Dialectal Differences in the Perceptive Intelligibility of Iraqi EFL Learners

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Abstract: Objectives: This study investigates the dialectal variations in perceptive speech intelligibility among Iraqi EFL learners at the university level, focusing on the influence of Accent Familiarity (AF). The study aims to reveal the influence of students' regional dialects, Gilit and Qeltu, on perceptive intelligibility due to their exposure to matched accent familiarity, mismatched accent familiarity, and unfamiliar accent familiarity. **Methods:** The participants were 20 male and female students from the 3rd grade at the Department of English, College of Education for Humanities, University of Anbar, during the academic year 2023–2024. The participants were divided between "Gilit"-speaking and "Qeltu"-speaking students. A quantitative design was used to investigate dialectal differences in perceptive intelligibility among Iraqi EFL learners, and a Perceptive Intelligibility Test was employed to collect the data. The data was presented through three different accents: Iraqi accent, British accent, and German accent. All these accents delivered an English context. **Results:** The results revealed that there is no significant difference between the two dialects, Gilit and Qeltu, in perceptive intelligibility. Additionally, there is no significant difference between the two dialects in matched accent familiarity, mismatched accent familiarity, or unfamiliar accent familiarity. **Conclusion:** These findings conclude that the dialectal differences between Gilit and Qeltu speakers have no significant impact on perceptive intelligibility across matched, mismatched, or unfamiliar accents. This study offers valuable insights for phonologists, highlighting the interplay between accent familiarity, learners' dialects, and speech intelligibility in an EFL context. **Recommendation:** The study proposes several practical recommendations for improving pronunciation instruction in Iraqi EFL contexts such as incorporating intelligibility training, diversifying accent exposure, adopting inclusive pronunciation models, developing methodological frameworks.

Keywords: Accent familiarity, dialects, EFL learners, perceptive intelligibility.

الاختلافات اللهجية في الوضوح المدرك لدى متعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية في العراق

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الملخص: الأهداف: تبحث هذه الدراسة في التباينات اللهجية في وضوح الإدراك السمعي للكلام بين متعلمي الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية (EFL) من العراقيين على المستوى الجامعي، مع التركيز على تأثير الألفة باللهجة. (AF) وتهدف الدراسة إلى الكشف عن تأثير اللهجات الإقليمية للطلاب، وهما لهجتا "گِليت" و"قِلتُو"، على وضوح الإدراك السمعي نتيجة تعرّضهم لمستويات مختلفة من الألفة باللهجة: الألفة المطابقة، الألفة غير المطابقة، وعدم الألفة. **المنهجية:** شملت الدراسة 20 طالبًا وطالبة من الصف الثالث في قسم اللغة الإنجليزية، كلية التربية للعلوم الإنسانية، جامعة الأنبار، خلال العام الدراسي 2023-2024. وتم تقسيم المشاركين إلى متحدثي لهجة "گِليت" ومتحدثي لهجة "قِلتُو". وقد تم استخدام منهج كمي لدراسة الفروقات اللهجية في وضوح الإدراك السمعي بين متعلمي الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية في العراق، وذلك من خلال اختبار الإدراك السمعي. وقد تم تقديم البيانات باستخدام ثلاث لهجات مختلفة: اللهجة العراقية، واللهجة البريطانية، واللهجة الألمانية، حيث قُدّمت جميع هذه اللهجات ضمن سياق لغوي إنجليزي. **النتائج:** كشفت النتائج عن عدم وجود فرق دال إحصائيًا بين متحدثي اللهجتين "گِليت" و"قِلتُو" في وضوح الإدراك السمعي. كما لم يُلاحظ أي فرق دال بين المجموعتين في تأثير الألفة المطابقة باللهجة أو الألفة غير المطابقة أو عدم الألفة باللهجة. **الاستنتاج:** تشير هذه النتائج إلى أن الفروقات اللهجية بين متحدثي "گِليت" و"قِلتُو" ليس لها تأثير كبير على وضوح الإدراك السمعي عند التعرّض للهجات مألوفة أو غير مألوفة أو غير مطابقة. وتوفر هذه الدراسة رؤى مهمة لعلماء الصوتيات، حيث تسلط الضوء على العلاقة بين الألفة باللهجة، واللهجات الأصلية للمتعلمين، ووضوح الإدراك السمعي في سياق تعليم اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية. **التوصيات:** تقترح الدراسة عدة توصيات عملية لتحسين تعليم النطق في سياق تعليم الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية في العراق، من بينها: إدراج تدريب على وضوح النطق، وتوسيع نطاق التعرض للهجات المختلفة، واعتماد نماذج نطق شاملة، وتطوير أطر منهجية لتعزيز تعليم النطق.

الكلمات المفتاحية: إلمام باللهجة، اللهجات، متعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية، القدرة على الفهم الإدراكي.

Introduction

Effective communication is vital for any nation seeking to assert its role in today's interconnected world (Shawaqfeh, et al., 2024). Language, as the primary tool of communication, serves as a bridge for cross-cultural exchanges and the transfer of knowledge (Jameel, 2022). In an era where global interactions resemble a small interconnected space, the ability to understand and share cultural and linguistic nuances has become indispensable (Habeeb & Jameel, 2023).

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The Statement and the Aims: Learning English as a foreign language primarily relies on the listener's ability to comprehend the spoken word, as understanding serves as the foundation of effective communication (Rink, 2024). Additionally, the goal of foreign language learners is to communicate and exchange ideas (Karimova & Ergasheva, 2023). While the primary aim of all foreign language learners is driven by their passion for effective communication, the process of learning to communicate effectively is influenced by a variety of factors, as highlighted in numerous studies (Yaseen & Alnakeeb, 2023; Addimando, 2024; Barajas-Gamboa, 2024; Charlina et al., 2024; and Morady Moghaddam, 2024). These studies identified factors such as social, verbal, and environmental influences, educational barriers, language proficiency, self-confidence, and the dialects of both speakers and listeners.

To examine the challenges faced by university students learning English as a foreign language, the researcher conducted a needs analysis. Students were asked to identify the most significant obstacles they encounter in learning to communicate in English. Analysis of their responses revealed that 74% of students requested an exploration of how their mother tongue dialect affects their understanding of speakers. Additionally, 11% expressed the need to learn communication strategies, 9% sought training in pronouncing letter sounds, and 6% requested an investigation into the impact of cultural differences. Based on the analysis, this study aims to explore the effect of the dialect of students in Anbar Governorate, western Iraq, specifically those characterized by the "Gilit" dialect, compared to students whose dialectal background is identified as "Qiltu." The research seeks to determine the impact of these dialects on the comprehension of spoken English. To achieve this, students were exposed to an English text spoken by an Iraqi citizen, a British citizen, and a German citizen, each delivering the text once. The objective was to assess whether the students' dialect influenced their ability to understand English texts spoken by individuals from different cultural and dialectal backgrounds.

In alignment with the objectives of the study, the following hypotheses were formulated:

1. There is a statistical significance difference at (α= 0.05) between the mean scores of the "Gilit" speaking participants and "Qeltu" speaking participants in perceptive intelligibility.

2. There is a statistical significance difference at (α= 0.05) between the mean scores of the "Gilit" speaking participants and "Qeltu" speaking participants in matched accent familiarity.

3. There is a statistical significance difference at (α= 0.05) between the mean scores of the "Gilit" speaking participants and "Qeltu" speaking participants in mismatched accent familiarity.

4. There is a statistical significance difference at (α= 0.05) between the mean scores of the "Gilit" speaking participants and "Qeltu" speaking participants in unfamiliar accent familiarity.

Literature Review

Linguistic diversity can pose challenges to mutual intelligibility (Gooskens & van Heuven, 2021). Mispronunciations of English words often arise due to the influence of speakers' native languages and dialects, leading to potential misunderstandings (Elwahab, 2020). As an example of linguistic and dialect diversity, we take the Arabic language as the closest example to speakers of English as a foreign language and the ability of Arab listeners to adapt. Standard Arabic is the common language among Arabs, but there are many dialects that distinguish each country. The spoken dialects of the Arabic language vary according to countries and regions of countries as well. In the same vein, we find that the dialect of a certain region is not understood by residents of other regions, and this diversity has cultural, social, and linguistic effects (Boyi, et al., 2024).

Gimson (2001) underscores the need for EFL learners to achieve a universally valid level of intelligibility; this can be achieved by mastering English phonemic distinctions and adapting to speaker accents. Several scholars have emphasized the role of Accent Familiarity (AF) in speech intelligibility within the context of English as an International Language (EIL) (Nazari & Younus, 2021; Adedeji, 2022; and Krug, 2023). The researchers believe that to understand a spoken sentence, the receiver (listener) must be familiar with the sender's accent; in this context, accent familiarity plays a significant role. Accent familiarity refers to the listener's experience and exposure to a speaker's accent, enhancing their ability to comprehend spoken language (Krug, 2023). Accent familiarity involves perceptive intelligibility—the listener's ability to understand the words and phrases of a speaker with a specific accent (Pérez-Ramón, et al., 2022). In this sense, Munro and Derwing (1995) argue that accent reduction does not always guarantee improved intelligibility, highlighting contrasting perspectives in research.

Due to the differences of the dialects that cause misperception intelligibility (El-Malkh, 2014; Anber & Jameel, 2020; Winn & Teece, 2021; Baese-Berk, et al., 2023; Gianakas, et al., 2022; Jameel, et al., 2024; and Naqeeb, 2025), the present study addresses a gap in the literature by investigating how Iraqi EFL learners' dialects influence their perceptive intelligibility in relation to accent familiarity. Existing studies have often focused on Received Pronunciation (RP) (Martin & Sippel, 2021) or native English speakers (Crystal, 2022), overlooking the unique challenges faced by Arab EFL learners. This research aims to bridge this gap by examining the influence of Iraqi-Arabic accents on speech intelligibility and developing a framework for analyzing AF within an Iraqi context.

Previous Studies: Numerous studies have explored the relationship between language and geographical variations, emphasizing the influence of non-linguistic factors on dialects (Huisman, et al., 2021; and Alshehri & AlShabeb, 2023). Speakers of specific dialects often strive to maintain phonemic distinctions within their linguistic systems. Changes to these systems are usually counterbalanced to preserve linguistic clarity. However, study on Iraqi dialects in relation to speech intelligibility remains limited, with many sub-regional variations yet to be explored (Al Abdely, 2024).

Studies conducted to reveal the influence of Arabic on English pronunciation sounds include a study by Munro and Derwing (1995), which revealed that Arabic speakers produce shorter English vowels compared to native English speakers. Similarly, López-Soto and Barrera (2007) examined Iraqi EFL learners' perception of regionally accented English and found familiarity with accents played a critical role in intelligibility. The influence of L1, Arabic language, on Arabic speakers' pronunciation of English sounds was investigated by Elwahab (2020), who identified pronunciation errors among Arab learners arising from native language interference, affecting their acquisition of English phonemes.

Concerning the phonological variation in the Iraqi context, Iraqi dialects exhibit significant morphological, phonological, and lexical variations (Meyerhoff, 2006). Phonological variation, in particular, reflects social factors and refers to differences in pronunciation without altering meaning. Existing research highlights the significant role of mother tongues in shaping Arab EFL learners' acquisition and production

of English vowels and consonants. Additionally, the proximity of L2 sounds to those of L1 can influence learners' phonemic spaces (Marković, 2009, cited in Al-Abadly & Yap, 2016).

The accent familiarity (AF) factor also influenced speakers' intelligibility. Nazari and Younus (2021) investigated the role of AF in Arab EFL learners' ability to comprehend English spoken with various accents. Their findings revealed that learners faced challenges when exposed to unfamiliar accents. Furthermore, Khalaf and Mohammed (2022) explored the impact of Iraqi EFL learners' native dialects on their pronunciation of English vowels, concluding that learners' first language significantly influences their vowel production patterns.

Methods

This study employed a quantitative design to investigate dialectal differences in perceptive intelligibility among Iraqi EFL learners at the university level, utilizing the Perceptive Intelligibility Test (PIT).

Sampling Method and Sample Size: A purposive sampling method was used to address the study's aims. This method was chosen because it emphasizes specific characteristics of the target population relevant to the study hypotheses. As suggested by Ritchie, Lewis, Nicholls, and Ormston (2013), purposive sampling is particularly suitable for in-depth studies requiring a focused examination of participants' characteristics.

The Participants: The participants were 20 male and female students from the 3rd grade at the Department of English, College of Education for Humanities, University of Anbar, during the academic year 2023–2024. The participants were divided between "Gilit" speaking and "Qeltu" speaking students who lived in the east of Anbar province. The participants were aged between 21 and 23 years, all of whom shared Arabic as their native language and had undergone identical formal English instruction. This selection ensured the sample was representative of the broader target population.

The Material Stimuli: The Perceptive Intelligibility Test (PIT) utilized recordings from three speakers with distinct first-language backgrounds sourced from the Speech Accent Archives (SAA):

1. The first speaker was an Arabic EFL English speaker, representing a matched accent.
2. The second speaker was a native English speaker, representing a mismatched accent.
3. The third speaker was a German native speaker with no prior exposure to the participants' accent, representing an unfamiliar accent.

The inclusion of these recordings aimed to capture varying degrees of accent familiarity (AF) and its influence on perceptive intelligibility.

The Instruments and Data Collection: The study employed a five-point scale to evaluate participants' intelligibility of the recorded English speech. The scale was designed to measure perceptive intelligibility across different accents. Participants were exposed to each speaker sequentially, following the accent familiarity (AF) levels suggested by Bent and Bradlow (2003):

1. First, the Arabic speaker (matched accent).
2. Next, the native English speaker (mismatched accent).
3. Finally, the German speaker (unfamiliar accent).

Each participant listened to a single recording per speaker and rated their comprehension using the five-point scale.

Data Analysis: Data analysis involved both descriptive and inferential statistics to evaluate the perceptive intelligibility of Iraqi EFL learners. Descriptive statistics were used to calculate the mean and standard deviation of participants' intelligibility scores. An unpaired-sample t-test was conducted to measure the differences in intelligibility across dialects and accents. A one-sample t-test assessed the overall productivity of Iraqi EFL learners' spoken English with an accent and analyzed variations in dialectal differences in relation to AF.

Results and Discussion

To evaluate overall perceptive intelligibility, the study utilized an unpaired-sample t-test, conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics version 25. Descriptive statistics were applied to determine the mean and standard deviation values for intelligibility scores among the participants.

Result Related to Perceptive Intelligibility: To verify the first hypothesis that states: "There is a statistical significance difference at (α= 0.05) between the mean scores of the 'Gilit' speaking participants and 'Qeltu' speaking participants in perceptive intelligibility." The results of perceptive intelligibility across three levels of accent familiarity (AF) are shown in Table 1.

Table (1): Level of familiarity with perceptive intelligibility.

Accent Familiarity					
Dialect	No.	Mean	T Value	P Value (Sig)	Statistical difference
Gilit	10	9.50	0.949	0.355 > 0.05	Insignificant
Geltu	10	8.60			

Table 1 shows that the mean score of the Gilit dialect is 9.50, while the mean score of the Qeltu dialect is 8.60 with a T-value of 0.949 and a P-value of 0.355, which is higher than the significant value of 0.05. This indicates that there is no significant difference between the two dialects in perceptive intelligibility. Thus, the first hypothesis is rejected, and the students' dialect differences have no effect on their understanding of the three different accents (Arabic, British, and German accents).

Result Related to Matched Accent Familiarity : To verify the second hypothesis that states: "There is a statistical significance difference at (α= 0.05) between the mean scores of the 'Gilit' speaking participants and 'Qeltu' speaking participants in matched accent familiarity." The results of participants' perceptive intelligibility with matched AF are shown in Table 2.

Table (2): Level of Familiarity with Matched Accent Familiarity.

Dialect	No.	Mean	T Value	P Value (Sig)	Statistical difference
Gilit	10	3.30	0.661	0.517 > 0.05	Insignificant
Geltu	10	2.90			

Table 2 shows that the mean score of the Gilit dialect is 3.30, while the mean score of the Qeltu dialect is 2.90 with a T-value of 0.661 and a P-value of 0.517, which is higher than the significant value of 0.05. This indicates that there is no significant difference between the

two dialects in matched accent familiarity. Thus, the second hypothesis is rejected, and the students' dialect differences have no effect on their understanding due to matched accent familiarity (the Arabic accent).

Mismatched Accent Familiarity: To verify the third hypothesis that states: *"There is a statistical significance difference at (α= 0.05) between the mean scores of the 'Gilit' speaking participants and 'Qeltu' speaking participants in mismatched accent familiarity."* The results of perceptive intelligibility with mismatched AF are summarized in Table 3.

Table (3): Mismatched Accent.

Dialect	No.	Mean	T Value	P Value (Sig)	Statistical difference
Gilit	10	3.20	0.221	0.828 > 0.05	Insignificant
Geltu	10	3.10			

Table 3 shows that the mean score of the Gilit dialect is 3.20, while the mean score of the Qeltu dialect is 3.10 with a T-value of 0.221 and a P-value of 0.828, which is higher than the significant value of 0.05. This indicates that there is no significant difference between the two dialects in mismatched accent familiarity. Thus, the third hypothesis is rejected, and the students' dialect differences have no effect on their understanding due to mismatched accent familiarity (the British accent).

Unfamiliar Accent Familiarity: To verify the fourth hypothesis that states: "There is a statistical significance difference at (α= 0.05) between the mean scores of the 'Gilit' speaking participants and 'Qeltu' speaking participants in unfamiliar accent familiarity." The results for perceptive intelligibility with unfamiliar AF are presented in Table 4.

Table (4): Unfamiliar Accent.

Dialect	No.	Mean	T Value	P Value (Sig)	Statistical difference
Gilit	10	3.00	0.688	0.837 > 0.05	Insignificant
Geltu	10	2.60			

Table 4 shows that the mean score of the Gilit dialect is 3.00, while the mean score of the Qeltu dialect is 2.60 with a T-value of 0.688 and a P-value of 0.837, which is higher than the significant value of 0.05. This indicates that there is no significant difference between the two dialects in unfamiliar accent familiarity. Thus, the fourth hypothesis is rejected, and the students' dialect differences have no effect on their understanding due to unfamiliar accent familiarity (the German accent).

Discussion and Implications: The results revealed that the students' accents, *Gilit* and *Qeltu*, did not influence their understanding of spoken English. Their comprehension of the spoken English context—whether delivered by an Iraqi accent, a British accent, or a German accent—was consistent. The findings confirm that dialectal differences between *Gilit* and *Qeltu* speakers have no significant impact on perceptive intelligibility across matched, mismatched, or unfamiliar accents.

The lack of influence of students' dialects on their understanding of spoken English in the accents of Iraq, Britain, and Germany can be attributed to the clarity of pronunciation, which significantly affected their comprehension. Additionally, students' awareness of English culture and their knowledge of language functions helped neutralize the differences in their local dialects, enabling them to understand spoken English effectively. The results also suggest that students focused on the linguistic features of English rather than the dialect of the speaker, provided the pronunciation was clear and adhered to linguistic principles such as appropriate vocabulary choice, chronological sentence structure, grammatical consistency, and sentence coherence.

Another possible explanation for the minimal influence of students' dialects on their comprehension is their exposure to English through technology and various multimedia tools. For instance, applications like Google's speaking dictionary offer multiple pronunciation options for vocabulary or sentences, allowing users to choose their preferred version.

The statistical analysis demonstrated no significant differences in perceptive intelligibility between *Gilit* and *Qeltu* speakers. However, slight variations in the mean scores were observed. For *Matched Accent Familiarity*, the mean score was 3.30 for *Gilit* speakers and 2.90 for *Qeltu* speakers. For *Mismatched Accent Familiarity*, the mean scores were 3.20 for *Gilit* and 3.10 for *Qeltu*. For *Unfamiliar Accent Familiarity*, the mean scores were 3.00 for *Gilit* and 2.60 for *Qeltu*.

These findings indicate that students had a greater understanding of spoken English delivered by the Iraqi accent, followed by the British accent, with the German accent being the most challenging. It appears that students exerted more effort when listening to the German accent due to its unfamiliarity.

These findings align with previous research emphasizing the universal challenges EFL learners face in adapting to various English-speaking accents (Bent & Bradlow, 2003; Ritchie et al., 2013). Studies by Bent and Bradlow (2003) demonstrated that both native and non-native listeners struggle with unfamiliar accents, regardless of their own dialectal backgrounds. Similarly, Ritchie et al. (2013) underscored the importance of exposure to diverse accents in improving EFL learners' comprehension.

Further supporting this perspective, Alghazo (2015) and Hendawy & Sawafta (2017) who highlighted that accent familiarity significantly influences perceptive intelligibility, with learners displaying better comprehension of familiar accents. This emphasizes the necessity of incorporating a variety of English accents into EFL instruction to enhance learners' adaptability. Derwing and Munro (1997) also argued that while a strong foreign accent does not inherently impede intelligibility, familiarity with the accent facilitates better understanding, reinforcing the need for exposure to diverse linguistic inputs.

In the context of Iraqi EFL learners, studies such as Al-Ani and Zughoul (2019) demonstrated that exposure to diverse English accents through multimedia resources significantly improved comprehension skills. Collectively, these findings emphasize that native dialectal differences among learners have minimal impact on perceptive intelligibility and advocate for instructional strategies that expose learners to a wide range of English accents to foster global communicative competence.

By highlighting the importance of accent familiarity in improving perceptive intelligibility, this study contributes to the growing body of research advocating for the integration of diverse accents into EFL curricula. This exposure equips learners to navigate real-world communication in a globalized context.

Implications of the Study

This study offers significant contributions to the field of phonetic intelligibility by examining Iraqi EFL learners as a novel demographic and investigating the impact of mother dialect differences on their comprehension of English speech.

The findings underscore the importance of understanding how learners' and teachers' dialects influence English learning. The results demonstrated that the dialects of Iraqi students do not impede their comprehension of English. Consequently, other factors influencing education levels and student performance should be considered.

The study also revealed that English language teachers can utilize any reliable academic teaching method characterized by validity and consistency, irrespective of its country of origin. Teachers are not required to exclusively adopt methods that use British accents; any method with proven reliability can be effectively applied to Iraqi students.

Moreover, the results suggest that students can benefit from utilizing artificial intelligence tools and technology for language learning. Participation in English courses held in non-English-speaking countries and instruction by Iraqi teachers has been shown to yield credible and professional language learning outcomes. This enables students to achieve English pronunciation that closely resembles native speakers.

These findings provide fresh insights into the unique challenges Iraqi learners face, particularly in relation to accent familiarity, and offer pedagogical recommendations for addressing these challenges effectively.

Conclusions

This study offers a novel approach to assessing English pronunciation at an international level, emphasizing the role of accent familiarity in mitigating the effects of dialectal variations on intelligibility. It examined the influence of the *Gilit* and *Qeltu* dialects on Iraqi EFL learners' perceptive intelligibility and found that familiarity with accents posed fewer challenges compared to mismatched or unfamiliar accents.

The findings revealed that Iraqi EFL learners faced challenges in understanding speech delivered by English speakers with varying accents. Although no statistically significant differences were observed between the two dialect groups, the study demonstrated that intelligibility was influenced by the level of accent familiarity. Matched and mismatched accents, such as those of Iraqi and British speakers, positively impacted comprehension. Conversely, the unfamiliar German accent posed greater challenges, underscoring the importance of exposure to diverse phonetic models.

The study proposes several practical recommendations for improving pronunciation instruction in Iraqi EFL contexts:

— **Incorporating Intelligibility Training**: Emphasizing comprehension rather than perfect pronunciation in pronunciation classes.

— **Diversifying Accent Exposure**: Providing learners with exposure to native and non-native English accents through multimedia tools.

— **Adopting Inclusive Pronunciation Models**: Selecting pronunciation models that accommodate the diverse linguistic backgrounds of learners.

— **Developing Methodological Frameworks**: Creating structured methods for evaluating pronunciation and speech comprehensibility in EFL learners.

By identifying the specific difficulties faced by Iraqi EFL learners, this study broadens the scope of intelligibility research and offers actionable insights for improving the teaching of pronunciation and listening skills. These findings serve as a valuable resource for developing curricula that prioritize practical communication and foster global English proficiency.

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