second clip of a non-native English speaker with a clearly non-standard but intelligible accent. This allowed participants to assess both understanding and attitude in a realistic context.

In addition, participants responded to two open-ended questions designed to elicit deeper reflections on the speaker's pronunciation and to explain the reasoning behind their numerical ratings. These qualitative prompts encouraged participants to comment on aspects such as clarity, fluency, naturalness, and emotional reactions. Responses were collected in Vietnamese and later translated into English for analysis.

2.3. Analysis procedures

Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS. Descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation) were used to summarize perception and acceptance scores across groups. One-way ANOVA tests were conducted to examine differences among the four participant groups. Correlation analysis was used to explore the relationship between comprehension and acceptance scores.

Qualitative data from open-ended responses were analyzed using thematic analysis. Responses were coded inductively, and emergent patterns were grouped into key themes reflecting participants' perceptions and attitudes toward non-standard pronunciation. Triangulation of quantitative and qualitative findings was used to enhance the overall interpretation and provide deeper insight into sociolinguistic influences on accent reception.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. RQ1 – Comprehension and acceptance of non-standard English pronunciation

Descriptive statistics showed that all four groups demonstrated moderate to high levels of comprehension and acceptance of the non-standard speech sample. Vietnamese teachers (VTs) and foreign teachers (FTs) exhibited the highest mean scores in both dimensions. English majors (EMs) had slightly lower comprehension scores but notably lower acceptance scores than non-English majors (NEMs).

Table 1 demonstrates the descriptive statistics of pronunciation ratings, comprehension, and acceptance by the four participant groups. The results show that Vietnamese teachers gave the highest average ratings for rhythm ($M = 3.80$, $SD = 0.84$), intonation ($M = 3.60$, $SD = 0.55$), and overall pronunciation ($M = 3.40$, $SD = 0.55$), while also provided the highest mean comprehension score ($M = 85.00\%$, $SD = 13.23$). Foreign teachers, similarly, reported high comprehension ($M = 71.40\%$, $SD = 15.32$) and relatively high ratings for pronunciation-related features.

On the other hand, the ratings for pronunciation aspects seemed more moderate among English majors and non-English majors. Specially, English majors had the lowest mean comprehension score ($M = 56.00\%$, $SD = 5.48$) and lowest average for overall pronunciation ($M = 2.60$, $SD = 0.55$), in spite of their moderate acceptance level ($M = 3.00$, $SD = 0.00$). Non-English majors rated overall pronunciation slightly higher ($M = 2.80$, $SD = 0.84$) but had a relatively low comprehension score ($M = 59.00\%$, $SD = 8.94$). This could be somewhat explained by their modest English proficiency and limited exposure to the English speaking environment.

In short, the findings suggest that professional background and exposure to English varieties play a significant role in influencing listeners' perceptions and attitudes. It can be seen from the study that teachers - who are both more experienced and linguistically trained - seem more tolerant and understanding of non-standard pronunciation, especially when intelligibility is not compromised.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of pronunciation ratings, comprehension, and acceptance by participant group

Group	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	Comprehension	Acceptance
	Overall Pron.	Ending	Stress	Intonation	Rhythm	(%)	
	M (SD)	M (SD)					
English Majors	2.60 (0.55)	3.00 (0.00)	2.80 (0.45)	2.00 (0.00)	2.80 (0.45)	56.00 (5.48)	3.00 (0.00)
Non-English Majors	2.80 (0.84)	3.00 (0.00)	3.00 (0.00)	2.60 (0.89)	2.40 (0.55)	59.00 (8.94)	3.40 (0.55)
Vietnamese Teachers	3.40 (0.55)	2.60 (1.14)	3.00 (1.00)	3.60 (0.55)	3.80 (0.84)	85.00 (13.23)	3.20 (0.45)
Foreign Teachers	3.00 (0.71)	3.20 (0.84)	3.00 (0.71)	3.00 (0.71)	3.20 (0.84)	71.40 (15.32)	3.20 (0.84)

Note: Q1–Q5 were rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = very poor to 5 = excellent). Comprehension was self-reported as a percentage. Acceptance (Q7) was rated on a 5-point scale (1 = unacceptable to 5 = highly acceptable).

3.2. RQs2&3 – Group differences and relationship of comprehension and acceptance

In order to examine group differences in two dependent variables: comprehension (Q6) and acceptance (Q7), a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used. The results are presented in Table 2.

There was a statistically significant difference in comprehension scores across the four groups, $F(3,126) = 6.82$, $p = 0.002$. Participants also differed significantly in their acceptance of the pronunciation, $F(3,126) = 3.22$, $p = 0.045$.

In order to see the difference more clearly, Post-hoc comparisons using Tukey's HSD revealed that foreign teachers showed considerably higher comprehension and acceptance levels compared to both English majors and non-English majors. Likewise, Vietnamese teachers showed significantly greater comprehension than non-English majors but did not significantly vary in acceptance from English majors.

Table 2. One-way ANOVA results for comprehension and acceptance by group

Variable	F-value	p-value
Comprehension (Q6)	6.82	0.002
Acceptance (Q7)	3.22	0.045

Next, a Pearson correlation was carried out to further examine the relationship between the degree of understanding and the willingness to accept non-standard pronunciation. The results demonstrated a moderate positive correlation, $r = 0.52$, $p = 0.0183$ (see Table 3).

The finding implies that the better participants understood the pronunciation, the more likely they were to accept it. In line with [2], this result emphasizes that comprehension, rather than nativeness, shapes acceptability in intercultural communication.

Table 3. *Pearson Correlation Between Comprehension and Acceptance*

Variable Pair	Pearson <i>r</i>	p-value
Comprehension vs. Acceptance	0.52	0.0183

Note: Correlation is significant at the $p < 0.05$ level.

3.3. RQ4 – Qualitative insights from open-ended feedback

Beyond the rating scales and structured comments, in-depth open-ended reflections provided by English teachers – particularly those with extensive classroom and assessment experience – shed further light on how non-standard English pronunciation is evaluated. These qualitative reflections serve as a valuable complement to the statistical findings and add depth to our understanding of perception, especially from the perspective of trained evaluators.

A recurring observation among teacher evaluators is the issue of ending sound omission, particularly for *-s*, *-ed*, and consonant clusters. These errors were noted as systematic and persistent across both male and female speakers. Teachers emphasized that such features – often tied to L1 transfer from Vietnamese – reduce the phonological completeness of speech and affect both comprehensibility and perceived fluency. Specific recommendations were offered, such as repeated listening to self-recordings, explicit instruction in morphological endings, and mastery of pronunciation rules, especially for plural and past tense markers.

Another major insight concerns stress and intonation, which were simultaneously recognized as a relative strength and a challenge. While many listeners noted that both speakers demonstrated good sentence-level rhythm and a degree of prosodic awareness, there were also frequent comments on unnatural phrasing, interruptions, and inconsistent emphasis. Some teachers highlighted the tendency of learners to self-correct mid-sentence, disrupting the flow and coherence of speech. This suggests that while students may be taught stress patterns formally, applying them fluently and authentically in extended discourse remains difficult.

Related to this is the theme of fluency and connectedness. Several teachers expressed concern over the disjointed nature of delivery, particularly in the female speaker's performance. Words were described as being pronounced individually rather than as part of a continuous stream. The solution proposed involved linking practice, shadowing native speakers, and focusing on rhythm and pacing through genre-based listening – such as podcasts and lectures – to improve the natural flow of speech.

Teachers also assessed accuracy at the phoneme level, noting particular instances where vowel or consonant substitution resulted in altered meaning or miscommunication. Examples include /s/ and /ʃ/ confusion in words like *issue* or *accent*, or difficulty with consonant blends such as *pr* and *gr* in *progress*. Such articulatory inaccuracies were flagged as barriers to native-like clarity, although they were often acknowledged as secondary to intelligibility.

Despite identifying multiple areas for improvement, nearly all teachers emphasized that both speakers were generally comprehensible, estimating intelligibility above 90% for Vietnamese listeners. However, some raised an important methodological caveat: evaluations conducted exclusively by Vietnamese teachers may introduce accent familiarity bias. As one teacher noted, the speech was "*easy to understand because I myself am Vietnamese.*" This raises an important implication for future research – the need to incorporate diverse listener backgrounds, including non-Vietnamese raters, to ensure generalizability in perception data.

Interestingly, some respondents explicitly endorsed an ELF perspective, asserting that intelligibility – not nativeness – should be the benchmark for successful oral communication. One teacher wrote, "*Indian English, Singlish, or Vietnamese English are not a matter. Interlocutors can*

understand each other – that is enough.” This view affirms the relevance of pluralistic models of pronunciation, aligning with [2] call for more flexible, inclusive norms in international English use.

Finally, some teachers advocated for more meaningful and context-based pronunciation training, where students are guided not just by correction but by a deeper awareness of how speech sounds, intonation, and rhythm serve communicative functions. Fluency, in this sense, is not simply a technical outcome but a socially constructed and listener-mediated perception.

In summary, the qualitative comments reveal a nuanced, layered evaluation process. Teachers acknowledged limitations in segmental accuracy, suprasegmental control, and fluency, while simultaneously recognizing overall intelligibility and communicative success. These findings highlight the value of triangulating pronunciation research through both quantitative scales and qualitative expert judgment, and they strongly support a shift in pedagogy from native-speakerism to intelligibility and listener-oriented instruction.

4. Conclusion

This study explored how Vietnamese English learners and teachers in Da Lat receive and evaluate non-standard English pronunciation through both quantitative ratings and qualitative reflections. The findings revealed a nuanced distinction between comprehension and acceptance, with teachers (both Vietnamese and foreign) demonstrating greater tolerance and understanding of non-standard accents compared to students, particularly English majors. A moderate positive correlation between comprehension and acceptance highlights the role of intelligibility over nativeness in shaping listener attitudes.

The study contributes to the growing body of research advocating for intelligibility-focused models of pronunciation, especially within ELF contexts. Rather than relying on native-speaker norms, the results emphasize the importance of communicative success and listener comprehension. This aligns with sociolinguistic theories that view language variation as legitimate and context-dependent rather than deficient.

Pedagogically, the findings suggest that English pronunciation instruction in Vietnam – and in similar EFL contexts – should move beyond rigid native norms to embrace a more functional, listener-oriented approach. Teachers and curriculum developers are encouraged to foster students’ awareness of global English varieties, focus on intelligibility, and provide training that integrates rhythm, stress, and connected speech in meaningful communication tasks. Teacher education programs should also equip instructors with sociolinguistic perspectives that allow them to better evaluate and support learners from diverse linguistic backgrounds.

Future research could extend this work by incorporating a wider range of English accents and involving listeners from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Additionally, further qualitative exploration of how learners internalize pronunciation norms – and how teachers mediate those expectations – would deepen our understanding of accent perception and its implications for language pedagogy in multilingual settings.

In sum, this study reinforces the importance of moving away from native-speakerism in pronunciation instruction and calls for a shift toward intelligibility, listener perceptions, and inclusive communicative practices in EFL classrooms.

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