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LEARNERS, ENGLISHES, AND IDENTITY: PROFILING ATTITUDINAL DIVERSITY IN SAUDI EFL CONTEXTS

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ABSTRACT

English language education in Saudi Arabia has long been shaped by native-speaker norms, despite the increasingly multilingual environments in which learners encounter English. This creates a mismatch between classroom practices and students' real-world engagement with diverse English varieties. This study examines learners' attitudes toward World Englishes using a component-based empirical approach rarely applied in the Saudi context. Drawing on survey data from 630 university learners, the author employed Principal Component Analysis and K-means clustering to identify the ideological patterns underlying their beliefs. Ten attitudinal dimensions emerged, alongside three learner profiles that reflect differing orientations toward intelligibility, identity, and linguistic legitimacy. While many students accepted Saudi English and other non-native varieties, native-like accuracy remained symbolically influential in academic and professional settings. These findings illustrate how Saudi learners negotiate multilingual realities and highlight the need for WE-informed pedagogies that validate local identities and prepare learners for diverse communicative contexts.

KEYWORDS: World Englishes (WE); Learners' identity; Multilingual English classrooms; learner attitudes; Principal Component Analysis (PCA).

1. INTRODUCTION

English continues to hold significant academic, economic, and social value in Saudi Arabia, functioning as a gateway to higher education, global mobility, and professional advancement. This mirrors broader developments in the Gulf, where English has become deeply embedded in educational and professional domains and is increasingly tied to socioeconomic mobility and global participation (Mahboob & Elyas, 2014a; Elyas & Mahboob, 2021). As English gains prominence, it is no longer perceived solely as a school subject but as a shared communicative resource mediating intercultural, academic, and workplace encounters (Kirkpatrick, 2011; Jenkins, 2013). Similar patterns have been observed among multilingual youth in the region, whose linguistic practices reflect fluid negotiations of global and local identities (Hillman & Ocampo Eibenschutz, 2018; Hopkyns, 2020).

Yet the sociolinguistic reality in Saudi Arabia is far more complex than a unidirectional shift toward standardized norms. Within its multilingual and multicultural landscape, English is shaped by localized identities, interactional practices, and emerging linguistic repertoires. As a result, tensions arise between long-standing Inner Circle norms and more contemporary understandings of English as a pluricentric, dynamic, and locally meaningful resource (Kachru 1985; Rose, McKinley and Galloway 2021). Research across the Gulf highlights similar dynamics, showing that hybridized English varieties frequently serve as markers of identity, belonging, and social alignment (Hopkyns, Zoghbor, & Hassall, 2021; Palfreyman & Al-Bataineh, 2018). Despite this, classroom instruction in many Saudi institutions continues to privilege British and American standards of correctness (Kachru, 2005; Harsanti & Manara, 2021), reinforcing normative hierarchies that contrast with learners' everyday linguistic encounters. These patterns echo findings demonstrating a persistent attachment to native-speaker norms across Gulf EFL settings (Asmari, 2014; Al-Ahdal & Al-Qunayeer, 2020).

At the same time, learners across Saudi Arabia engage with English through digital platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok. These environments expose them to a broad range of accents, registers, and communicative styles (Naghdipour, 2022). Evidence from Gulf-based studies suggests that such digital encounters reshape how young speakers perceive linguistic legitimacy, intelligibility, and identity, often diverging from the monolithic norms emphasized in formal instruction (Hillman, Selvi, & Yazan, 2021; Alkhatib, 2017).

Given these shifting conditions, there is a compelling need to examine how Saudi EFL learners position themselves with respect to World Englishes and the attitudinal ideologies that frame their perceptions of English variation. Prior scholarship in the region underscores how attitudes toward English varieties intersect with sociocultural identity, indexical meanings, and the emergence of localized forms (Alshurafa, 2014; Daquila, 2025).

Accordingly, the present study explores the attitudinal dimensions that influence Saudi learners' orientations toward English varieties, focusing on issues of intelligibility, authenticity, identity, and communicative practice. It seeks to address three questions:

RQ1: What attitudinal dimensions influence perceptions of World Englishes among Saudi EFL learners?

RQ2: How do learners position themselves with regard to authenticity, intelligibility, and identity?

RQ3: Which attitudinal clusters or learner profiles can be identified, and what pedagogical implications follow?

To answer these questions, the study employs a quantitative design incorporating Principal Component Analysis and cluster analysis to identify the ideological structures underlying learner attitudes. These approaches allow for the systematic reduction of complex attitudinal data and the identification of patterned learner groupings. The analysis draws on theoretical perspectives from World Englishes and English as a Lingua Franca, alongside sociolinguistic research examining language ideologies, identity formation, and global communicative practices (Canagarajah, 2012; Jenkins, 2013). Recent work on Gulf Englishes further situates this study within a broader discussion of emerging localized varieties and shifting linguistic ecologies in the region (Siemund & Lorenz, 2025; Hopkyns, 2025).

The paper concludes with a discussion of the conceptual, pedagogical, and institutional implications of the findings and considers how English language education in Saudi Arabia might be re-envisioned in response to its evolving linguistic landscape and the increasing recognition of localized Englishes (Mahboob, 2013; Onysko & Siemund, 2022).

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS

2.1. Conceptualizing World Englishes

World Englishes (WE) refers to the plurality of

Englishes shaped by local linguistic, cultural, and pragmatic conditions across global contexts (Kachru, 1985; Kirkpatrick, 2008). As English functions as a lingua franca across diplomacy, higher education, and digital communication, the assumption of a single codified standard has become increasingly untenable (Jenkins, 2013; Rose, McKinley, & Galloway, 2021). With over 80% of global English use occurring in L2-L2 interactions (Henry, 2010), scholars emphasize the importance of recognizing diversified and localized varieties (Bruthiaux, 2003; Jenkins, 2009). This diversification is evident in Gulf contexts, where emerging English varieties reflect hybrid sociocultural identities and localized communicative norms (Alshurafa, 2014; Palfreyman & Al-Bataineh, 2018).

Kachru's (1992) concentric circles model remains a foundational framework, distinguishing Inner, Outer, and Expanding Circle contexts (Galloway & Rose, 2015; Jenkins, 2009). Although the model has been critiqued for its static typology (Matsuda, 2003), it continues to shape debates on linguistic legitimacy, ownership, and the sociopolitical status of English (Canagarajah, 2006). Recent work in the Gulf, however, positions English within more fluid sociolinguistic ecologies that challenge fixed categorizations, highlighting dynamic identity negotiation and emergent linguistic practices (Hillman & Ocampo Eibenschutz, 2018; Alkhatib, 2017).

2.2. *WE-Informed Pedagogies*

The global spread of English has prompted pedagogical shifts grounded in EIL, ELF, and GELT frameworks (McKay, 2012; Bayyurt & Sifakis, 2015). EIL foregrounds cultural awareness and pragmatic adaptability, emphasizing the diversity of English users worldwide (McKay, 2002). ELF, in contrast, prioritizes intelligibility and communicative accommodation over adherence to native-speaker norms (Jenkins, 2009). GELT integrates these perspectives by encouraging multilingual awareness, inclusivity, and pedagogies attuned to diverse linguistic realities (Galloway & Rose, 2015; Matsuda & Matsuda, 2010).

Despite these theoretical advances, WE-oriented teaching remains difficult to implement. Teacher education programs often provide limited exposure to WE and ELF concepts, leaving educators unprepared to engage with linguistic plurality (Bayyurt & Sifakis, 2017). Textbooks and assessment frameworks continue to promote Inner Circle norms, restricting learners' engagement with authentic linguistic diversity (Huang, 2006). Similar patterns

are evident in Saudi Arabia, where institutional expectations reinforce native-speaker standards despite learners' increasing exposure to diverse Englishes (Asmari, 2014; Al-Ahdal & Al-Qunayeer, 2020). As Gulf studies show, digital platforms further complicate this landscape by immersing learners in multilingual, hybrid English practices absent from classroom materials (Hopkyns, 2020; Hillman, Selvi, & Yazan, 2021).

2.3. *Teaching English in Saudi Arabia*

The role of English in Saudi Arabia is multifaceted and evolving. It facilitates access to higher education, economic advancement, and participation in global knowledge networks while interacting with deeply rooted cultural and linguistic traditions (Mahboob & Elyas, 2014; Elyas & Picard, 2018). Saudi English has emerged as a localized variety with identifiable features, yet it remains undervalued relative to British and American standards. This hierarchy is reinforced through curriculum design, teacher education, and professional gatekeeping mechanisms (Khan, Hassan, & Cheng, 2025; Khan & Jayaraj, 2025). Comparable challenges in legitimizing localized Englishes across the Gulf are reported in studies documenting limited institutional recognition of emerging varieties (Hopkyns, Zoghbor, & Hassall, 2021; Siemund & Lorenz, 2025).

Digital exposure has transformed learners' interaction with English. Saudi youth encounter English in social media, gaming, influencers' content, and online learning platforms, where translanguaging, hybrid registers, and fluid identity performances are common (Naghdipour, 2022; Alruwaili, 2023). Gulf-based research shows that these digital practices influence learners' attitudes toward linguistic legitimacy and reshape their sense of identity and belonging (Hillman & Ocampo Eibenschutz, 2018; Hopkyns, 2020). However, these informal encounters often contrast with classroom practices rooted in textbook-driven, exam-focused, and monolithic norms of correctness (Mahboob, 2018; Liu, Lin, & Wiley, 2016). Learners thus navigate two parallel English worlds: one dynamic and pluralistic, another institutionally constrained and norm-bound (Alkhatib, 2017).

Policy initiatives such as Saudi Vision 2030 aim to modernize English language education, promote linguistic diversification, and cultivate globally competent learners (Elyas & Alghofaili, 2020; Alfahadi, 2022). However, implementation remains uneven. Many teacher education programs offer limited engagement with WE or ELF frameworks, leaving instructors uncertain about balancing local

legitimacy with global intelligibility (Alshurafa, 2014; Daquila, 2025).

2.4. Learner Attitudes Toward World Englishes

Learners' attitudes toward WE are shaped by their educational histories, sociocultural backgrounds, and exposure to diverse Englishes. Although many students express positive views toward localized varieties, native-speaker norms continue to dominate high-stakes contexts such as university admissions and employment assessments (He, 2020; Canagarajah, 2021). In Saudi Arabia, learners frequently experience ambivalence as they negotiate the dual demands of global communicative competence and local identity alignment (Liang, Huang, & Zhao, 2024; Fang, 2017). Similar ideological tensions have been documented in Gulf contexts, where hybrid identity practices intersect with evolving attitudes toward English variation (Hopkyns, 2020; Hillman, Selvi, & Yazan, 2021).

Patterns observed elsewhere mirror this complexity. In Korea and Japan, learners report conceptual support for WE but resist non-native models in practice due to persistent societal norms (Ahn, 2015; Lee & Green, 2016). In contrast, many European and African learners demonstrate greater tolerance of accent variation and prioritize communicative success over native-like accuracy (Matsuda, 2003; Yunhua & Budiman, 2024). Pedagogical interventions—such as exposure to global Englishes through listening activities, intercultural exchanges, or critical reflection—have been shown to enhance learners' acceptance of linguistic diversity (DeMarree et al., 2023; Chumak-Horbatsch, 2019).

Yet, Saudi research remains dominated by qualitative accounts, offering limited insight into how learners' attitudes cluster into coherent ideological patterns (Gupta, 2001; Canagarajah, 2013; Mei, Aas, & Medgard, 2019).

2.5. Rationale for the Study

Although international scholarship has extensively examined attitudes toward WE, there remains a lack of empirical research that models how Saudi learners' beliefs are structured, organized, and distributed across learner groups.

Existing studies document persistent tensions between native-speaker norms and localized linguistic identities (Alasmari, 2020; Khan & Jayaraj, 2025), but they rarely investigate the underlying ideological dimensions that inform such tensions. This gap is significant given the increasing

complexity of English use in the Gulf, where hybrid linguistic practices, digital exposure, and shifting ideologies are reshaping learners' perceptions of legitimacy and intelligibility (Hopkyns, Zoghbor, & Hassall, 2021; Siemund & Lorenz, 2025).

Moreover, despite widespread engagement with English in digital spaces, institutional practices still prioritize monolithic standards, reinforcing traditional hierarchies (Harsanti & Manara, 2021; Khan, Hassan, & Cheng, 2025). There is little understanding of whether learners' attitudes cohere into identifiable clusters or how such typologies might inform differentiated pedagogical approaches. Applying Principal Component Analysis (PCA) and K-means clustering enables a more rigorous examination of these ideological structures, offering insights that extend beyond descriptive accounts and contribute to more context-sensitive language policy and pedagogy.

This empirical focus is timely in light of Saudi Vision 2030, which emphasizes multilingual competence, global readiness, and pedagogical innovation (Elyas & Alghofaili, 2020; Alrabai, 2020). By modelling learners' attitudinal orientations toward WE, this study provides a framework that supports responsive, evidence-based ELT practices capable of engaging with the realities of Saudi Arabia's evolving linguistic ecology. It also contributes to wider debates on decolonizing English education and rethinking linguistic legitimacy within the Gulf region (Mahboob & Elyas, 2014; Canagarajah, 2021).

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Participants

The sample for this study included 630 Saudi learners of English as a foreign language, pursuing undergraduate and postgraduate courses in various colleges and universities across Saudi Arabia. These institutions comprised both public and private establishments situated in urban and semi-urban areas. A convenience sampling technique was employed, with participants drawn from diverse academic disciplines, predominantly within the humanities and social sciences. Approximately 51% of respondents identified as female, while 48% identified as male.

The age range of participants was between 18 and 28 years. All participants reported that English was a foreign or additional language for them; none claimed it as a first language. Ethical approval was secured, and written informed consent was obtained from all participants. (see Table 1)

Table 1: Participant Demographics of the Study Sample (N = 630).

Variable	Category	n	%
Gender	Female	323	51.1
Gender	Male	307	48.7
Age Group	18-20	211	33.4
Age Group	21-23	212	33.6
Age Group	24-28	106	16.8
Academic Level	Undergraduate	341	54.1
Academic Level	Postgraduate	289	45.8
English Background	Learned English as L2/L3	630	100

3.2. Instrument

The primary data collection tool was a structured questionnaire designed to capture students' attitudinal orientations toward World Englishes (WE). It comprised 36 positively framed Likert-scale items (ranging from 1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree), covering dimensions such as communicative priorities, the legitimacy of English varieties, digital learning exposure, translanguaging practices, and identity alignment. These items were adapted from previously validated WE attitudinal frameworks (e.g. Jenkins, 2009; Siqueira, 2015; Rose, McKinley, & Galloway, 2021) and are detailed in Appendix I. Demographic questions on gender, education level, and language background were also included.

3.3. Data Collection Procedure

Data were collected online using a Google Form. Participation was voluntary, and the average response time was 20–25 minutes. Respondents were informed about the study's purpose, assured of the confidentiality of their responses, and told they could withdraw at any time. Data collection occurred over four weeks at the beginning of 2025. A total of 641 responses were received, of which 630 were deemed complete and valid for analysis.

3.4. Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using the Python programming language, employing libraries such as scikit-learn and pandas. PCA was first applied to reduce the dimensionality of the dataset and identify latent structures in the 36 attitudinal items. Ten principal components explaining at least 75% of the variance were retained. Each component's loadings were analyzed to identify underlying ideological themes.

Subsequently, K-means clustering was conducted on the PCA-transformed data to categorize learners into distinct typological groups. The optimal number of clusters was determined using the Elbow Method, which indicated that three clusters best represented

the data. Descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations) and visualizations (scree plots, cluster plots) were generated to support interpretation. Cronbach's alpha for the instrument was calculated at 0.84, indicating strong internal reliability. The combined PCA and K-means approach allowed for a nuanced and empirical classification of learners, facilitating the identification of attitudinal profiles and their implications for pedagogical practice. (see Table 2)

Table 2: Internal Consistency Reliability of the WE Attitudinal Questionnaire.

Subscale	Items	Cronbach's α
Awareness of Global English Varieties	4	.79
Attitudes Toward Non-Native Varieties	4	.82
Classroom WE Exposure	4	.80
Confidence and Identity	4	.83
WE-Informed Pedagogy Beliefs	4	.78
Digital and Informal Learning	4	.81
Multilingualism and Code-Switching	4	.76
Accent-Based Discrimination	4	.84
Pedagogical Expectations	4	.82
Total Scale	36	.84

4. RESULTS AND FINDINGS

This section presents the analysis of attitudinal responses from 630 Saudi undergraduate and postgraduate students regarding World Englishes (WE). To uncover underlying ideological structures and categorize learner profiles, the author applied Principal Component Analysis (PCA) and K-means clustering. These multivariate techniques are particularly effective in identifying underlying attitudinal patterns in sociolinguistic and educational datasets, where variables tend to be interdependent and multidimensional (Jolliffe & Cadima, 2016; Field, 2018). Similar quantitative designs have been adopted in research on English variation and multilingual practices in the Arab Gulf, particularly in studies examining English's evolving sociolinguistic role (Al-Issa & Dahan, 2011; Hijazi,

Sowter, & Nag, 2014).

PCA is especially suited to attitude-based survey data because it identifies orthogonal components that represent deeper ideological constructs. Prior WE studies have applied PCA to uncover latent structural relationships within learners' perceptions (Uyar & Erozan, 2024; Snodin & Resnik, 2019), echoing arguments in Gulf sociolinguistic research that English attitudes often reflect layered and sometimes conflicting ideological positions (Mahboob, 2013; Gallagher, 2025). Cluster analysis complements PCA by grouping learners according to their scores on extracted components, generating coherent attitudinal profiles. This methodological integration aligns with an emerging trend toward combining exploratory statistical modelling with sociolinguistic interpretation to enhance explanatory validity (Angouri, 2010; Onysko & Siemund, 2022).

4.1. Unpacking Learner Beliefs: PCA-Derived Dimensions Of English Use and Identity

The PCA yielded ten components that explained 75% of total variance. Each principal component (PC) reflects a distinct ideological dimension, illustrating the complex and often ambivalent ways Saudi learners negotiate English use, identity, and linguistic legitimacy.

PC1: Communicative Clarity

PC1 emphasizes a preference for intelligibility over grammatical precision. Items such as "I would like teachers to teach communication rather than perfect grammar" (loading = 0.255) and "English should be assessed by clarity and context, not by accent or nativeness" (0.244) reflect learners' orientation toward communicative effectiveness. This stance aligns with BELF research showing that clarity and contextual accuracy often outweigh formal correctness in multilingual encounters (Kankaanranta et al., 2015). Similar attitudes are reported in Gulf contexts where English is used pragmatically in academia and workplaces (Aldawsari, 2022; Mahboob & Elyas, 2014).

PC2: Exposure and Status Orientation

PC2 reflects learners' mixed orientation toward native-like accents and multimodal exposure. High-loading items such as "I learn English from YouTube or social media where people speak in different accents" (0.289) and "I feel proud using English in my natural accent" (0.283) illustrate ambivalence between prestige norms and emerging confidence in localized accents. This mirrors findings from studies documenting how Gulf youths negotiate identity across digital and offline spheres (Hillman & Ocampo Eibenschutz, 2018; Hopkyns, 2014). The

presence of hybrid Englishes across online platforms appears to destabilize traditional notions of linguistic status (Avram, 2014; Palfreyman & Al-Bataineh, 2018).

PC3: Awareness of Linguistic Discrimination

PC3 captures heightened awareness of accent-based stigma. Items such as "I have been corrected or imitated because of the way I speak English" (0.310) and "People judge others based on how 'native' their English sounds" (0.332) suggest learners are attuned to linguistic policing practices. Such discrimination has been well documented in postcolonial and Gulf contexts, where accent hierarchies intersect with broader social evaluations and identity politics (Jenkins, 2013; Mahboob, 2013). Awareness of accent-based inequity also aligns with discussions on language, identity, and legitimacy in the Arab Gulf (Elyas & Mahboob, 2021).

PC4: Pedagogical Inclusivity

PC4 signifies support for diversified pedagogical input. Statements such as "I would feel more motivated to learn English if it included real-world and diverse usage" (0.367) and "Class activities should include accents from different regions" (0.279) reflect learners' desire for inclusive curricular content. This aligns with calls for pedagogical reform in Gulf English classrooms to better reflect local linguistic realities (Galloway & Rose, 2017; Hopkyns, 2025). Regional scholarship likewise advocates expanding ELT materials to represent localized and hybrid Englishes (Al-Issa & Dahan, 2011; Al-Rawi, 2012).

PC5: Local Identity Confidence

PC5 highlights learners' comfort with Saudi English and their desire to engage globally without renouncing local accents. Statements such as "It's okay to speak English with a Saudi accent" (0.377) and "I feel confident using English even if my grammar is not perfect" (0.342) reveal an emerging local linguistic identity. Such self-assurance corresponds with research showing increasing recognition of Gulf Englishes as legitimate varieties (Alsagoff, 2012; Bernaisch & Koch, 2016), and echoes identity-related findings from Saudi youth communicating across multicultural spaces (Aldawsari, 2022; Hopkyns, 2020).

PC6: Informal and Multimodal Learning

PC6 reflects the role of digital and multimodal exposure in shaping learners' linguistic development. Items such as "I mix English with my local language while talking with friends" (0.408) and "Watching Saudi influencers speaking in English helps me learn better" (0.398) demonstrate how translanguaging and digital immersion contribute to

language learning. This pattern resonates with Gulf studies documenting fluid code-mixing and hybrid digital discourse (Avram, 2014; Alshurafa, 2014). Such patterns also align with broader sociolinguistic perspectives that view informal and multimodal environments as legitimate learning spaces (Canagarajah, 2013).

PC7: Global Self-Assurance

PC7 represents a sense of communicative confidence irrespective of native-like norms. Items such as “I feel comfortable speaking English even without perfect grammar” (0.430) and “I believe the English used in Saudi Arabia is as valid as native English” (0.295) reflect an expanding sense of linguistic legitimacy. These views resonate with WE scholarship affirming that local Englishes hold communicative value within pluralistic global settings (Matsuda, 2003; Mahboob & Elyas, 2014). Confidence in localized forms also mirrors trends observed in multilingual Gulf communities (Palfreyman & Al-Bataineh, 2018).

PC8: Critique of Linguistic Gatekeeping

PC8 indicates resistance to institutionalized and societal ideologies that privilege native accents. Items such as “I have been mocked for my accent” (0.330) and “Knowing about different English varieties helps me understand the global nature of the language” (0.447) suggest learners are critically aware of native-speakerism. Such critique aligns with research examining linguistic inequality and indexicality in the Gulf (Hijazi et al., 2014; Hopkyns, 2025). These findings contribute to ongoing debates about decolonizing English education in the region (Mahboob & Elyas, 2014).

PC9: Transnational Pragmatism

PC9 reflects strategic language use across transnational contexts, as seen in statements like “I think my English is good enough for global discussions” (0.277). This indicates learners’ pragmatic orientation toward communication goals rather than native norms. Such orientations resonate with regional shifts toward functional, intercultural English use in academic and professional settings (Elyas & Mahboob, 2021; Onysko & Siemund, 2022).

PC10: Resistance to Pronunciation Hierarchies

PC10 challenges conventional hierarchies equating native pronunciation with prestige or competence. Items such as “Some Saudi regional accents are unfairly viewed as less professional” (0.398) and “I don’t think it is important to imitate British or American pronunciation” (0.361) underscore emerging resistance to native-speakerist ideologies. This is consistent with findings from Gulf English studies emphasizing alternative linguistic

capital and shifting norms of acceptability (Siemund & Lorenz, 2025; Hopkyns, 2014).

A scree plot (see Figure 1) confirmed the suitability of the ten-component solution, with an elbow observed after the tenth component (see Tables 3 and 4), further supporting dimensional distinctiveness.

Figure 1: Scree Plot - Cumulative Variance Explained by PCA Components.

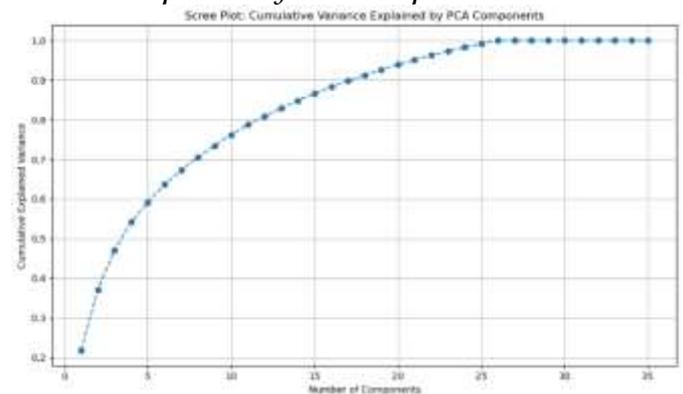


Table 3: Principal Component Loadings (Top Loadings ≥ .24).

Component	Item (Abbreviated)	Loading
PC1	Teacher focus on communication	.255
PC1	Textbooks include diverse cultures	.255
PC1	Clarity/context over nativeness	.244
PC2	Learn via social media accents	.289
PC2	Pride in natural accent	.283
PC2	Multi-variety textbook input	.298
PC3	Mocked for accent	.310
PC3	Judged for nativeness	.332
PC3	Varieties show global nature	.332

Table 4: Summary Of Principal Components And Interpretative Themes

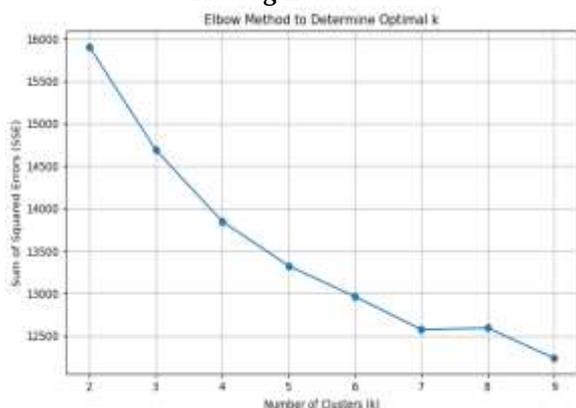
Component	Theme	Interpretation	Variance (%)
PC1	Communicative Clarity	Intelligibility focus	~12
PC2	Digital Accent Exposure	Mixed native/digital input	~9
PC3	Accent Discrimination Awareness	Sensitivity to accentism	~8
PC4	Inclusive WE Pedagogy	Desire for WE integration	~7
PC5	Local Identity	Pride in Saudi English	~7
PC6	Translanguaging	Digital multimodal learning	~6

PC7	Global Confidence	Confident L2 English use	~6
PC8	Anti-Gatekeeping	Rejects nativeness bias	~6
PC9	Global Pragmatism	Readiness + anxiety	~6
PC10	De-centering Nativeness	Clarity-focused norms	~5

4.2. WE Attitudinal Profiles: Traditionalists, Progressives, and Identity-Based Learners

K-means clustering applied to PCA scores revealed three attitudinal profiles (see Figure 2). and demonstrating how different orientations toward WE co-exist within a single educational ecosystem. (see Figure 2)

Figure 2: Elbow Method To Determine Optimal Number Of Clusters (K). The Point Of Inflection At K = 3 Suggests Three Distinct Attitudinal Clusters Among Learners.



Cluster 0: Pragmatic Traditionalists

Cluster 0 consisted of learners who demonstrated moderate support for WE while maintaining clear preferences for conventional ELT models. With mean scores between 3.2 and 3.8, these students acknowledged the legitimacy of linguistic diversity but displayed caution in moving away from native-speaker norms. They valued grammatical accuracy, textbook-driven instruction, and established pedagogical routines, reflecting patterns seen in postcolonial and expanding-circle contexts where normative attachments remain strong (Crismore, Ngeow, & Soo, 1996; Tran & Tanemura, 2020). Similar ambivalence has been observed in Gulf English studies, where learners endorse communicative flexibility but remain influenced by entrenched ideologies of linguistic prestige (Mahboob & Elyas, 2014; Al-Ahdal & Al-Qunayeer, 2020). Their orientation also parallels findings from Saudi classrooms where traditional correctness and institutional conventions continue to shape evaluative expectations (Asmari, 2014; Hopkyns, 2014).

Cluster 1: Progressive Advocates

Cluster 1 represented the most forward-leaning group, exhibiting strong endorsement of WE principles with mean scores ranging from 3.9 to 4.8. These learners supported accent inclusivity, multilingual practices, and informal, digitally mediated language exposure. They engaged with English through YouTube, social media, gaming platforms, and influencer culture, forming identities that draw on hybrid, transnational repertoires. Similar youth-driven linguistic innovation has been documented in Thailand and the Philippines (Baker, 2015; Imperial, 2025), and these trends are increasingly visible among Gulf students navigating superdiverse digital landscapes (Hillman & Ocampo Eibenschutz, 2018; Alkhatib, 2017). Their openness mirrors emerging research illustrating how Gulf millennials construct fluid English identities shaped by online participation and multimodal literacy (Hopkyns, Zoghbor, & Hassall, 2021; Naghdipour, 2022). This cluster aligns with patterns in broader sociolinguistic studies emphasizing digital cosmopolitanism and informal learning as catalysts for linguistic innovation (Palfreyman & Al-Bataineh, 2018; Avram, 2014).

Cluster 2: Identity-Anchored Realists

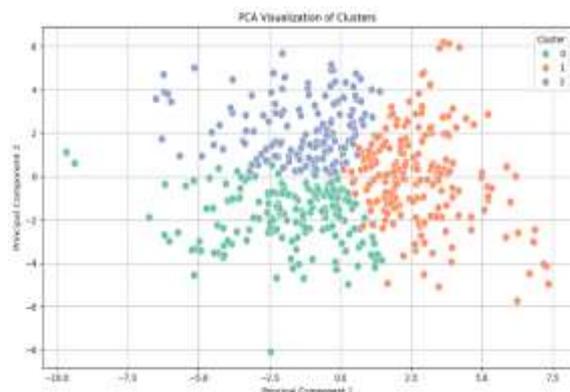
Cluster 2 blended national linguistic pride with pragmatic engagement in global communication. With scores ranging from 3.1 to 4.4, these learners demonstrated confidence in Saudi English while valuing accommodation and intelligibility in multicultural contexts. Their endorsement of code-switching, curricular flexibility, and explicit discussions of linguistic plurality reflects patterns found among bilinguals in Singapore, who balance global reach with strong cultural anchoring (Alsagoff, 2012). In the Saudi and Gulf contexts, similar identity-anchored stances have emerged as learners reconcile global participation with affirmations of local linguistic legitimacy (Daquila, 2025; Siemund & Lorenz, 2025). Their perspectives resonate with findings showing that Saudi youth often construct hybrid identities through multilingual negotiation, both online and offline (Hopkyns, 2020; Elyas & Mahboob, 2021). Unlike the aspirational cosmopolitanism of Cluster 1, this group embraces a grounded orientation that values both national identity and strategic adaptability in transnational interactions (Mahboob, 2013; Alshurafa, 2014). (see Table 5) (see Figure 3)

Table 5: Descriptive Statistics And Characteristics Of The Three Learner Clusters.

Cluster	Label	n (%)	Key Traits	PCA Profile
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0	Pragmatic Traditionalists	36 %	Moderate WE support	Moderate PC1/4/5
1	Progressive Advocates	32 %	High WE orientation	High PC1/4/5/6/7/10
2	Identity-Anchored Realists	32 %	Identity + global balance	High PC5/7

Figure 3: Cluster Visualization With PCA Overlay



4.3 Situating Saudi WE Attitudes in Global Contexts

Saudi Arabia presents a particularly complex sociolinguistic landscape in which learners negotiate both global and locally grounded expectations of English use. Although earlier studies have highlighted the endurance of native-speakerist ideologies in curriculum design, assessment practices, and teacher beliefs (Khan, Hassan, & Cheng, 2025; Harsanti & Manara, 2021), recent work points to increasing exposure to diverse Englishes through digital platforms, influencers, and online learning environments (Naghdipour, 2022; Alkhatib, 2017). Our PCA results reinforce this duality: Saudi students do not subscribe to a singular ideological position but instead display layered orientations reflecting simultaneous openness and ambivalence. For instance, PC5 (Local Identity Confidence) indicates a growing acceptance of Saudi English as a legitimate variety, a trend also reported in studies on Saudi youth identity and hybrid English practices (Mahboob & Elyas, 2014; Hopkyns, 2020). At the same time, PC3 (Awareness of Linguistic Discrimination) reflects learners' recognition of accent-based stigma, which aligns with findings from Gulf sociolinguistic studies documenting hierarchical evaluations of English pronunciation (Hillman & Ocampo Eibenschutz, 2018; Elyas & Mahboob, 2021).

When situated within broader Gulf and global

patterns, our results reveal both parallels and distinct features. Similar to learners in Korea and China who demonstrate mixed acceptance of localized English varieties (Ahn, 2015; He, 2020), Saudi students continue to associate grammatical precision and native-like pronunciation with academic and professional legitimacy, a belief consistent with Cluster 0 (Pragmatic Traditionalists) and longstanding institutional expectations in the Saudi ELT system (Al-Ahdal & Al-Qunayeer, 2020; Alshurafa, 2014). However, PC1 (Communicative Clarity) and PC10 (Resistance to Pronunciation Hierarchies) reflect a growing recognition that intelligibility and contextual appropriateness matter more than native-like norms—mirroring ELF principles emphasized in contemporary WE literature (Jenkins, 2013) and increasingly reflected in Gulf youth discourse (Hopkyns, 2014; Palfreyman & Al-Bataineh, 2018).

This interplay of traditional norms and emerging pluralistic orientations is further illustrated in our cluster analysis. Cluster 1 (Progressive Advocates), for example, aligns with studies showing that Saudi learners who engage with English in digital and transnational spaces develop more flexible and inclusive linguistic identities (Hillman, Selvi, & Yazan, 2021; Daquila, 2025). Meanwhile, Cluster 2 (Identity-Anchored Realists) captures a stance noted in Gulf multilingual communities, where speakers balance national identity with strategic participation in global communication (Siemund & Lorenz, 2025; Hopkyns, 2025). These attitudinal combinations confirm arguments by Mahboob (2013) and Elyas & Mahboob (2021) that English in Saudi Arabia operates within a sociolinguistic ecology in which global aspirations intersect with strong local identity commitments.

Overall, these findings demonstrate that Saudi learners' attitudes toward WE are not static but dynamic responses to multiple sociolinguistic pressures. Exposure to multilingual, digitally mediated English practices creates conditions for greater acceptance of diversity, while institutional structures continue to reinforce traditional norms of correctness. By integrating PCA-derived components with cluster profiles, this study provides a more nuanced understanding of how Saudi learners reconcile competing ideologies of legitimacy, intelligibility, and identity. This extends the WE literature by showing that attitudinal diversity in Saudi Arabia is shaped not only by global linguistic trends but also by localized sociopolitical forces and rapidly evolving digital practices (Mahboob & Elyas, 2014; Hopkyns, 2020). As such, WE-informed

pedagogies in Saudi Arabia must move beyond abstract endorsement of pluralism toward practical reforms in assessment, teacher preparation, and materials development—reforms that acknowledge learners' lived linguistic experiences and the hybrid Englishes they engage with daily (Rose, McKinley, & Galloway, 2021; Sifakis & Bayyurt, 2017).

5. DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

5.1. *Interpreting Saudi Learner Attitudes through The WE-ELF Lens*

The present study provides a deeper understanding of how Saudi EFL learners navigate ideological tensions surrounding World Englishes (WE), revealing attitudes shaped by both global linguistic trends and locally situated sociocultural dynamics. The PCA findings highlight that Saudi learners' orientations toward English variety legitimacy, communicative norms, and identity formation cannot be understood in isolation from the Saudi context, where institutional commitment to Inner-Circle norms remains strong (Khan, Hassan, & Cheng, 2025; Harsanti & Manara, 2021). At the same time, students' increasing exposure to diverse Englishes through social media, digital influencers, and online learning reflects broader Gulf trends of English circulating in multilingual, hybridized digital spaces (Naghdipour, 2022; Hopkyns, 2020; Alkhatib, 2017).

Learners' emphasis on intelligibility over perfection (PC1) resonates with ELF-oriented communication reported among multilingual speakers in the Gulf (Palfreyman & Al-Bataineh, 2018). Likewise, comfort with Saudi English (PC5) aligns with findings that localized varieties such as Saudi English (SauE) are increasingly recognized as legitimate identity resources by youth (Alshurafa, 2014; Daquila, 2025; Bernaisch & Koch, 2016). The identity-driven nature of PC7 mirrors emerging research suggesting that English in Saudi Arabia has become a site for negotiating global aspirations and national belonging (Mahboob & Elyas, 2014; Elyas & Mahboob, 2021; Hopkyns, 2025).

However, the persistence of native-like pronunciation preferences and textbook-driven norms (PC2, PC4, PC10) demonstrates the enduring influence of exonormative ideologies in Saudi ELT. This is consistent with earlier observations that learners and teachers continue to treat British and American English as yardsticks of correctness and prestige (Kachru, 2005; Al-Ahdal & Al-Qunayer, 2020). Accent-related insecurities revealed in PC8 also reflect wider Gulf concerns about linguistic discrimination and hierarchical judgments tied to

“nativeness” (Hillman & Ocampo Eibenschutz, 2018; Hopkyns, 2014). Together, these tensions indicate that Saudi English education is situated within a shifting linguistic ecology—one where pluralistic and conservative ideologies coexist and compete.

5.2. *Learner Profiles And Their Significance For Saudi English Education*

The cluster analysis further clarifies how these ideological tensions manifest across different learner groups. Pragmatic Traditionalists reflect learners who continue to align with exam-focused pedagogies, demonstrating adherence to accuracy, structure, and conventional learning pathways. This orientation remains common in Saudi educational settings, where assessment practices reinforce correctness-based ideologies (Khan, Hassan, & Cheng, 2025; Alshurafa, 2014).

Progressive Advocates, by contrast, embody learners whose English use is shaped significantly by digital, informal, and multimodal exposure. Their profile aligns closely with Gulf scholarship documenting how young Saudis engage with influencers, gaming communities, and hybrid linguistic environments that mix Arabic and English fluidly (Naghdipour, 2022; Hillman & Ocampo Eibenschutz, 2018; Hopkyns, 2020). These learners reflect global trends found in research on digital cosmopolitanism but are distinctly shaped by Saudi Arabia's rapidly evolving digital culture.

Identity-Anchored Realists represent a critical group for understanding English in contemporary Saudi Arabia. They value global intelligibility but also affirm the legitimacy of Saudi English, paralleling research on GCC English varieties that emphasizes local ownership and hybrid identity positioning (Bhatt, 2005; Siemund & Lorenz, 2025). Their stance reinforces evidence that Gulf Englishes are emerging as socially meaningful and contextually grounded varieties, shaped by demographic diversity, mobility, and daily multilingual interaction (Alkhatib, 2017; Palfreyman & Al-Bataineh, 2018).

Collectively, these profiles highlight the agency of Saudi learners in selecting, resisting, and reinterpreting linguistic norms rather than passively absorbing institutional ideologies. This supports WE perspectives on user-driven norm negotiation and underscores the need for pedagogical frameworks that respond to localized attitudinal complexity (Rose, McKinley, & Galloway, 2021).

5.3. *Implications for EFL Pedagogy, Assessment, And Curriculum In Saudi Arabia*

The findings call for pedagogical reforms aligned with the multilingual realities of Saudi learners. The strong emphasis on intelligibility and communicative clarity (PC1, PC10) suggests that instruction should prioritize communication-focused and function-oriented goals over rigid native-speaker models. Similar recommendations have been made in Saudi WE research, which critiques the mismatch between real-world English use and classroom expectations (Al-Ahdal & Al-Qunayer, 2020; Hillman & Ocampo Eibenschutz, 2018).

Teacher preparation programs must also incorporate WE- and ELF-informed pedagogies. Many Saudi teachers report feeling constrained by British/American-centric curricula and lack the training needed to engage learners in discussions about linguistic diversity, accent variation, and identity (Mahboob & Elyas, 2014; Elyas & Mahboob, 2021). Given that learners—especially from Clusters 1 and 2—demonstrate readiness to engage with pluralistic orientations, teacher education must foreground critical language awareness and strategies for validating diverse Englishes.

Assessment practices similarly require transformation. High-stakes, accuracy-dominant evaluations create linguistic insecurity and restrict the development of communicative competence (Khan et al., 2025). Performance-based assessments—peer interaction, oral communication tasks, digital storytelling—would better reflect the multilingual and multimodal contexts where Saudi learners actively use English (Hopkyns, 2020; Alkhatib, 2017).

Finally, the findings have direct implications for language policy, particularly in alignment with Vision 2030. The growing legitimacy accorded to Saudi English among learners supports the case for recognizing SauE as part of Saudi linguistic identity (Daquila, 2025; Bernaisch & Koch, 2016). Institutional acknowledgment of localized varieties would enhance learner confidence, promote cultural alignment, and reduce dependence on exonormative models.

5.4. Theoretical Contributions To WE And Applied Linguistics

The study contributes to World Englishes and applied linguistics by empirically modelling ideological structures rather than describing them anecdotally. The Saudi case illustrates how English attitudes are shaped by a blend of national identity, global engagement, and digital multilingual exposure—a combination characteristic of multilingual, postcolonial, and highly digitized societies.

By illustrating how intelligibility, identity, and linguistic legitimacy interact in Saudi learners' orientations, the study advances theoretical debates on norm negotiation, user agency, and the localization of English in Expanding Circle contexts (Mahboob & Elyas, 2014; Hopkyns, 2025). The findings also validate WE and ELF claims that English today operates as a pluricentric, diverse, and context-driven resource shaped by its users.

6. CONCLUSION

This study examined how Saudi EFL learners position themselves within the evolving landscape of global Englishes, revealing a complex negotiation between traditional native-speaker norms and emerging multilingual ideologies. The ten attitudinal dimensions identified through PCA, together with the three learner profiles, demonstrate that Saudi learners do not hold uniform beliefs about English. Instead, their orientations reflect a tension between valuing intelligibility and embracing localized identity resources, while still recognising the symbolic authority of Inner-Circle norms. These patterns illustrate a linguistic ecology in transition—one shaped simultaneously by institutional expectations and the multilingual, digitally mediated environments in which learners increasingly use English.

The findings also highlight that learners' everyday digital encounters play a critical role in reshaping their perceptions of linguistic legitimacy, accent, and communicative norms. Progressive Advocates and Identity-Anchored Realists, in particular, reflect the influence of online multilingual practices and the growing acceptance of Saudi English as a meaningful variety. At the same time, the persistence of accuracy-oriented beliefs among Pragmatic Traditionalists underscores the continued institutional weight of standard-based curricula. Together, the profiles show that Saudi learners draw on multiple ideological resources as they navigate English for academic, social, and global purposes.

These insights point to clear implications for the development of English education in Saudi Arabia. Pedagogical and assessment practices must respond more directly to learners' lived linguistic experiences by emphasising intelligibility, flexible communicative strategies, and awareness of English variation. Equally, teacher education programs need to prepare educators to engage with linguistic diversity and to support learners whose identities and language practices extend beyond native-speaker models. By aligning instruction with the attitudinal patterns revealed in this study, English

education in Saudi Arabia can move toward a more contextually grounded and inclusive approach, one that better equips learners for communication in an increasingly diverse global environment.

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