

DIVERSE ENGLISH ACCENTS AND EFL LISTENING COMPREHENSION: A SCOPING REVIEW

DIVERSIDAD DE ACENTOS DEL INGLÉS Y COMPRENSIÓN AUDITIVA EN LENGUA EXTRANJERA: REVISIÓN DE ALCANCE

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Abstract

Accent diversity characterizes contemporary communication in English; however, many English as foreign language courses still concentrate listening practice on a narrow range of prestige varieties. This scoping

review examined recent evidence on the relationship between English accent diversity and learners' listening comprehension. Following Joanna Briggs Institute methodological guidance and PRISMA-ScR reporting recommendations, ERIC, DOAJ, and OpenAlex were searched for studies published from 2020 onward; the final search was conducted on 3 August 2026. Of 137 records, 24 studies involving approximately 1,437 participants met the inclusion criteria. Familiarity frequently influenced performance and perceived difficulty, although no accent was consistently more comprehensible across contexts. Speaker intelligibility, listener proficiency, and task design explained part of the variation. Nine interventions indicated that exposure to diverse accents can support comprehension and phonological awareness when combined with explicit guidance, repeated practice, and reflection; retention of gains and changes in attitudes associated with accent prestige were less consistent. Listening instruction should therefore incorporate accent diversity gradually, while assessments should carefully calibrate speakers and tasks.

Keywords: Global Englishes; English accents; listening comprehension; accent familiarity; scoping review

Resumen

La diversidad de acentos caracteriza la comunicación actual en inglés, pero muchos cursos de inglés como lengua extranjera aún concentran la práctica auditiva en pocas variedades de prestigio. Esta revisión de alcance examinó la relación entre la diversidad de acentos y la comprensión auditiva de estudiantes de inglés. Siguiendo los lineamientos metodológicos del Joanna Briggs Institute y las recomendaciones de reporte de PRISMA-ScR, se buscaron en ERIC, DOAJ y OpenAlex estudios publicados desde 2020; la última búsqueda se ejecutó el 3 de agosto de 2026. De 137 registros, 24 estudios con aproximadamente 1.437 participantes cumplieron los criterios de inclusión. La familiaridad influyó en el desempeño y la dificultad percibida, pero ningún acento fue sistemáticamente más comprensible en todos los contextos. La inteligibilidad de los hablantes, la competencia de los oyentes y el diseño de las tareas explicaron parte de la variación. Nueve intervenciones indicaron que la exposición a diversos acentos puede favorecer la comprensión y la conciencia fonológica cuando se combina con orientación explícita, repetición y reflexión; la retención y los cambios en las actitudes vinculadas al prestigio de los acentos fueron menos consistentes. Se recomienda incorporar gradualmente acentos diversos y calibrar las voces y las tareas de evaluación.

Palabras clave: ingleses globales; acentos del inglés; comprensión auditiva; familiaridad con el acento; revisión de alcance

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Introduction

Listening is an active process of segmenting a continuous speech stream, linking it to linguistic and contextual knowledge, and constructing meaning under time pressure. The task becomes more demanding when learners have practiced with only a narrow range of voices. The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages describes listening across varied conditions and speaker characteristics, directing attention toward flexible meaning construction rather than recognition of a single idealized model (Council of Europe, 2020).

That flexibility matters because English is used among people with different linguistic, regional, and social histories. Accent refers to systematic pronunciation patterns; it does not, by itself, indicate low proficiency or poor communication. Global Englishes scholarship has therefore questioned the continued dominance of a small number of British and American models in teaching materials and has called for a broader representation of English users, purposes, and settings (Rose et al., 2021). The issue is especially relevant to listening, where unfamiliar segmental patterns, rhythm, stress, or speech rate can interrupt word recognition even when a message is otherwise accessible.

Three related outcomes need to remain distinct. Intelligibility concerns what a listener actually understands, commonly measured through transcription or comprehension accuracy. Comprehensibility is the listener's perceived ease or difficulty of understanding. Accentedness is a judgment of how strongly speech differs from an expected pronunciation model. Learners may understand a speaker accurately while still rating that speaker as difficult or strongly accented. Verbeke and Simon (2023), for instance, found high transcription accuracy across several varieties despite clear differences in subjective ratings. Treating these outcomes as interchangeable can make an accent appear stronger or simpler than it is.

Recent empirical findings are dispersed across comparative tests, classroom interventions, perception surveys, and qualitative cases. They also involve very different learner populations and accent sets. Some report a benefit for familiar speech, others find little difference between traditionally privileged and well-controlled second-language accents, and several show that instruction can improve adaptation (Chiu & Lin, 2024; Kang et al., 2024; Phomprasert & Grace, 2020). A scoping review is appropriate when the purpose is to map this heterogeneous evidence, clarify how the phenomenon has been studied, and identify gaps rather than estimate one pooled treatment effect (Peters et al., 2020).

Accordingly, this review addressed one research question: What does recent empirical research show about the ways English accent diversity relates to EFL learners' listening performance, perceptions, difficulties, and instructional experiences? Its objective was to synthesize learner-focused evidence published since 2020 and derive cautious implications for listening pedagogy and assessment.

Materials and methods

Review design and protocol

A scoping-review design was used. The procedure followed the updated Joanna Briggs Institute guidance for scoping reviews (Peters et al., 2020) and the PRISMA extension for scoping reviews (PRISMA-ScR) for reporting (Tricco et al., 2018). A protocol was developed prospectively with the JBI protocol template and

retained with the review records; it was not registered in a public repository. The review was designed to map concepts, designs, contexts, and findings, not to calculate a pooled effect size.

Eligibility criteria

Eligibility was framed around population, concept, and context. Participants had to be learners or test takers using English as a foreign, second, or additional language. The concept was exposure to, perception of, or comprehension of more than one English accent or variety, with learner listening data reported. Educational and language assessment settings were eligible. Empirical journal articles in English or Spanish, published from 2020 through 3 August 2026, were considered. Teacher-only studies, native-English-listener experiments, theoretical papers, reviews, editorials, studies without a listening outcome, and reports whose full text could not be obtained for eligibility assessment were excluded. The recent-publication boundary was chosen to produce a manageable and current map rather than a historical account.

Information sources and search strategy

ERIC, the Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ), and OpenAlex were searched on 3 August 2026. Three concept combinations were adapted to each source: (English OR EFL OR ESL) AND (accent* OR “English varieties” OR “World Englishes” OR “Global Englishes”) AND (listening OR “listening comprehension” OR intelligibility); accent* AND listening AND (learner* OR student*); and (“Global Englishes” OR “World Englishes”) AND listening. Searches were limited to 2020–2026 where the platform allowed. Targeted Google Scholar and backward-citation searches were used only to verify metadata and locate full texts; they did not add unique included records. Complete result files, query labels, dates, and URLs were retained in the audit trail.

Selection, charting, and synthesis

Search results were merged and duplicated by DOI and normalized title. The lead reviewer screened titles and abstracts, retrieved potentially eligible reports, and recorded one principal reason for each full-text exclusion. Decisions were preserved in a structured screening file so that an independent reviewer can verify the complete selection before the final editorial decision. This single-lead-reviewer procedure is reported as conducted and is considered in the limitations.

The charting form captured author and year, setting, educational level, sample, design, accent or variety represented, listening task or intervention, performance findings, perceptions, pedagogical implications, and limitations. The full texts were checked again while the evidence table and narrative were written. Because the studies differed substantially in participants, stimuli, tasks, outcomes, and statistical designs, the results were organized as a descriptive numerical summary and a narrative synthesis. No formal risk-of-bias appraisal was undertaken; critical appraisal is optional for a scoping review and would not have supported a valid pooled estimate in this heterogeneous corpus. Methodological constraints were nevertheless charted and used to qualify interpretations.

Results and Discussions

Study selection

The searches produced 137 records. After 34 duplicates were removed, 103 titles and abstracts were screened and 62 were excluded. Forty-one reports were sought for full-text assessment; 16 could not be retrieved. Twenty-five reports were assessed in full, and one was excluded because its participants were first-language English listeners rather than English learners (McLaughlin et al., 2024). The final map therefore included 24 studies. Figure 1 presents the selection flow.

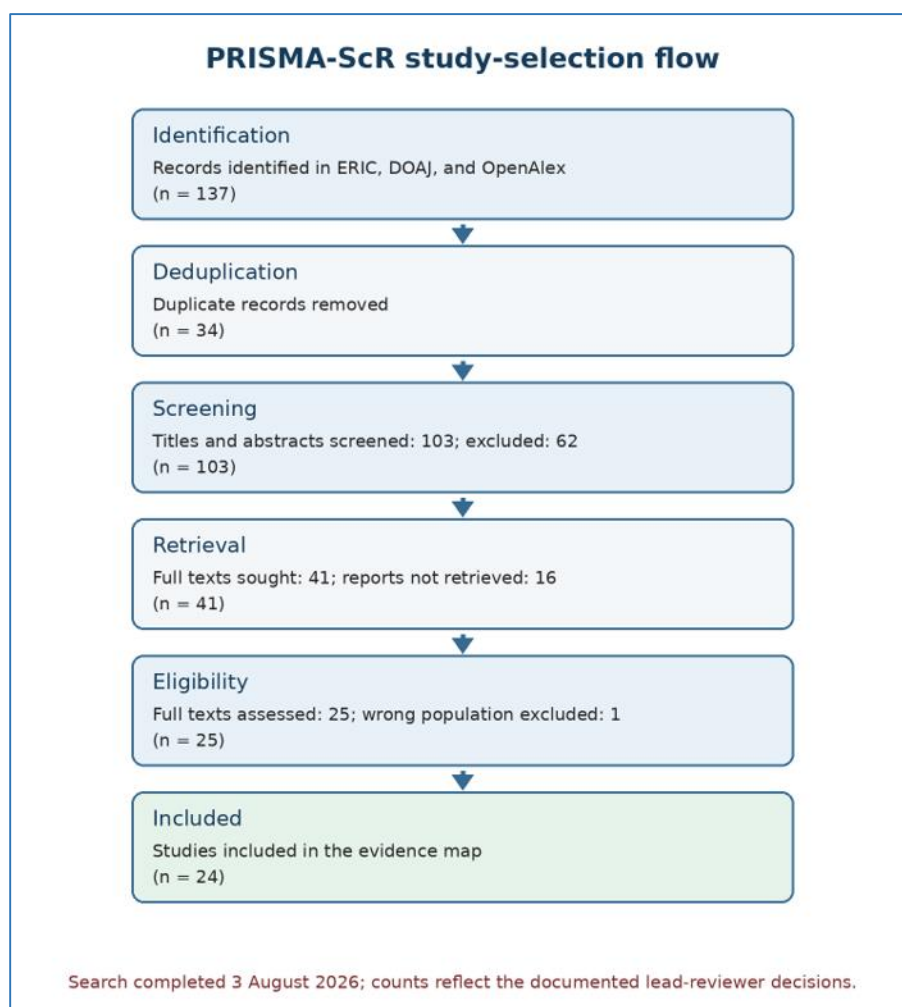


Figure 1. PRISMA-ScR flow of evidence selection.

Note. The one full-text exclusion involved first-language English listeners. Counts reflect the documented lead-reviewer decisions.

Characteristics of the evidence

The 24 studies were published from 2020 to 2026 and involved approximately 1,437 learners. Two appeared in 2020, three in 2021, three in 2022, four in 2023, five in 2024, five in 2025, and two in 2026. Samples ranged from a two-child exploratory case (De León Zamarripa, 2023) to a survey and think-aloud study with

300 Thai learners (Yaemtui, 2025). Most research was conducted with university students. Only a small group of studies examined secondary-school learners, and the evidence was concentrated in Asian EFL settings, with additional work in Sweden, Belgium, Mexico, Costa Rica, and a multilingual testing context.

Ten studies primarily compared listening performance across accents, nine implemented instruction or structured exposure, four concentrated on perceptions, and one focused on listening strategies. Outcome measures included transcription, multiple-choice comprehension, intelligibility and comprehensibility ratings, attitude scales, reflective journals, interviews, and classroom observations. This variation broadens the map but prevents a single numerical estimate of the “effect of accent.” Table 1 summarizes the corpus.

Table 1. Characteristics and principal findings of the 24 included studies.

Study and setting	Design and sample	Accent/input focus	Main contribution
Edayoshi (2020), Japan	Controlled comparative study; 20 university learners.	Several English accents at controlled speech rates.	Familiarity affected comprehension, but perceived difficulty and performance did not always align.
Phomprasert & Grace (2020), Thailand	Comparative listening test; 33 business-English freshmen.	American, British, and Australian English.	British and Australian input produced higher scores in this group; prior exposure was a plausible explanation.
Jeong et al. (2021), Sweden	Six-group listening/attitude study; 160 upper-secondary students.	Six L1- and L2-English accents.	Speaker affected understanding and ratings; privileged accents were favored, but preference was not identical to understanding.
Wu et al. (2021), China	Comparative study; 16 learners.	Several non-native accents.	The familiar Chinese accent was easier; speaker and text differences limit causal attribution.
Yokomoto et al. (2021), Japan	Pre/post awareness intervention; 48 university students.	Korean- and Chinese-accented English.	Transcription accuracy improved after research, examples, and explicit attention to accent features.
Boonsamritphol (2022), Thailand	Mixed method pre/post study; 30 engineering students.	World Englishes instructional model.	Listening, intelligibility/comprehensibility scores, and attitudes improved after instruction.
Kurtuldu & Ozkan (2022), Türkiye	Mixed-method comparison; 38 preservice teachers.	Multiple L1- and L2-English accents.	Familiarity shaped scores and reflections; no variety was universally easy.
Li & Lu (2022), Chinese students in the UK	Comparative tasks/interviews; 30 master’s students.	American and British English.	No significant overall accent difference; proficiency and field of study were more informative.
De León Zamarripa (2023), Mexico	Exploratory qualitative case; two 12-year-olds.	American- and Mexican-accented English.	Responses showed both local-accent acceptance and residual native-speaker expectations; sample was extremely small.

Hu et al. (2023), China	Dictation and rating study; 40 university students.	Chinese, Japanese, and French accents at two strengths.	Accent type and strength interacted; mild accents were generally easier than strong accents.
Maharani (2023), Indonesia	Mixed-method perception survey; 33 postgraduates.	American and British English.	American English dominated reported familiarity and preference, reflecting educational exposure.
Verbeke & Simon (2023), Belgium	Transcription and rating study; 33 Dutch-speaking learners.	British, regional British, Indian, Nigerian, and Dutch English.	Actual intelligibility was high across speakers, while ratings favored familiar prestige varieties.
Budiyanto et al. (2024), Indonesia	Listening-journal study; 45 university students.	Multiple World Englishes videos.	Journals expanded awareness and reflection, although stereotypes did not disappear automatically.
Chiu & Lin (2024), Taiwan	Two-group intervention; 88 first-year English majors.	British, Singaporean, Japanese, American, and Taiwanese English.	Varied exposure plus explicit phonological instruction outperformed exposure alone.
Kang et al. (2024), multilingual test context	Controlled listening tasks; 160 learners from four L1 groups.	Shared-L1, American, British, and other screened accents.	A shared-L1 benefit appeared, but highly intelligible accents often performed comparably when speakers were controlled.
Segura Arias & Herrera Rodríguez (2024), Costa Rica	Qualitative classroom case; 46 pre-intermediate learners.	Geographically varied online recordings.	Learners valued real-world relevance; pronunciation and unfamiliarity remained major difficulties.
Syahri et al. (2024), Indonesia	Survey study; 25 English majors.	Javanese-accented English videos.	Learners generally accepted the local accent while reporting specific comprehension challenges.
Fauzia & Poedjiastutie (2025), Indonesia	Survey in a listening class; 15 students.	Five English accents.	The familiar Indonesian accent was most liked for clarity; Thai English was least liked in this sample.
Jeong et al. (2025), Sweden	Three-week intervention/control study; 51 pupils.	High-variability training and mediated contact.	Understanding, ease, and language-focused attitudes improved for untrained speakers; status attitudes did not.
Maharani et al. (2025), Indonesia	Eight-session classroom case; 24 university students.	Global Englishes extensive listening.	Awareness and confidence increased through journals and discussion; unfamiliar speech remained demanding.
Miao et al. (2025), China	Eight-week intervention/control study; 50 undergraduates.	Global Englishes versus American-oriented instruction.	Immediate listening gains were not sustained at the delayed test; pronunciation did not change.

Yaemtui (2025), Thailand	Questionnaire and think-aloud study; 300 learners.	ASEAN English-accented conversations.	Higher-ability listeners reported more systematic cognitive and metacognitive strategy use.
Gunawan & Fadillah (2026), Indonesia	Qualitative classroom case; about 30 students and one lecturer.	Global Englishes extensive listening materials.	Authentic varied input, journals, presentations, and discussion supported confidence; material selection was difficult.
Inayat et al. (2026), Pakistan	Sequential mixed methods; 120 IELTS candidates; interview subset of 20.	Familiar, unfamiliar, and multi-accent listening.	Familiar speech reduced load; repeated multi-accent exposure supported adaptation, but the study requires cautious weighting.

Note. Terminology for accents reflects the source articles and does not imply a hierarchy of speakers. Interview subsets are included within, not added to, the quantitative sample totals.

Familiarity matters, but it does not create a universal accent hierarchy

Familiarity was the most recurrent explanation for both performance and perceived ease. Thai, Chinese, Japanese, Indonesian, and Costa Rican learners often responded more successfully or more positively to voices that resembled their previous instructional or social experience (Edayoshi, 2020; Fauzia & Poedjiastutie, 2025; Phomprasert & Grace, 2020; Segura Arias & Herrera Rodríguez, 2024; Wu et al., 2021). Yet the direction of the advantage differed by setting. An accent that was familiar in one program was unfamiliar in another, so the corpus does not support a stable ranking from easiest to hardest.

The studies with tighter control over speakers and tasks sharpen this conclusion. Kang et al. (2024) screened speakers for intelligibility and controlled speech rate before using accent-diverse test input. A shared-first-language advantage emerged, but highly intelligible shared-L1 and British or American accents often produced comparable scores. Li and Lu (2022) likewise found no significant overall difference between American and British input; learner proficiency and academic background were more revealing. Accent category alone is therefore a weak predictor unless listener experience, speaker intelligibility, and task characteristics are considered together.

Measured understanding and subjective judgment are related but distinct

Several studies exposed a gap between what learners understood and how they evaluated the voice. Verbeke and Simon (2023) recorded transcription accuracy between 79% and 95% across speakers, even though comprehensibility and accentedness ratings favored familiar Inner-Circle varieties. Swedish students also gave more favorable judgments to socially privileged accents, but their scores and ratings did not form a single hierarchy (Jeong et al., Swedish youths as listeners of Global Englishes speakers with diverse accents: Listener intelligibility, listener comprehensibility, accentedness perception, and accentedness acceptance, 2021). Familiarity may therefore improve perceptual efficiency while prestige beliefs influence reported ease, suitability, or liking.

This distinction has practical consequences. A learner who says that an accent is “hard” may be reporting actual word-recognition failure, greater mental effort, unfamiliarity, or a socially learned expectation. The small Mexican case illustrates how acceptance of a local accent can coexist with native-speaker-oriented

beliefs (De León Zamarripa, 2023), while Indonesian perception studies reveal strong American preferences alongside growing acceptance of local and regional speech (Maharani R. , 2023; Syahri et al., 2024). Listening research and classroom assessment should pair performance measures with perception data instead of using one as a substitute for the other.

Diverse exposure is more useful when it is guided

The nine instructional or structured-exposure studies generally reported benefits, but exposure was not a uniform treatment. Awareness activities helped Japanese students transcribe Korean- and Chinese-accented English more accurately (Yokomoto et al., 2021). A World Englishes model improved Thai students' listening scores and attitudes (Boonsamritphol, 2022). Listening journals and extensive-listening courses supported awareness, confidence, vocabulary work, and reflection in Indonesian classrooms (Budiyanto et al., 2024; Gunawan & Fadillah, 2026; Maharani et al., 2025). These findings show that diverse voices can be integrated into ordinary classroom routines rather than treated as an isolated cultural topic.

More controlled interventions clarify what may make exposure effective. Chiu and Lin (2024) found that variety plus explicit phonological explanation produced stronger listening gains than variety alone. Jeong et al. (2025) combined high-variability listening with mediated contact and observed transfer to untrained speakers in intelligibility, comprehensibility, and language-focused attitudes. Miao et al. (2025), however, found that an immediate advantage after eight weeks was not maintained at delayed testing. Together, the studies suggest that novelty is insufficient: learners benefit from repeated encounters, attention to recurrent pronunciation cues, purposeful comprehension tasks, and opportunities to reconsider their reactions.

The evidence for attitude change was more uneven than the evidence for perceptual adaptation. In the Swedish intervention, language-focused judgments improved but status-related attitudes remained stable (Jeong et al., 2025). Listening journals sometimes surfaced stereotypes without necessarily resolving them (Budiyanto et al., 2024). Teachers should therefore discuss why some accents are treated as more legitimate, while keeping the instructional focus on successful communication. Perceptual learning and ideological change are connected, but they do not move at the same pace.

Pedagogical and assessment implications

A defensible curriculum does not replace one dominant accent with another. It begins with intelligible speech near learners' existing experience and expands variability gradually. First, listening can target global meaning; repeated listening can focus on lexical segmentation, stress, rhythm, linking, reduction, or speech rate; and a post-listening task can compare actual comprehension with perceived difficulty. Learners need to adapt to variation; not imitate every voice they hear.

Strategy instruction may be particularly valuable when unfamiliar accents increase processing demands. Yaemtui (2025) found that higher-ability Thai listeners reported more systematic use of cognitive and metacognitive strategies during ASEAN-accented conversations. Prediction, monitoring, selective attention, inference, and repair can therefore be made visible and practiced. Such support should accompany accent diversity rather than leave less experienced listeners to cope through exposure alone.

Assessment requires the same balance between authenticity and control. A test restricted to one prestige variety underrepresents contemporary listening, but poorly calibrated accent variation can add construct-

irrelevant difficulty. Speaker selection should consider intelligibility, speech rate, recording quality, lexical and grammatical complexity, and prior exposure. Kang et al. (2024) demonstrate that diverse accents can be used fairly when speakers and tasks are screened systematically. High-stakes use should be preceded by representative practice and empirical item review.

Evidence gaps and review limitations

The map reveals persistent research gaps. University learners dominate the corpus, leaving younger, lower-proficiency, vocational, and community learners underrepresented. Many studies use one speaker per accent or change the text together with the speaker, making accent difficult to isolate. Delayed measures and interactive listening are rare. Latin American evidence is limited, and few studies examine how learners request clarification, negotiate meaning, or adapt during genuine interaction.

This review also has limitations. It covers recent rather than historical literature, searches three accessible multidisciplinary or educational sources rather than subscription databases such as Scopus or Web of Science, and includes only English- or Spanish-language reports. Sixteen potentially relevant full texts could not be retrieved, which may have introduced availability bias. Selection and charting were conducted by one lead reviewer and documented for independent audit. No formal critical appraisal was performed, so small exploratory cases and more controlled studies appear in the same map but should not receive equal evidential weight. Finally, heterogeneous accents, speakers, tasks, and outcomes precluded meta-analysis and require cautious generalization.

Conclusions

Recent evidence does not support the idea that one English accent is inherently easiest for EFL listeners. Understanding emerges from an interaction among previous exposure, speaker intelligibility, listener proficiency, task demands, and expectations. Familiarity often helps, but its direction changes across contexts. Subjective difficulty, social evaluation, and measured comprehension must therefore be interpreted separately.

Classroom exposure to varied English can improve listening and awareness, especially when learners receive repeated practice, explicit attention to useful phonological cues, strategic support, and guided reflection. The durability of gains is less certain, and prestige-related attitudes appear more resistant than perceptual performance. Programs should diversify input progressively and select voices for communicative value and intelligibility rather than nationality alone.

For research, the next priority is not simply adding more accent labels. Stronger studies should use multiple calibrated speakers per variety, comparable texts and recordings, transparent proficiency measures, delayed tests, and interactive tasks. More work is also needed with school-age and lower-proficiency learners and in Latin American settings. These steps would make accent-diverse listening both pedagogically useful and empirically defensible.

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