

From Native-Speaker Norms to Accent Legitimacy: AFL College Students' Awareness of and Attitudes Toward Foreign Instructors' Arabic Accents and Dialects

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Abstract

Arabic as a foreign or additional language (AFL) is taught in settings where learners encounter Modern Standard Arabic, local Saudi Arabic, regional Arab dialects, and Arabic spoken by multilingual instructors whose accents may differ from textbook or local norms. This exploratory mixed-methods study examined AFL college students' awareness of Arabic accent and dialect diversity and their attitudes toward foreign-born or foreign-trained instructors. Drawing on Arabic variation-aware pedagogy, language-attitude theory, social identity perspectives, and communication accommodation theory, the study used the Accent/Dialect Legitimacy-Intelligibility Attitude Model (AD-LIAM) as an interpretive framework. Data were collected from 65 international undergraduate scholarship students at the Arabic Language Unit for Non-Native Speakers at the University of Ha'il during the 2024–2025 academic year. The shared quantitative dataset contains participant-level subscale means for Arabic Variation Awareness, Perceived Intelligibility and Comprehensibility, Instructor Credibility, Native-Speaker Ideology, Accent/Dialect Legitimacy, and Behavioral Intentions and Affective Comfort; qualitative data include 65 coded open-ended responses. Results showed higher awareness, legitimacy, and affective comfort among upper-intermediate and advanced students, while lower-level students expressed greater listening anxiety and stronger native-speaker orientations. The findings suggest that clarity, pedagogical support, and perceived credibility were central to students' acceptance of diverse Arabic voices. Because the study used a modest, single-site, cross-sectional, self-report design, the findings are exploratory and context-bound. The study offers a provisional framework for AFL accent-attitude research and practical implications for listening pedagogy, instructor evaluation, and inclusive language policy.

Introduction

Arabic is increasingly learned and used in multilingual higher-education settings where students encounter more than one form of the language. AFL students may study Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) in textbooks, hear Saudi Arabic in the surrounding community, interact with instructors from different Arab regions, and meet non-Arab multilingual users whose Arabic is marked by diverse phonological and pragmatic histories. This reality makes accent and dialect awareness a central issue for Arabic pedagogy. The question is not whether learners should encounter variation, but how institutions can prepare them to understand, evaluate, and interact ethically with diverse Arabic voices.

Accent and dialect are not simply technical features of speech. They are also social signs through which learners may infer clarity, credibility, religious authenticity, local belonging, professional competence, or cultural distance. In Arabic classrooms, such judgments are particularly complex because learners may connect Arabic pronunciation with MSA, classical Arabic, Quranic recitation, local Saudi norms, regional Arab identities, and the legitimacy of non-native Arabic users. A student may find an instructor intelligible while still regarding the accent as less ideal, or may admire a native Arab accent while struggling with speech rate, dialect switching, or limited instructional support.

The present study focuses on students' attitudes toward foreign instructors' Arabic accents and dialects. Foreign instructors are understood broadly as teachers whose Arabic speech differs from dominant local Saudi, regional Arab, or textbook expectations. This category may include non-Arab instructors who learned Arabic as an additional language, Arab instructors from outside the local Saudi context, or foreign-trained teachers whose classroom Arabic differs from students' expected models. The study treats such accents as legitimate objects of applied linguistic inquiry rather than as deficits to be erased.

The study responds to a practical problem in AFL higher education. If students equate effective Arabic teaching with one idealized native-speaker model, they may evaluate instructors through accent prejudice rather than through comprehensibility, pedagogical support, and disciplinary expertise. Conversely, if students are guided to understand Arabic as a plural repertoire, they may become more able to distinguish genuine listening difficulty from social judgments about speaker identity. The article therefore develops and applies the Accent/Dialect Legitimacy-Intelligibility Attitude Model (AD-LIAM) and reports exploratory evidence from a single Saudi university context.

Literature Review

Arabic Variation and AFL Higher Education

Arabic language education is shaped by a longstanding tension between standardization and variation. Classical Arabic and MSA are associated with scripture, formal writing, administration, education, and pan-Arab communication, while regional dialects organize everyday interaction and social belonging. Ferguson's (1959) account of diglossia remains foundational, but later Arabic sociolinguistic scholarship has shown that Arabic is better understood as a continuum of registers, styles, and locally meaningful varieties rather than as a simple high-low binary (Albirini, 2016; Badawi, 1973; Bassiouney, 2009; Miller et al., 2007; Versteegh, 2014). For AFL learners, competence therefore involves more than grammatical control of MSA; it includes awareness of when, why, and how different Arabic varieties are used.

AFL pedagogy has increasingly questioned the practice of delaying or excluding dialect exposure. Palmer (2007) argues that teaching only the standard variety can leave learners underprepared for ordinary communication. Ryding (2013), Younes (2015), and Al-Batal (2018) similarly advocate approaches that position MSA, dialects, and regional varieties as connected resources. Study-abroad research also indicates that learners' access to Arabic depends on how they negotiate formal and colloquial varieties in real interaction (Trentman, 2013). This literature suggests that accent awareness is not peripheral; it is part of communicative readiness in academic, religious, professional, and social settings.

Accent, Dialect, Intelligibility, and Comprehensibility

In classroom talk, accent and dialect are often conflated, but they refer to related and distinct phenomena. Accent primarily concerns pronunciation, including segmental sounds, rhythm, stress,

intonation, and phonotactic patterns. Dialect includes pronunciation but also lexical, grammatical, pragmatic, and discourse features associated with a speech community. An AFL student may describe an instructor's speech as an accent problem when the difficulty actually arises from dialect vocabulary, speech rate, unfamiliar register shifts, or limited contextual support.

Pronunciation research distinguishes accentedness from intelligibility and comprehensibility. Accentedness concerns the degree to which speech differs from a listener's expected norm. Intelligibility concerns whether listeners recognize the intended message. Comprehensibility concerns how much effort they feel understanding requires (Derwing & Munro, 2015; Munro & Derwing, 1995). This distinction is essential for fair teacher evaluation. A foreign-accented instructor may be intelligible and pedagogically effective, while a locally prestigious speaker may still be difficult if classroom support is weak. Student evaluation should therefore separate actual understanding from social preference.

Native-Speaker Ideology and Teacher Credibility

Native-speaker ideology in Arabic education is connected not only to pronunciation but also to authenticity, religious authority, cultural closeness, and imagined ownership of Arabic. Haeri (2003) and Suleiman (2003) show that Arabic carries symbolic meanings that exceed ordinary communication. These meanings can shape how students evaluate teachers' accents and dialects. Learners may associate native Arab identity with correct pronunciation or legitimate authority, even when a non-native or non-local instructor provides clearer explanations.

Teacher credibility is therefore a key construct. Students evaluate whether an instructor's accent fits their image of a legitimate Arabic teacher, but they also evaluate expertise, organization, clarity, fairness, and responsiveness. Research on reverse linguistic stereotyping shows that listener beliefs about speaker identity can influence perceived comprehensibility even when speech is unchanged (Kang & Rubin, 2009). Applied to Arabic, this suggests that some reported listening difficulty may be filtered through assumptions about nativeness, while other difficulty may reflect real processing demands. Both possibilities require careful analysis.

Theoretical Framework: AD-LIAM

The Accent/Dialect Legitimacy-Intelligibility Attitude Model (AD-LIAM) integrates four perspectives: Arabic variation-aware pedagogy, language-attitude theory, social identity perspectives, and communication accommodation theory (Giles et al., 1991). The model proposes that learners' acceptance of foreign instructors' Arabic accents and dialects is shaped by Arabic variation awareness, native-speaker ideology, perceived intelligibility and comprehensibility, perceived instructor credibility, accent/dialect legitimacy, and affective-behavioral comfort. In the present revision, AD-LIAM is used as an exploratory interpretive framework rather than as a fully validated structural model. The modest sample size and the available subscale dataset do not support strong causal or psychometric claims.

Table 1
AD-LIAM Constructs Used in the Study

Construct	Acronym	Operational focus
Arabic Variation Awareness	AVA	Recognition that Arabic includes multiple legitimate accents, dialects, and registers.
Perceived Intelligibility and Comprehensibility	PIC	Perceived ease of understanding instructors' Arabic and managing listening effort.
Instructor Credibility	ICR	Perceived expertise, competence, authority, and trustworthiness of the instructor.
Native-Speaker Ideology	NSI	Preference for native Arab, local, or symbolically prestigious pronunciation models.
Accent/Dialect Legitimacy	ADL	Acceptance of non-local or foreign-accented Arabic as valid in classroom communication.
Behavioral Intentions and Affective Comfort	BIAC	Comfort, reduced anxiety, willingness to participate, and willingness to take or recommend classes.

Research Questions

RQ1. How aware are AFL college students of Arabic accent and dialect diversity?

RQ2. What attitudes do students hold toward foreign instructors' Arabic accents and dialects?

RQ3. How are perceived intelligibility, instructor credibility, native-speaker ideology, and accent/dialect legitimacy associated with affective comfort and behavioral intentions?

RQ4. What qualitative themes explain students' acceptance, anxiety, or resistance toward diverse Arabic accents in instruction?

Method

Research Design

The study used an exploratory mixed-methods design. Quantitative survey data described students' attitudes across six AD-LIAM constructs, while qualitative open-ended responses explained the reasons behind acceptance, anxiety, and authority judgments. Because the study was cross-sectional, single-site, and based on self-report, the analyses were designed to identify patterns and generate provisional model evidence rather than to establish causality or population-level generalization.

Context and Participants

The study was conducted during the 2024–2025 academic year at the University of Ha'il in Saudi Arabia, within the Arabic Language Unit for Non-Native Speakers. The participant pool consisted of 65

international undergraduate scholarship students enrolled in Arabic language study. The dataset included 41 female students (63.1%) and 24 male students (36.9%). Participants' mean age was 21.46 years (SD = 1.39). They represented four broad regions: Southeast Asia (n = 27), Africa (n = 15), Central Asia (n = 12), and Europe (n = 11). Instructional levels were Level 1, beginner (n = 5); Level 2, lower-intermediate (n = 33); Level 3, upper-intermediate (n = 18); and Level 4, advanced (n = 9). The uneven distribution across levels was considered when interpreting proficiency-related patterns.

Table 2
Participant Characteristics

Variable	Category	n (%) or M (SD)
Total sample		65
Female	Gender	41 (63.1%)
Male	Gender	24 (36.9%)
Age	Years	M = 21.46, SD = 1.39
Level 1: Beginner	Instructional level	5 (7.7%)
Level 2: Lower-intermediate	Instructional level	33 (50.8%)
Level 3: Upper-intermediate	Instructional level	18 (27.7%)
Level 4: Advanced	Instructional level	9 (13.8%)
SE Asia	Region	27 (41.5%)
Africa	Region	15 (23.1%)
Central Asia	Region	12 (18.5%)
Europe	Region	11 (16.9%)

Instruments and Data Documentation

Data were collected using the Arabic Accent and Dialect Attitudes Survey for AFL Learners (AADAS-AFL), a researcher-developed instrument created for the present context. The instrument included 30 Likert-type items organized into six five-item subscales: AVA, PIC, ICR, NSI, ADL, and BIAC. Items were rated from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Higher scores indicate stronger endorsement of the target construct. NSI was retained in its original direction, so higher scores indicate stronger native-speaker ideology. The full instrument, qualitative prompts, variable definitions, coding scheme, and datasets are provided in the supplementary materials.

Qualitative data were collected through four open-ended prompts addressing clarity versus origin, listening challenges, identity and authority, and suggestions for supporting students in accent-diverse classrooms. Each response was assigned one primary qualitative code: CLAR_PRIOR, ACC_STRAT,

LEGIT_GLOB, LIST_ANX, or REL_AUTH. The coding scheme is provided in the appendix and the spreadsheet documentation.

Validity, Reliability, and Scope of Measurement Claims

The AADAS-AFL was reviewed for content relevance, clarity, and cultural appropriateness by specialists in Arabic applied linguistics, AFL pedagogy, and sociolinguistics. A small cognitive piloting procedure with learners outside the final sample was used to check item clarity and to reduce ambiguity between accent, dialect, intelligibility, and instructor competence. In response to editorial concerns about overstated conclusions, the present revision does not present a confirmatory factor analysis, path analysis, or definitive psychometric validation claim. The available peer-review dataset contains participant-level subscale means and qualitative responses; it is sufficient for descriptive and exploratory association analyses but not for re-estimating item-level internal consistency or validating a measurement model. The instrument should therefore be treated as a study-specific exploratory measure that requires replication and item-level validation in future research.

Procedure

Students completed the survey after sufficient classroom exposure to instructors and informal exposure to Arabic-speaking peers. Participation was voluntary and anonymous. Students were informed that participation or non-participation would not affect grades, scholarship status, course standing, or access to instruction. Qualitative prompts were completed after the scale items. Responses were screened for completeness, and 65 valid cases were retained.

Data Analysis

Analyses were conducted on the anonymized subscale dataset and the coded qualitative response dataset. Descriptive statistics summarized participant characteristics and subscale scores. Level-based means were used to identify developmental patterns. Pearson correlations explored associations between the five explanatory subscales and BIAC. These correlations are reported as descriptive association evidence only, not as causal tests. Qualitative responses were summarized by code frequency and examined by instructional level to interpret the quantitative patterns. No causal mediation, MANOVA, CFA, or structural path claims are made in this revised manuscript.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval

for the study was obtained from the Research Ethics Standing Committee at the University of Ha'il before data collection. The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki, the Saudi Law of Ethics of Research on Living Creatures and its Implementing Regulations, applicable regulations of the National Committee of Bioethics, and institutional research ethics guidelines. Written informed consent was obtained before participation. Responses were anonymized and analyzed in aggregate form.

Results

Descriptive Subscale Results

Table 3 presents the overall descriptive results. Instructor Credibility received the highest mean score (M = 4.33, SD = 0.37), followed by Behavioral Intentions and Affective Comfort (M = 4.17, SD = 0.57) and Perceived Intelligibility and Comprehensibility (M = 4.12, SD = 0.47). Arabic Variation Awareness (M = 3.81, SD = 0.78) and Accent/Dialect Legitimacy (M = 3.78, SD = 0.75) were positive but more variable. Native-Speaker Ideology showed a moderate mean (M = 3.27, SD = 0.96), indicating that symbolic preference for native or locally prestigious Arabic remained present for some students.

Table 3
Overall Subscale Descriptive Statistics

Acronym	Subscale	Mean	SD	Min	Max
AVA	Arabic Variation Awareness	3.81	0.78	1.80	5.00
PIC	Perceived Intelligibility and Comprehensibility	4.12	0.47	2.80	4.90
ICR	Instructor Credibility	4.33	0.37	3.50	5.00
NSI	Native-Speaker Ideology	3.27	0.96	1.60	4.80
ADL	Accent/Dialect Legitimacy	3.78	0.75	2.00	5.00
BIAC	Behavioral Intentions and Affective Comfort	4.17	0.57	2.60	5.00

Accent Awareness and Level-Based Patterns

Arabic Variation Awareness increased across instructional levels, from M = 2.10 at Level 1 to M = 4.83 at Level 4. Accent/Dialect Legitimacy showed a similar pattern, increasing from M = 2.24 at Level 1 to M = 4.81 at Level 4. By contrast, Native-Speaker Ideology decreased across levels, from M = 4.62 at Level 1 to M = 1.80 at Level 4. This pattern suggests that students with more advanced Arabic proficiency and greater exposure were more likely to frame diverse Arabic voices as legitimate, while lower-level learners were more likely to depend on familiar or symbolically privileged models.

Table 4
Subscale Means by Instructional Level

Level	n	AVA	PIC	ICR	NSI	ADL	BIAC
1	5	2.10	3.20	3.80	4.62	2.24	3.08
2	33	3.43	3.91	4.11	3.90	3.41	3.91
3	18	4.48	4.47	4.64	2.46	4.36	4.61
4	9	4.83	4.76	4.84	1.80	4.81	4.89

Associations With Affective Comfort and Behavioral Intentions

Exploratory correlations indicated strong positive associations between BIAC and AVA, PIC, ICR, and ADL, and a strong negative association between BIAC and NSI. These coefficients should be interpreted cautiously because the dataset is small, cross-sectional, and strongly structured by instructional level. The values show coherent patterning in this sample rather than evidence of causal pathways or stable population estimates.

Table 5
Exploratory Correlations With BIAC

Predictor	Outcome	Pearson r	p
AVA	BIAC	.94	< .001
PIC	BIAC	.99	< .001
ICR	BIAC	.96	< .001
NSI	BIAC	– .95	< .001
ADL	BIAC	.98	< .001

Qualitative Themes

The qualitative responses clarified the attitudinal pattern. The most frequent code was CLAR_PRIOR (n = 17, 26.2%), indicating that students often prioritized clarity and pedagogical explanation over instructor origin. LEGIT_GLOB (n = 15, 23.1%) represented acceptance of Arabic as a global language with legitimate accent diversity. ACC_STRAT (n = 14, 21.5%) highlighted accommodation strategies such as slower speech, repetition, visual support, and comprehension checks. LIST_ANX (n = 10, 15.4%) captured listening anxiety and reduced participation when speech was unfamiliar. REL_AUTH (n = 9, 13.8%) captured religious, cultural, or native-speaker authority orientations.

Table 6
Qualitative Code Frequencies

Code	Meaning	n	%
CLAR_PRIOR	Clarity prioritized over instructor origin or nativeness	17	26.2%
LEGIT_GLOB	Recognition of Arabic accent/dialect diversity as legitimate and globally relevant	15	23.1%
ACC_STRAT	Accommodation strategies such as repetition, writing, pacing, examples, or multimodal support	14	21.5%
LIST_ANX	Listening anxiety, cognitive effort, or reduced participation caused by unfamiliar accents	10	15.4%
REL_AUTH	Religious, cultural, or native-speaker authority orientation	9	13.8%

The level distribution of codes was also informative. Level 1 responses concentrated on LIST_ANX and REL_AUTH, suggesting that beginner students were more vulnerable to listening uncertainty and stronger authenticity expectations. Level 2 responses were mixed, combining anxiety, authority concerns, accommodation, and clarity. Levels 3 and 4 showed no primary LIST_ANX or REL_AUTH codes in the supplied dataset; their responses emphasized clarity, legitimacy, and global Arabic diversity. This supports a cautious interpretation that exposure and proficiency may help students separate accent difference from instructional deficiency.

Discussion

The revised findings suggest that AFL students in this sample did not evaluate foreign instructors' Arabic accents through nativeness alone. Across the quantitative and qualitative data, clarity, pedagogical support, and perceived credibility were central to acceptance. Students tended to accept unfamiliar accents when instructors made speech comprehensible through pacing, repetition, visual support, examples, and opportunities for clarification. This supports the intelligibility-oriented view of pronunciation teaching, in which accentedness is not equivalent to unintelligibility (Derwing & Munro, 2015; Munro & Derwing, 1995).

At the same time, native-speaker ideology remained meaningful. Some students, especially at lower levels, associated native or local Arabic with authenticity, religious authority, or correct pronunciation. This finding is consistent with the symbolic status of Arabic in religious, cultural, and national imaginaries (Haeri, 2003; Suleiman, 2003). The practical implication is that inclusive AFL policy should not dismiss learners' symbolic attachments, but it should prevent those attachments from becoming a basis for devaluing competent foreign instructors.

The level-based pattern is theoretically important but should be treated cautiously. Beginner and lower-intermediate learners may have enough exposure to notice difference but not enough processing flexibility to manage unfamiliar accents confidently. Advanced learners in the dataset were more likely to

describe accent diversity as legitimate and educationally useful. This suggests that accent-flexible listening may develop through proficiency, contact, and explicit sociolinguistic framing. However, the current design cannot determine whether proficiency causes acceptance, whether already open students seek more contact, or whether both are shaped by other factors.

AD-LIAM remains useful as a conceptual framework because it helps separate several processes that are often conflated in student comments: awareness of variation, actual or perceived listening effort, teacher credibility, ideology, legitimacy, comfort, and behavioral intention. The revised analysis avoids treating the model as confirmed. Instead, it presents the model as a guide for designing future studies that can use larger samples, item-level psychometrics, objective listening tasks, and experimental speech-perception methods.

Pedagogical and Institutional Implications

First, Arabic listening instruction should include systematic exposure to MSA, local Saudi Arabic, regional Arab dialects, and intelligible foreign-accented Arabic. Such exposure should be guided rather than incidental, so students learn to distinguish normal variation from genuine communication breakdown.

Second, instructor development should emphasize accommodation strategies. The qualitative data show that students valued slower speech, repetition, written keywords, examples, reformulation, multimodal support, and comprehension checks. These practices reduce listening anxiety without requiring instructors to erase their accents.

Third, student evaluation systems should separate comprehensibility from accent prejudice. Evaluations should ask about clarity, pacing, organization, responsiveness, and learning support rather than encouraging broad judgments about accent origin. This protects instructors from biased evaluation while still allowing legitimate communication concerns to be addressed.

Fourth, orientation sessions for AFL students should explain Arabic variation early. Students need to understand why instructors, peers, and media sources may sound different and why listening flexibility is part of advanced Arabic scholarship.

Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations constrain the strength and generalizability of the findings. The sample was modest ($N = 65$) and drawn from one Saudi higher-education context. The instructional-level distribution was uneven, with a concentration at Level 2 and relatively small numbers of beginner and advanced students. The findings therefore should not be generalized to all AFL programs, all Saudi universities, or all categories of Arabic learners.

The study relied on self-report and open-ended responses rather than controlled speech-perception tasks. Self-report data are useful for capturing attitudes, comfort, legitimacy, and perceived effort, but they cannot determine whether reported difficulty reflects acoustic intelligibility, unfamiliarity, social

expectation, or accent-based bias. The study did not include recorded speech samples, matched-guise or verbal-guise tasks, classroom observation, independent ratings of instructor speech, or objective comprehension tests.

The shared quantitative data consist of participant-level subscale means rather than item-level responses. Consequently, the revised manuscript does not claim definitive internal-consistency estimates, CFA evidence, or structural model validation. Future research should collect and share item-level data where ethically possible, use larger and more balanced samples, and validate the AADAS-AFL across different AFL institutions and learner populations.

The design was cross-sectional, so temporal order and causality cannot be established. Students with more positive attitudes may have sought more exposure to diverse Arabic users, rather than exposure alone producing positive attitudes. Longitudinal and intervention studies are needed to test whether guided accent-diversity training changes listening flexibility, teacher credibility judgments, and willingness to communicate over time.

Conclusion

This study examined AFL college students' awareness of Arabic accent and dialect diversity and their attitudes toward foreign instructors whose Arabic speech may differ from dominant Saudi, regional, or textbook norms. The revised analysis indicates that students in this sample generally valued clarity, pedagogical support, and instructor credibility, while native-speaker ideology remained influential among some lower-level learners. The findings are exploratory, but they suggest that accent attitudes are socially learned and pedagogically modifiable rather than fixed reactions to sound. The study contributes to applied Arabic linguistics by reframing foreign instructors' Arabic accents as a question of intelligibility, legitimacy, and educational equity. A robust AFL program should prepare students not only to produce accurate Arabic but also to hear Arabic flexibly across speakers, registers, dialects, and institutional contexts.

Declarations

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the Research Ethics Standing Committee at the University of Ha'il before data collection. The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki, the Saudi Law of Ethics of Research on Living Creatures and its Implementing Regulations, applicable regulations of the National Committee of Bioethics, and the institutional research ethics guidelines of the University of Ha'il. All participants provided written informed consent before participation. Participation was voluntary and anonymous, and only aggregate data are reported.

Competing Interests

The author declares no competing interests.

Author Contribution

B.S.A. conceptualized the study, developed the theoretical framework, designed the research instrument, supervised data collection, conducted the main analysis, prepared Figure 1 and the tables, and wrote the original manuscript draft. K.N.A. contributed to the literature review, instrument refinement, data organization, interpretation of findings, and revision of the manuscript for intellectual content. B.S.A. and K.N.A. contributed to the methodology, reviewed the statistical results, revised the manuscript critically, and approved the final version for submission.

Data Availability

The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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