

## **Intercultural Communicative Competence and Attitudes towards English Accents: Exploring the Nexus among EFL speakers**

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### **ARTICLE INFO**

Received 02.08.2023  
Revised form 24.09.2023  
Accepted 19.10.2023  
Doi: 10.31464/jlere.1336418

#### **Keywords:**

*intercultural communicative competence (ICC)*  
*Intercultural competence (IC)*  
*English accent perception*  
*pluriculturalism*

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### **ABSTRACT**

The present study aims to explore the interplay between intercultural communicative competence and attitudes toward English accents among L2 English speakers at the tertiary level. Additionally, the study sought to examine the impact of self-rated proficiency and the year of enrollment in the degree program on the results. The participants were freshmen and sophomore students enrolled in a Turkish state university's English Translation and Interpreting Department. To gather data, the students were asked to complete a survey in which they self-assessed their intercultural communication competence and rated four English accent varieties on a 7-point Likert scale, considering status-related and solidarity-related characteristics as well as language-focused qualities. The findings indicated that there was no direct relationship between the self-rated intercultural communication competencies and perceptions of different English accents among EFL speakers. These findings held true for when excluding ratings of the American English variety from the analysis, but significant findings emerged, especially regarding individual speech samples. Furthermore, the self-reported proficiency level of EFL speakers and their status as second-year students in the degree program showed a positive correlation with intercultural communicative competence.

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### **Acknowledgments**

The author would like to thank the participating students in her classes for devoting their valuable time to this study.

### **Statement of Publication Ethics**

The ethics committee approval was obtained for the current study: Kütahya Dumlupınar University Ethics Committee, 27.04.2023, Decision #55.

### **Conflict of Interest**

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

### **Reference**

Gokgoz-Kurt, B. (2023). Intercultural communicative competence and attitudes towards English accents: Exploring the nexus among EFL speakers. *Journal of Language Education and Research, 9(2)*, 405-424.

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## Introduction

It has long been recognized that culture plays a crucial role in the teaching and learning of languages (Alptekin, 1993; Brown, 1986). The concept that the connection between language and culture is unbreakable has faced challenges in the realm of sociology. However, when viewed from the perspective of psychology, language acquisition can be considered a journey profoundly entwined with culture. According to this view, teaching culture involves more than just teaching discrete facts as a pedagogical approach. On the other hand, from the sociological perspective of teaching culture, learners no longer solely rely on such inextricable relationships but rather accept the fact that when discourse comes into play, language and culture may be considered separable (Risager, 2006). This means that when one diverges from the notion that exclusively recognizes “native” culture and “native” speakers as the sole benchmarks for language learning, one also embraces the concept of English as a lingua franca (ELF). In this scenario, communication takes place among diverse individuals speaking English as their additional language while possessing distinct cultural assets.

Indeed, English, as the lingua franca of the globalized world, has already become the predominant medium of communication within the interconnected global realm. This brings about a great deal of variation in terms of language use given that the majority of this communication is performed by second-language (L2) speakers of English (Eberhard et al., 2020). In line with this, concepts such as World Englishes (WE) and ELF have gained popularity. One fundamental principle emphasized by these paradigms is the importance of including diverse pronunciation models in English as a second language (L2) classrooms rather than exclusively focusing on standard English accents (Jenkins, 2006). To facilitate effective communication amid such diversity, it is essential for interlocutors to possess intercultural communicative competence (ICC), which essentially means the ability to engage with individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds (Byram, 2021). ICC is considered to be an indispensable ability for all who strive for effective communication across cultures and nations for different reasons, such as business, education, or tourism to establish connections that successfully bridge cultural barriers (Van Houten & Shelton, 2018). Based on the assumption that intercultural competence fosters deeper understanding and respect, one can expect that individuals who are non-native English speakers (L2 speakers) and possess a strong level of intercultural competence (IC) will demonstrate a heightened propensity to engage in communication with individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds (Lee, 2020). Additionally, they are expected to demonstrate an awareness of and appreciation for cultural differences while simultaneously showing a reduced likelihood of harboring stereotypes and biases towards various accents and varieties of English (Derwing et al., 2002).

Research has shown how L2 English accent perception affects a variety of factors ranging from a speaker’s comprehensibility (i.e., how difficult or easy it is to understand the speaker) (Saito et al., 2019) to their perceived competence in professional life (Baquiran & Nicoladis, 2020). Hence, understanding how L2 learners perceive different English accents and the impact of these perceptions on intercultural communication is essential for language educators and learners seeking to develop their intercultural competence. Existing research

provides valuable insights into the prominence of preparing L2 speakers to adopt strategies for cross-cultural communication by enhancing their perceptions of different varieties of English (Matsuda, 2017). Nevertheless, empirical studies are yet to determine the link between L2 learners/speakers' English accent perceptions and their competence in intercultural communication, which could ultimately inform language education practices for fostering more effective intercultural communication in diverse contexts. This study aims to address this gap by examining how tertiary-level EFL speakers' perceptions of English accents relate to their ICC level.

## **Literature Review**

### **Perception of English Accents**

Regardless of their native language, everybody has an accent which is defined as “the phonological characteristics of speech” (Derwing et al., 2014, p. 65). L2 speech with an accent is described as “nonpathological speech produced by second language (L2) learners that differs in partially systematic ways from the speech characteristic of native speakers of a given dialect” (Munro, 1998, p. 139). With the increased popularity of WE or ELF paradigms, which embrace and support the variety of accents of L2 speakers, it has been widely acknowledged that the “standard” pronunciation models should no longer be the only models for language learners (Jenkins, 2006). Although L2 speakers' perceptions of the degree of L2 accent have been found to affect the perceived degree of comprehensibility, these are known to stem from unsubstantiated claims that as a pronunciation model, the L1 accent is the only correct model of pronunciation (Kim, 2008; Lindemann, 2005).

However, despite the support behind the ELF paradigm which appreciates diversity in L2 accents, research has also shown that the listeners' perceptions are mainly shaped by factors such as social attitudes, stereotyping, L2 accents, and pronunciation (Kang & Rubin, 2009; Reid et al., 2019). Numerous studies exploring learners' preferences for L2 English accents have consistently shown that a significant majority of learners prefer native-like pronunciation standards or hold a more favorable opinion of native-like English accents (e.g., Li, 2009; Lindemann, 2003; Timmis, 2002). In a recent mixed-methods investigation conducted by Tsang (2020), L2 learners' perceptions of different L1 and L2 accents were assessed with respect to their appropriateness for an English teacher, their effectiveness as learning models, and their ability to capture learners' attention. The findings indicated that learners rated teachers with L1 English accents higher on suitability and for holding learners' attention. The qualitative findings not only reinforced the quantitative outcomes but also supplied additional validation. L2 English learners expressed that English instructors with L2 accents, who lacked proficient pronunciation skills, unintentionally proved to be inadequate language role models for their students. This, in turn, resulted in learners encountering embarrassing situations and communication breakdowns. However, it should be noted that the location of the learners might be an influential factor in learner perceptions. Kang (2015) investigated the L2 English learners' perceptions and beliefs regarding L2 pronunciation learning and L2 accents. The findings showed that as opposed to L2 learners residing in expanding circle countries (e.g., Türkiye, Spain), those located in inner and outer

circle countries expressed higher levels of discontentment with their present pronunciation curriculum, primarily due to factors such as the perplexity arising from multiple pronunciation models, instructors' exclusive focus on a single accent variety, and a lack of emphasis on incorporating English as a global language. Consequently, a more comprehensive integration of the WE concept within the language classrooms was emphasized.

Given that various paradigms approach the way L2 accent is/should be perceived from varying perspectives, one way to turn this conflict into mutual respect and understanding could be through increased tolerance and understanding of L2 varieties. Research has indicated that specialized training programs aimed at fostering awareness of ICC and the diversity of L2 accents have the potential to cultivate positive attitudes. At the same time, these programs may help alleviate apprehension and ambiguity in collaborative interactions with individuals from diverse ethnic and linguistic backgrounds (e.g., Kang et al., 2015). This includes training listeners, speakers, and raters of L2 English alike on the legitimacy of WE or ELF (Derwing & Munro, 2015; Kang & Yaw, 2021; Ramjattan, 2022) for fostering "social and cultural language awareness, promoting understanding and tolerance, and boosting communicative competence" (Fang & Yuan, 2011, p. 107).

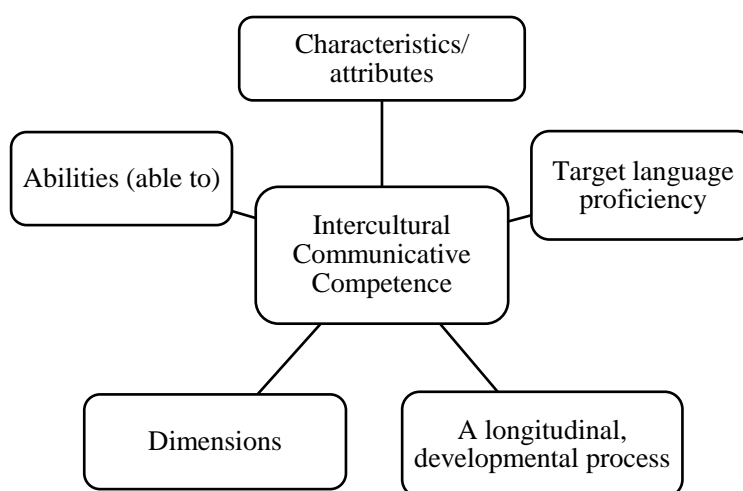
However, it should be noted that while such training could positively affect attitudes, it is a relatively slow process (Fang & Yuan, 2011, p. 107), and the perceived degree of comprehensibility or intelligibility was not found to be influenced (Derwing et al., 2002). In addition, there are a variety of other factors affecting the attitudes toward L2 speech such as the proficiency of the L2 speakers (Ludwig & Mora, 2017; Nymeyer et al., 2022), social bias (e.g., Reid et al., 2019), or accent familiarity (Kahng, 2023; Winke et al., 2013; see also Hayes-Harb et al., 2008). Therefore, it may be unrealistic to expect everyone to become equally competent in intercultural communication even when they receive training on the awareness of ICC. Previous studies have shown that when evaluating second language (L2) speech, raters who were more tolerant, prioritized different linguistic factors over nativelikeness, and demonstrated a greater willingness to accept specific accent varieties of English for effective communication (Derwing et al., 2002; Saito et al., 2019). Therefore, there is a need to examine the role of various background variables in the assessments of L2 speakers.

### **Understanding Intercultural (Communicative) Competence**

IC is defined as a multidimensional framework of knowledge, attitudes, skills, and beliefs that constantly evolves as new knowledge about target cultural concepts assimilates into the person's experience (Byram & Wagner, 2018; Deardorff, 2020). As a corollary to this way of looking at language and culture, Byram and Wagner (2018) maintained that terms such as "intercultural," "intercultural competence," and "intercultural speaker" were coined and used to challenge the idea of native speakers and their competence in language education. In the view of Fantini (2006), intercultural competence can be described as "a complex of abilities needed to perform effectively and appropriately when interacting with others who are linguistically and culturally different from oneself," which involves various fields such as "relationships, communication, and collaboration," or aspects such as

“knowledge, attitude, skills, and awareness,” or characteristics such as host language proficiency (p. 12, emphasis in original). Alternative terms were also proposed in place of IC including “biculturalism,” “cultural and intercultural sensitivity,” “global-mindedness,” “plurilingualism,” “multiculturalism,” (Fantini, 2018, p. 32) or “transcultural competence” (Biell & Doff, 2014). Fantini (2018, p. 32-33) maintains that all of these definitions represent “incomplete aspects of a more complex phenomenon” and proposes to use the term “intercultural communicative competence” since it endeavors to comprehensively represent the communicative aspect of intercultural competence with the inclusion of “speaking, behaving, and interacting.” According to Fantini (2018), ICC comprises five components, as shown in Figure 1.

**Figure 1.** Components and Aspects of ICC (Adapted from Fantini, 2018, p. 35)



The first subcomponent of ICC involves “flexibility, humor, patience, openness, interest, curiosity, empathy, tolerance for ambiguity, and suspending judgments, among others,” which could be both situational/contextual factors as well as in-born traits and may help educators in increasing their awareness of the characteristics that could be improved through their educational endeavors. The next big component is the abilities or domains which are summarized as “the ability” to “establish relationships, communicate well,” and collaborate.” Next, there are four dimensions, which are “(positive) attitudes/affect, skills, knowledge, and awareness,” with awareness constituting a key role among the others. Finally, Fantini also mentions proficiency in the target language and “levels of attainment” as the other key components in ICC. According to his predefined levels, individuals could be categorized as “Level 1: Educational traveler,” “Level II: Sojourner,” “Level III: Professional,” and “Level IV: Intercultural/multicultural specialist” (Fantini, 2018, p. 35-38). These components help explain the concept of ICC better by clarifying some of the more general terminology and approaches to IC in other academic domains making it more relevant to language education.

An alternative model proposed by Byram (1997, 2021) for explaining I(C)C involves the dimensions of knowledge, attitudes, skills, and education. According to the ICC model proposed by Byram (1997, 2021), attitudes refer to the perceptions related to the individuals’ “cultural meanings, beliefs, values, behaviours they exhibit; such attitudes often remain

implicit in their interaction with interlocutors from their own social groups” (pp. 44-45). The knowledge dimension comprises (a) “knowledge of one’s own social groups and their cultures and similar knowledge of the interlocutor’s social groups and cultures,” and (b) “knowledge of the processes of interaction at individual and societal levels” (p. 46). The dimension of skills involves individuals’ (a) being able to interpret a document from a different country than their own by drawing on the knowledge of their own and other environments. It also comprises discovery, which may or may not be performed in interaction with society. An individual performs this when there is a gap or low familiarity with the countries and cultural information. Even though all of these dimensions may be acquired without formal education, teachers can incorporate them into their classroom instruction (Byram, 2021). As part of the discussion of his model, Byram (2021) also defines a sojourner, indicating that language learners seeking to be interculturally competent in communication should strive to become sojourners. According to him, as opposed to a tourist, a sojourner “has the opportunity to learn and be educated, acquiring the capacity to critique and improve their own and others’ conditions, actions which are ‘political’” (p. 2). However, Byram also indicates that although the wish is for them to reach the perspective of a sojourner by “experiencing and analyzing other ways of life...[and] change in themselves—whether they travel or not—in sum to be educated through language learning” (p. 3). Despite the primary role of foreign language learning, he adds that the teaching and assessment of ICC should not be confined to the teaching of languages, since subjects such as literature, history, and geography expose students to other cultures and experiences (Byram, 2021, pp. 5-6). In this vein, Byram and Wagner (2018) underscore that the purpose of culture learning should be to prepare language learners as intercultural communicators:

What is especially important for educators and students to reflect on is the difference between being able to live in two cultures (or being bicultural, as if one were two native speakers in one person), often seen as the ill-conceived and impossible ideal toward which to strive in teaching and learning, and being able to act as a mediator between people of two or more different cultural and linguistic contexts, using one’s intercultural skills and attitudes. (p. 145)

However, they also add that IC should not be considered a “by-product of language teaching,” and thus second language (L2) teachers should make an effort to raise L2 learners’ awareness as interculturally and communicatively competent speakers through language teaching (Byram & Wagner, 2018, p. 147).

Much attention has been devoted to ICC in English language learning and teaching in the context of Turkey (e.g., Alptekin, 1993; Atay et al., 2009; Bektaş-Çetinkaya & Çelik, 2013; Demircioğlu & Cakir, 2015; Gedik Bal & Savas, 2022; Kazykhankyzy & Alagözlü, 2019; Saricoban & Oz, 2014), and depending on the context and the participant profiles, the ICC level has varied. Research has also shown that individuals’ ICC might be affected by a variety of factors such as overseas experience (Hismanoglu, 2011), interaction with English speakers in digital contexts (Lee, 2020), language proficiency (Nymeyer et al., 2022), or being trained/educated on cross-cultural communication (Hismanoglu, 2011). Furthermore, empirical research studying the relationship between the perceptions of English accents and ICC is limited. Lee (2020) conducted a study examining the interplay between informal digital learning of English, perceptions of varieties of English, and the use of strategic competence in cross-cultural communication. The study’s findings revealed that the way

individuals perceive different accents acts as a mediating factor in the association between digital learning and the use of strategic competence for cross-cultural communication.

### **The Current Study**

Previous studies have shown individuals with higher awareness of cultures other than their own will be more competent in cross-cultural communication. With the premise that intercultural competence brings about more tolerance and less stereotyping, the present study aims to examine tertiary-level EFL speakers' intercultural competence in relation to their perceptions of the speakers' traits with different accents of English by addressing the following research questions:

1. How do Turkish EFL speakers perceive various English accents spoken by Spanish, Hindi, Korean, and American English L1 speakers?
  - 1a. What impact does the year of enrollment in the degree program (1st year compared to 2nd year) have on the perceptions of speakers with different accents of English?
  - 1b. How is self-reported proficiency related to the perceptions of speakers with different accents of English?
2. What is the self-reported degree of intercultural communicative competence among Turkish EFL speakers?
  - 2a. What impact does the year of enrollment in the degree program (1st year compared to 2nd year) have on the self-reported intercultural communicative competence?
  - 2b. How is self-reported proficiency related to the self-reported degree of intercultural communicative competence?
3. How are the perceptions of English accents among Turkish EFL speakers related to their self-reported level of intercultural communicative competence?

## **Methodology**

### **Research Design**

This study utilizes a quantitative paradigm and a noninterventionist correlational approach that “focuses on gathering data on two (or more) measures from a single group of subjects” and examines variables “to determine if they are related and, if so, the direction and magnitude of that relationship” (Tavakoli, 2013, pp. 115-116). To investigate whether there may be a connection between EFL speakers' perceptions of various English accents and their self-reported scores on intercultural communicative competence, data were gathered through a web-based survey.

### **Publication Ethics**

Ethical permission was granted by the Kütahya Dumlupınar University Ethics Committee, dated April 27, 2023, with decision number 55.

## Participants and Context

The study consisted of 74 students recruited via convenience sampling. They were Turkish EFL speakers who were majoring in English Translation and Interpreting at a state university in Türkiye. The students who were about to complete their first academic year in the program took various courses such as Translation, English Literature, and American Literature, Culture, & Society while those who were completing their second academic year additionally took classes such as Translation and World Literature, Intercultural Communication and Translation, and Linguistics. The students were also required to take French or German as a foreign language for 4 hours per week. The survey was sent out to students who were primarily in their first ( $n = 32$ , 43%) or second year ( $n = 36$ , 49%) of the program and were enrolled in one of the two classes the researcher was teaching in Spring 2023. There were also 4 (5%) students who were in their junior year and 2 (3%) who were in their senior year. The classes were held through online/hybrid learning for the respective semester of the academic year due to the devastating earthquake in south-central Türkiye in early 2023. A total of 102 students were invited to take part in the web-based survey, but of 82 students who filled out the survey, 7 did not complete it, and thus, their responses were removed from the analysis. Also, in order not to complicate the findings, the responses from one international student were removed ( $N = 74$ ). The mean age for the participants was 21 ( $SD = 3.63$ ), and 42 (57%) of them were female. Only 18% ( $n = 13$ ) of them reported having traveled abroad for various purposes. As for proficiency, the participants were asked to self-rate their overall proficiency in English on a scale out of 7 with 0 representing “very low.” The mean for the participants’ self-rated overall proficiency in English was 4.69 out of 7 ( $SD = 0.8$ ).

**Table 1.** Description of Participant Profiles ( $N = 74$ )

Enrollment Year	<i>N</i>	Gender		Travel abroad		Self-rated proficiency		
		F	M	Yes	No	2-3	4	5-6
1	32	17	15	7	25	2	11	19
2	36	23	13	5	31	3	12	21
3	4	0	4	1	3	0	0	4
4	2	2	0	0	2	0	0	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>74</b>	<b>42</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>61</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>41</b>

*Note.* There were no students who rated their overall proficiency as “1” (= very low) or “7” (= very high).

## Instruments and Materials

An online survey with four sections was used to collect data in a single session. Before the survey was initiated, the participants were first provided information about the study and were asked to give their consent for their responses to be collected. Following this page, in the second section of the survey, the participants were asked to rate four speech samples chosen from the Speech Accent Archive (Weinberger, 2015) for the quality of their speech samples in which speakers read the same text. Since the survey questions did not involve any comprehensibility judgments, using the same text was not considered to cause any undesirable familiarity effect on the raters. The speakers involved an American English speaker from Ohio, a native Hindi speaker from Maharashtra, India, a Korean speaker from Cheju-do, South Korea, and finally, a Spanish speaker from Santiago, Chile. The purpose of



the selection was to represent the diversity in English accents from around the world with which Turkish students were less likely to be exposed in their previous encounters while including at least one speech sample from countries located in Kachru's (1992) three concentric circles. For consistency, all speech samples were delivered by male speakers, and their durations were kept to a maximum difference of 2 seconds. Following Lindemann (2003), the participants were asked to rate each speaker/speech sample based on how "ambitious, intelligent, successful" (positive, status-related), "lazy, incompetent, uneducated" (negative, status-related), "friendly, likable, helpful" (positive, solidarity-related), "unkind, insincere, aloof (distant)" (negative, solidarity-related) they were. The speakers were also rated based on the following language-focused qualities: "appropriate to perform a communicative task, nice to listen to, and speaks poorly." No randomization in the presentation of the speech samples was applied as there were only four speech samples, and the researcher did not want the speech sample spoken by the American speaker, which was presented last, to influence the preceding ratings. The reliability statistics indicate high values for the ratings for Track 1 (Indian speaker)  $\alpha = .82$ , Track 2 (Chilean speaker)  $\alpha = .87$ , Track 3 (Korean speaker)  $\alpha = .88$ , and Track 4 (American speaker)  $\alpha = .81$ . Unlike Lindemann (2003), the rating criterion in the present study did not ask participants to rate the nativelikeness of the speakers as it was beyond the scope and purpose of the present study.

The third part of the survey involved 25 questions from the Intercultural Competence Scale for EFL Learners developed by Chao (2014). The instrument originally comprised 30 questions with a five-factor structure: knowledge of intercultural interaction (9 items), affective orientation to intercultural interaction (6 items), self-efficacy in intercultural situations (3 items), behavioral performance in intercultural interaction (7 items), and display of intercultural consciousness (5 items). Except for the items from the final factor, all other questions under the four factors were included in the survey. Details regarding the validity and reliability of the original scale items can be found in Chao (2014). For the present study, the calculation of coefficient alpha indicated that the reliability was high ( $\alpha = .85$ ). The values of Cohen's alpha for the sub-dimensions, i.e., Factors 1, 2, 3, & 4, were .67, .80, .80, .60, respectively. In the final section of the questionnaire, the participants were asked various language and sociodemographic background questions such as age, gender, experience traveling abroad, year of enrollment in their degree program, and their self-perceived proficiency in L2 English. The participants were invited to take part in the web-based survey through the learning management system.

## **Data Analysis**

To answer the first research question descriptive mean scores were calculated to provide a full picture of the ratings by EFL speakers regarding four different English accents. Additionally, to see if there were any significant differences among the ratings for speech samples, Friedman's two-way analysis of variance was conducted since at least one speech sample did not meet the assumptions for running a parametric test as revealed by a statistically significant Shapiro-Wilk test ( $p < .05$ ). However, when the mean scores for four and three speech samples (with and without the American English speech sample, respectively) were calculated and checked for normality, data in both cases were found to be normally distributed as revealed by non-significant Shapiro-Wilk test results ( $p = .47$ ,  $p$

= .52). Next, EFL speakers' self-reported ICC was demonstrated using descriptive statistics. Finally, to investigate whether there was a statistically significant relationship between the participants' ratings of English accents and their self-assessed degree of ICC, a Pearson's correlation analysis was performed. Since the analysis involves conducting a correlation analysis, assumptions for using parametric tests of correlation were checked. A statistically non-significant Shapiro-Wilk test ( $p > .05$ ) as well as an examination of histograms and skewness and kurtosis values indicated a normal and linear distribution of data obtained from the scale measuring self-rated IIC. Furthermore, upon checking the assumptions of normality and homogeneity of variance, dependent sample two-sample t-tests were used to investigate whether the year of enrollment in the degree program and their self-perceived proficiency made any difference in EFL speakers' self-rated ICC.

## Results

### Perceptions of English Accents

The first research question aimed to investigate the perceptions of tertiary-level L2 English speakers regarding four different English accents. The raw mean scores for each of the traits participants rated are presented in Table 2 and Figure 2 below.

**Table 2.** Descriptive Statistics for Accent Perceptions

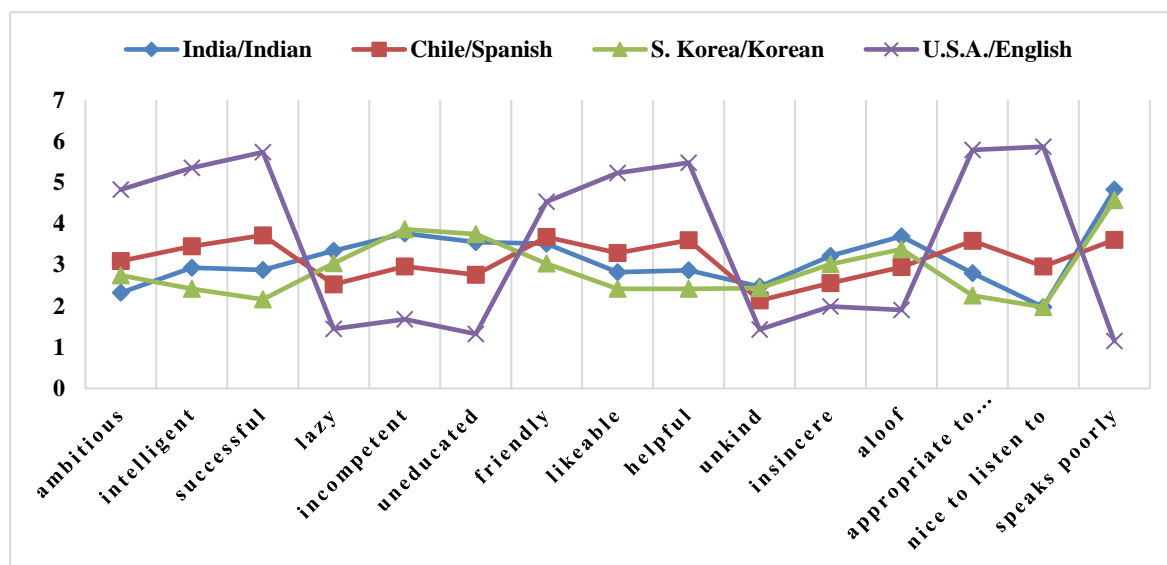
<i>Origin/L1</i>	India/Hindi	Chile/Spanish	S. Korea/Korean	U.S.A/ English
<i>Traits</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>
Ambitious	2.32 (1.36)	3.09 (1.20)	2.74 (1.54)	4.82 (1.58)
Intelligent	2.93 (1.16)	3.45 (1.09)	2.42 (1.06)	5.35 (.84)
Successful	2.88 (1.23)	3.72 (1.30)	2.16 (1.16)	5.73 (.56)
Lazy	3.34 (1.70)	2.53 (1.31)	3.04 (1.63)	1.45 (.88)
Incompetent	3.76 (1.53)	2.96 (1.37)	3.86 (1.75)	1.68 (1.37)
Uneducated	3.55 (1.55)	2.76 (1.18)	3.74 (1.65)	1.32 (.97)
Friendly	3.51 (1.34)	3.68 (1.18)	3.03 (1.36)	4.53 (1.36)
Likable	2.82 (1.22)	3.28 (1.28)	2.42 (1.34)	5.23 (.97)
Helpful	2.86 (1.29)	3.59 (1.40)	2.42 (1.39)	5.47 (.88)
Unkind	2.47 (1.56)	2.14 (1.21)	2.43 (1.38)	1.43 (.74)
Insincere	3.22 (1.62)	2.55 (1.21)	3.01 (1.56)	1.99 (1.26)
Aloof	3.69 (1.66)	2.95 (1.40)	3.38 (1.77)	1.91 (1.09)
appropriate*	2.80 (1.51)	3.58 (1.57)	2.26 (1.51)	5.78 (.76)
nice to listen to	1.97 (1.10)	2.96 (1.41)	1.97 (1.29)	5.86 (.48)
speaks poorly	4.82 (1.39)	3.61 (1.56)	4.57 (1.62)	1.15 (.57)

*Note.* Mean scores represent raw scores without reverse coding. \*appropriate to perform a communicative task

The participants' ratings of speech samples in terms of individual traits revealed interesting findings. While the American English speaker received higher ratings for positive traits such as "ambitious" or "friendly," the least favorable ratings overall belonged to the Korean speaker followed by the Hindi speaker in most traits. However, such a ranking was

not observed across all traits. For example, the participants ranked the Hindi speaker as the one who spoke the most “poorly,” while they rated the Korean speaker as the most “incompetent.” When the reverse coding for the tracks was applied to determine the speakers with the most favorable and least favorable ratings, the findings revealed that American English speaker was rated the highest ( $M = 5.86$ ,  $SD = .52$ ,  $Sk = -1.5$ ,  $SE = .28$ ,  $Kurt = 3.5$ ,  $SE = .55$ ) followed by the Spanish speaker ( $M = 4.25$ ,  $SD = .77$ ,  $Sk = .01$ ,  $SE = .28$ ,  $Kurt = .10$ ,  $SE = .55$ ), the Hindi speaker ( $M = 3.55$ ,  $SD = .76$ ,  $Sk = .16$ ,  $SE = .28$ ,  $Kurt = .02$ ,  $SE = .55$ ), and the Korean speaker ( $M = 3.40$ ,  $SD = .91$ ,  $Sk = .30$ ,  $SE = .28$ ,  $Kurt = .31$ ,  $SE = .55$ ), respectively.

**Figure 2.** Means of English Accent Perceptions by Speaker Nationality/First Language



To find out if there was a statistically significant difference in EFL speakers' ratings depending on the speech samples, Friedman's two-way analysis of variance was conducted, and the results revealed statistically significant differences between the distributions of at least two speech samples ( $p < .01$ ). Posthoc pairwise comparisons revealed that ratings of the American speaker/speech sample showed higher ratings than the Korean [ $\chi^2(2) = -2.345$ ,  $SD = .21$ ,  $p = .000$ ], Hindi [ $\chi^2(2) = -2.155$ ,  $SD = .21$ ,  $p = .000$ ], and Spanish [ $\chi^2(2) = -1.176$ ,  $SD = .21$ ,  $p = .000$ ] speakers, all three of which were statistically significant. Furthermore, ratings for the Spanish speaker were significantly higher than the Korean speaker [ $\chi^2(2) = 1.169$ ,  $SD = .21$ ,  $p = .000$ ] and the Hindi speaker [ $\chi^2(2) = .980$ ,  $SD = .21$ ,  $p = .000$ ]. However, there were no statistically significant differences between the ratings for the Korean and Hindi speakers [ $\chi^2(2) = .189$ ,  $SD = .21$ ,  $p = .373$ ].

A t-test analysis was also conducted to examine whether being a first-year student as opposed to a second-year student in the degree program affected their perceptions of English accents, and no statistically significant differences were noted [ $t(72) = -.813$ ,  $p > .05$ ]. Findings of the correlation analysis between self-rated proficiency and the perceptions of English accents revealed no statistically significant relationships [ $r(74) = -.157$ ,  $p > .05$ ].

### Self-reported Degree of Intercultural Communicative Competence

The second research question asked how competent EFL speakers reported themselves in intercultural communicative competence. The findings revealed that with an overall mean of 3.77 ( $SD = .044$ ) out of 5, their self-reported ICC was high. There were differences among the factors, with Factor 2, i.e., affective orientation to intercultural interaction, having received the highest scores. Factors 1 & 4, which correspond to knowledge and behavioral performance in intercultural communication, received relatively lower self-ratings compared to the other two factors. This might indicate lower self-perceived skills in situations where knowledge and practice are expected in intercultural communication.

**Table 3.** Descriptive Statistics for Participants' Self-reported ICC

Dimension	<i>M</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>SD</i>	Ske.*	Kurt.**
Factor 1	3.58	.047	.41	.15	-.40
Factor 2	4.31	.06	.52	-.96	1.55
Factor 3	3.7	.093	.80	-.433	-.05
Factor 4	3.59	.051	.44	.092	.08
Total	3.77	.044	.38	-.204	.22

*Note.* Factor 1: knowledge of intercultural interaction; Factor 2: affective orientation to intercultural interaction; Factor 3: self-efficacy in intercultural situations; Factor 4: behavioral performance in intercultural interaction. \*Skewness Standard Error (*SE*) = .28, \*\* Kurtosis *SE* = .55

Furthermore, a t-test was computed to examine whether being a first-year as opposed to a second-year student in the degree program affected participants' self-perceived ICC levels. The findings indicated that EFL speakers who were in their second year ( $n = 36$ ,  $M = 3.88$ ,  $SD = .37$ ) compared to those who were enrolled in their first year of the degree program ( $n = 32$ ,  $M = 3.63$ ,  $SD = .34$ ) demonstrated better self-rated ICC, which was statistically significant,  $t(66) = -2.91$ ,  $p = .005$ . Additionally, a Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient was calculated to see if there was any association between participants' self-rated proficiency and their self-reports in ICC. The findings revealed a positive relationship indicating that as participants' self-rated proficiency increased their self-rated ICC also increased [ $r(74) = .552$ ,  $p < .001$ ].

### The Interplay Between the Perceptions of English Accents and Self-reported ICC

The last research question aimed to answer whether there was a relationship between how EFL speakers perceived various EFL accents and their degree of self-assessed ICC. Two different correlation analyses were conducted to address this question.

First, given that the data for the ratings of the American English speaker showed a non-normal distribution, both parametric and nonparametric correlation analyses were conducted to check for associations between the variables. Next, mean scores for the Korean, Hindi, and Spanish L1 speakers with and without American English L1 speaker ratings were calculated. Both scores were found to be normally distributed. Therefore, both ratings for individual speech samples as well as two additional averages (with and without the ratings

of the American English L1 speaker) were correlated with the EFL speakers' self-rated degree of ICC.

The findings of Pearson's correlation and Spearman's rank order correlation analyses indicated no statistically significant relationships between the participants' self-reported ICC and the total English accent ratings. This holds true for both when the American English accent rating is included [ $r(72) = -.103, p = .38$ ] and excluded [ $r(72) = -.146, p = .216$ ] from the total as shown in Table 4.

**Table 4.** Pearson's Correlation Matrix for ICC and Accent Perceptions

	L2 learners' ratings of English accents (Chilean, Indian, Korean) ( <i>p</i> )	L2 learners' ratings of English accents (American, Chilean, Indian, Korean) ( <i>p</i> )
ICC	-.146 (.216)	-.103 (.38)

However, statistical significance ( $p < .05$ ) was observed between the individual speakers and the dimensions of the scale. More specifically, there was a statistically significant association between the score of Factor 1 and the ratings of the Spanish speaker [ $r(72) = -.239, p = .04$ ] as well as Factor 2 scores and the ratings of the Hindi speaker [ $r(72) = -.299, p = .01$ ]. No other statistically significant correlations ( $p < .05$ ) were noted.

### Discussion

The purpose of the present study was to investigate how university-level EFL speakers' degree of intercultural communicative competence was related to their perceptions of various English accents. The study also aimed to determine whether there was any difference in the degree of ICC and attitudes towards English accents among EFL speakers based on their self-reported proficiency in English and whether they were enrolled in their first or second year of the degree program.

The findings of the first research question revealed that EFL speakers rated the American speaker the highest in all traits, followed by Chilean, Indian, and Korean speakers of English, respectively. Although this ranking varied based on the specific trait that was rated, the least favorable scores for the traits were always received by the Indian speaker or the Korean speaker while the Chilean and American speakers were always perceived as more favorable. When it comes to linguistic traits like being "nice to listen to" and being the one who "speaks poorly," the results consistently showed that the American speaker was perceived as the most pleasant to listen to and the one who communicated with the least difficulty. Finally, the Indian speaker was the one who spoke the most poorly, with both the Indian and the Korean speakers being equally unpleasant to listen to.

The findings were in line with some of the previous studies which showed that learners preferred English speakers from the inner circle countries over those from the outer or expanding circle countries (Li, 2009; Timmis, 2002; Tsang, 2020). Although the present study does not involve a comparison of learners in terms of their learning context, the findings support Kang (2015) in that EFL speakers may have been less supportive of the ELF paradigm overall as they perceive the native-speaker model as their ideal. Besides, the low scores of the Indian and Korean speakers as opposed to the Chilean speakers might be

due to the higher familiarity with the Spanish-accented L2 English, thus leading them to be more tolerant and understanding. This could partially be attributed to what Hayes-Harb and her colleagues (2008) defined as “the interlanguage speech intelligibility benefit.” When listeners are exposed to or familiar with a specific accent, they adapt their phonological inventory in a way to tolerate those speakers’ accented speech more.

Finally, no statistically significant differences were noted with regard to EFL speakers’ self-reported proficiency or the year of enrollment in the degree program and their perceptions of various English accents. Previous research (Saito et al., 2019) partially corroborated the absence of a connection between proficiency and L2 speech ratings, but it is essential to note that the present study relied on self-reported measures. Nevertheless, earlier research has also established a link between the two (Ludwig & Mora, 2017). There could be various reasons for the discrepancy, including the type of proficiency measures, the raters’ familiarity with the accents of the speakers, the rating tasks, and the background of the listeners. To gain a better understanding of similar relationships, further research that takes into account some or all of these factors is needed.

Next, the results addressing the second research question, which aimed at examining the ICC among EFL speakers, indicated an overall high score although the ratings for the sub-dimensions varied. Among the four components of the scale, EFL speakers reported themselves the highest on the subdimension of affective orientation to intercultural interaction factor, which expresses willingness to communicate with outgroups. The second highest dimension was self-efficacy in intercultural situations, which sought to find out about EFL speakers’ confidence levels in interactions. Although behavioral performance and knowledge of intercultural interaction were rated almost equally, the ratings indicated an agreement above neutral. Overall, these findings reveal that while Turkish EFL speakers who are studying English translation and interpreting as their major degrees are self-confident and willing to undertake intercultural interactions, they are less sure about their knowledge of and behavioral performance in intercultural communication. These findings are somewhat echoed by Bektaş-Çetinkaya and Çelik (2013) who found that EFL pre-service teachers held a small to medium amount of knowledge of and self-efficacy in English-speaking cultures while being highly willing for intercultural encounters. It is indeed not surprising to find that EFL speakers give a lower overall rating to the components that assess their performance and competence compared to those that just ask about their willingness and self-efficacy. The difference in self-efficacy levels may be due to the difference in the scales used, but it may also stem from the change in the sources of input and familiarity with the cultures. The prevalence of the internet and social media might be the primary actors increasing the amount of exposure to English-speaking cultures. Considering the role of digital contexts, Lee (2020) highlights the significance of digital environments in facilitating cross-cultural communication, especially for L2 speakers with no overseas exposure by enabling them to encounter diverse English accents and to develop a more favorable outlook towards them.

The study also sought to find out whether EFL speakers’ self-reported proficiency and the year of enrollment in their degree program were related to their ICC levels. The results indicated that as participants’ proficiency increased, their skills in ICC also increased,

which is consistent with some previous research (Hammer, 2017) although it is not in line with all (e.g., Hismanoglu, 2011). Earlier research also showed that L2 proficiency is related to an L2 learner's likelihood of interacting with native speakers (Baker-Smemoe et al., 2014) and helps learners understand "the surrounding sociocultural reality to a deeper level" (Hammer, 2017). Furthermore, compared to the EFL speakers completing their second semester, those who were about to complete their fourth semester in the program were found to be more competent in intercultural communication. While this may be due to being exposed to more content about non-Turkish cultures, including an intercultural communication & translation class, it may also be related to the profiles of the students alone. Although it is hard to confirm that the class(es) EFL speakers took were primary factors yielding such an outcome, previous research indicates that training listeners and learners on intercultural communication could be helpful (Genc & Bada, 2005; Godwin-Jones, 2013; Kavaklı, 2020). In a study by Hismanoglu (2011) pre-service L2 English teachers who had taken formal education (a specific course on cross-cultural communication) were found to be more successful in their ICC. However, it should be noted that, unlike the students in the present study, those in Hismanoglu's (2011) study were enrolled in the same year of their degree program allowing for a true comparison. Further studies, preferably with an experimental design, with comparable groups are needed to confirm the findings of the present study. Moreover, taking into account additional language and socio-demographic variables could provide a more comprehensive perspective on the issue, enabling a fuller understanding.

The last research question investigated whether there was a relationship between EFL speakers' ICC and their perceptions of English accents. The findings showed that they were not meaningfully related. While this could be due to the limitations of the measurement tools and the context, it is also striking because it shows how EFL speakers may self-report themselves as competent in intercultural communication and may still find L2 English accents less favorable compared to L1 accents. This finding fails to support previous research which reports that favorable perceptions of varieties of English accents are more likely to foster their strategic competence for cross-cultural communication (e.g., Lee, 2020). This may be due to the participants' context of learning English and their limited overseas experience. This finding is partially supported by Tsang (2020) who showed that despite the popularity of the ELF or WE paradigms, accent remains significant in the perception of English language learners. This does not align with the idea that language learners with high levels of intercultural competence are less likely to have stereotypes and biases toward different accents and varieties of English (Hammer, 2017). As we delve into the subtleties of this phenomenon, sociocultural elements subtly intertwine with learners' perceptual experiences. Aspects of sociocultural theory, which postulates that interactions among various linguistic communities may gradually alter perceptions, are consistent with this occurrence (Vygotsky, 1978). In addition, the significance of identity dynamics, as suggested by social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) becomes increasingly relevant in understanding how learners identify and relate to various linguistic groups regardless of their level of ICC. Together, these subtly interwoven sociocultural and identity dynamics

shed light on the continued significance of accent evaluation by L2 English learners, even for those with higher intercultural competence.

From a pedagogical point of view, English language teaching and learning should be designed in a way to provide opportunities for critical cultural awareness (Byram, 2021) and an appreciation of diversity in L2 English accents. Depending on the context, intercultural communication skills should be underscored either as a part of a stand-alone course or by integrating them into language classrooms. The critical point here is that such training may include developing tolerance towards different L2 varieties and raising awareness of the fact that native speakers are not the only models for successful communication in L2 English. These classes should involve exposure to authentic materials with different accent varieties and cultures, awareness raising in the importance of intelligibility over native-speakerism, in-class or authentic interaction activities, including role-plays, debates, guest speaker presentations or interviews to encourage learners to understand cultures and accents by directly engaging in intercultural communication. Finally, individuals may be encouraged to use or integrate technology into their learning and teaching, which was shown to be a promising and effective way of increasing positive attitudes toward L2 accent perceptions, and consequently enhancing strategic competence in intercultural communication (Lee, 2020). The digital contexts may especially help learners in learning environments with limited exposure to outgroup members.

### **Conclusion**

Various theoretical and empirical studies propose that enhanced ICC brings about more tolerance and more favorable perceptions of various English accents although various factors including proficiency, social bias, familiarity, and overseas experience have been shown to affect the connection between the two. The findings of the present study showed that EFL speakers rate their ICC above average with self-efficacy and willingness gaining higher mean scores than their knowledge and behavioral skills. This is an indication that although EFL speakers dare to perform effectively in intercultural contexts, they consider their performance and knowledge to fall behind. Second, the study further reveals that self-report proficiency in L2 English and the year of enrollment in the degree program made a difference in ICC self-ratings. Finally, although the present study did not reveal any meaningful relationships between accent perceptions and ICC, further studies should seek such a relationship using different measurement tools with a higher number of participants and speech samples. A closer look at the role of individual variables, including age, gender, experience traveling abroad, the use of English, exposure to varieties of English accents in daily life and digital settings, and asking learners to guess the nationality/L1 of the speakers or rate may also shed more light on the interpretation of the findings. Despite the constraints imposed by the limited sample size, this study adds valuable insights to the existing literature, bearing significant pedagogical implications. The findings underscore the pivotal role of fostering awareness in enhancing intercultural communication and influencing perceptions of English accents. For further research, a broader consideration of individual variables as primary factors influencing self-reported ratings of ICC and accent perceptions is recommended.



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