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Stratified Voices: Accent, Fluency, and Belonging in Jordanian Graduate EFL Education

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***Abstract*:** In Jordanian universities, English increasingly functions not only as a medium of instruction but also as a marker of cultural legitimacy and professional credibility. This study explores how accent, fluency, and performative competence shape students' participation and sense of belonging in English as a Foreign Language graduate program. The analysis draws on semi-structured interviews and reflective narratives from twenty-four students enrolled in EFL-related graduate programs at two Jordanian universities. Students who entered university from urban and privately schooled backgrounds often described English fluency as an ordinary part of their educational experience, one that readily translated into academic confidence and professional recognition. By contrast, participants from public-school and rural contexts frequently reported monitoring their speech closely, worried that accent or pronunciation would expose them to judgment. Their accounts also reveal how classroom practices and institutional expectations quietly privilege native-like pronunciation and cosmopolitan communicative styles. Across these narratives, English emerges not as a neutral skill but as a cultural resource unevenly distributed across educational trajectories. Interpreted through the lenses of intersectionality, linguistic capital, and postcolonial critique, the findings suggest that English-medium higher education may reproduce existing inequalities unless pedagogical and policy reforms place greater emphasis on intelligibility, communicative competence, and linguistic inclusion.
Keywords: Accent, employability, English-medium instruction (EMI), fluency, linguistic capital, politics of belonging

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In Jordanian higher education, English functions not only as a value-neutral subject and/or a medium of instruction but also as a marker of legitimacy. It shapes whose voices are heard, whose aspirations are validated, and which students are recognized as globally competent interlocutors. Within graduate English as a foreign language (henceforth, EFL) programs, spaces purportedly devoted to pedagogy, access, and inclusion, English frequently functions as a gatekeeping mechanism, sorting students by socio-economic background, geographic origin, and prior schooling, entrenching broader social inequalities within the university.

Two claims guide this analysis. First, students' fluency, accent, and performative competence, shaped by prior schooling and sociocultural conditions, structure positioning and belonging in Jordanian EFL higher education, with intersectionality linking schooling history, regional location, and linguistic background to the circulation of English as symbolic capital (Abrar-ul-Hassan, 2021; Hightower, 2024; Kayi-Aydar et al., 2022; Varsik & Gorochovskij, 2023). Second, within the political economy of English across the Global South, marked by colonial inheritances, neoliberal reforms, and persistent geopolitical asymmetries, English functions not as a value-neutral medium but rather as symbolic capital whose value determines who speaks, which varieties count, and the institutional site (Ammon, 2003; Bourdieu, 1991; Daghigh et al., 2022; Lippi-Green, 2012; Pennycook, 2017; Phillipson, 1992; Shah, 2025). Accent and proficiency gatekeep study and work (Eid, 2024; Ibarra-Gambrill, 2021; Nuske, 2018). Accordingly, admissions and assessment practices in Jordanian EFL programs should address how English legitimizes some trajectories while sidelining others.

In Jordanian universities, criteria for professional English (e.g., fluency, near-native pronunciation, cosmopolitan interactional styles) operate in practice through admissions rubrics, presentation grading, and internship interviews. Students who benefited from private schooling, specialist tuition, or prolonged immersion in English-rich environments thus carry a marked advantage, as their speech and comportment are more readily interpreted by peers, instructors, and employers as evidence of academic readiness and employability.

Conversely, students from rural areas and public schools often possess adequate functional skills, yet their accented English, locally shaped pragmatic norms, and limited exposure to tacit academic codes are frequently read as deficiencies rather than as alternative, contextually situated competencies (Zhang, 2020; Zuraiq et al., 2020). These judgments materialize in practice by shaping participation invitations, instructor uptake of ideas, and allocation to remedial tracks, with downstream effects on grades, references, and opportunities.

Evidence abounds that nonnative accents often function as markers of otherness, giving rise to biases that undermine assessments of competence irrespective of actual performance (Bradac & Wisegarver, 1984; Gluszek & Dovidio, 2010; Spence et al., 2024). In the Jordanian context, however, such judgments are also mediated by culturally embedded norms of interaction, where perceptions of politeness, appropriateness, and communicative authority intersect with linguistic identity (Bataineh et al., 2023). These biases are seldom deliberate but rather arise from entrenched language ideologies that subtly equate certain accents with intellectual credibility and higher social status. In this context, English-medium instruction (EMI), advocated as a conduit for employability and global competitiveness (Barnawi & Alzahrani, 2024; Hamid et al., 2013), may inadvertently perpetuate existing inequities, invoking the rhetoric of access while leaving structural barriers and exclusionary assessment practices intact (Hopkyns et al., 2024).

Students are often expected to display a rigid model of professional English, measured in accent, fluency, and demeanor, that privileges those with access to costly support while penalizing those without such resources. When pedagogy and assessment remain narrowly tied to accuracy and form, these inequalities deepen, as learners' central struggles rarely involve discrete grammar items but rather the sustained use of English across listening, speaking, reading, and writing in real academic and workplace contexts (AlAli et al., 2025; Bataineh & Al-Ghareeb, 2025; Bataineh & Bataineh, 2024; Bataineh et al., 2017; Bataineh et al., 2020).

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What students typically learn in the classroom, therefore, rarely prepares them for the fluid demands of university seminars, job interviews, or transnational communication (Bataineh et al., 2013).

Fluency seldom originates within formal instruction but rather accrues incrementally through incidental exposures, such as television and film, music, after-school tuition, and family practices of code-switching. Learners with steady access to these supports often advance rapidly and with little conscious awareness of their gains whereas, for others, the path is laborious, slow, costly, and often discouraging. Recent scholarship, both local studies (Salah, 2021) and international reports (OECD, 2023; Xu & Jin, 2024), further corroborates how these disparities in access to resources result in unequal levels of resilience and achievement, with individuals from less privileged backgrounds often facing greater challenges (Alahmari & Alrabai, 2024; Bataineh et al., 2025; Liu et al., 2024; Zhang, 2024) than their more privileged counterparts.

Framed within intersectionality, the analysis examines how multiple, mutually constitutive axes of inequality, such as previous schooling, region, and language background, converge to channel opportunities, delimit participation, and yield patterned divergences in learners' trajectories (Crenshaw, 1997; Kayi-Aydar et al., 2022; OECD, 2023). Applied-linguistic scholarship has translated this heuristic into empirical work that traces the concrete mechanisms through which overlapping identities shape access to pedagogic resources, assessment regimes, and institutional recognition (Artanti & Azhari, 2025; Kanno & Kangas, 2024; Kayi-Aydar et al., 2022).

Within the Jordanian higher-education context, these intersecting conditions generate uneven access to English-learning supports and measurable attainment gaps. Students from rural areas and public schools face distinct, often compounded barriers to participation and advancement compared with urban, privately schooled peers, even when both cohorts matriculate into the same programs (Alhumsi, 2024; Al-Okaily et al., 2024).

Intersectionality further highlights how structural advantages and disadvantages intersect to shape who gains most from EMI. Building on this perspective, the current research draws on critical intercultural communication (Cooks, 2003; Yep & Lescure, 2018) and research on linguistic hegemony (Barrett et al., 2022) to examine patterns of recognition in the Jordanian foreign language classroom. The analysis focuses on how English confers legitimacy on some voices while sidelining others. Educational systems frequently become sites where language practices and cultural narratives intersect to shape identity formation and belonging (Toibazar et al., 2025).

Rather than documenting these dynamics, the study conceptualizes EFL education as a context of critical linguistic citizenship, one where the hierarchies of language can be made visible, challenged, and, perhaps, reworked. Its contribution lies in reframing accent and fluency as stratified cultural capital that shapes belonging and early mobility in EMI, aligning itself with intersectional analyses of culture, inequality, and resistance.

Literature Review and Policy Context

Across the Global South, EMI has often reinforced inequality rather than reduced it. For example, in India, English has long operated as a classed resource, serving urban elites while rural learners confront alienation (Annamalai, 2005). Across sub-Saharan Africa, EMI has been associated with subtractive bilingualism, as the rise of English often coincided with the erosion of local languages and cultural identities (Brock-Utne, 2010). In Latin America, the discourse of global competitiveness frequently clashes with stark disparities in educational provision, as quality English instruction remains largely confined to elite urban institutions (de Mejía, 2008). Collectively, these examples underscore the central paradox of EMI: although it is promoted as a tool for expanding opportunity, EMI often curtails access and entrenches the very forms of

social stratification it claims to overcome. Recent scholarship in ethnic and cultural studies likewise shows how language education shapes identity formation and cultural positioning within educational systems (Artanti & Azhari, 2025).

The pattern traverses the MENA region, but it assumes different shapes in different states. Gulf governments, especially the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia, have explicitly positioned EMI as a lever of higher-education reform, prioritizing English in professional faculties and tightening language thresholds that shape recruitment and program growth (Barnawi & Alzahrani, 2024; Elyas & Al-Hoorie, 2024; Gallagher & Jones, 2023). Lebanon offers a contrasting case, as English and French coexist as competing prestige registers that map onto school sectors and social lines, a dynamic visible in Beirut's private versus public track divisions (Shaaban & Ghaith, 2003).

Language status signals shape hiring practice. In several Egyptian contexts, especially in Cairo and Alexandria, employers and professional gatekeepers prize particular registers of English, treating proficiency as a credential for entry to high-status professions rather than merely a communicative skill (Warschauer, 2000). Consequently, English operates as occupational currency, structuring access to fields, such as medicine, finance, and multinational businesses.

Jordan's trajectory is distinctive. Ministry of Higher Education plans and institutional policies have foregrounded English as instrumental to employability and international engagement, and EMI expanded rapidly across programs with stricter entry and graduation thresholds (Alhabahba et al., 2016; Khasawneh, 2011; Zuraiq et al., 2020; Zuraiq et al., 2023). The effect is uneven, as students who matriculate from Amman's international and well-resourced private schools typically arrive with stronger academic English and clearer pathways through EMI tracks whereas peers from under-resourced public or rural schools face steeper barriers at admission and during coursework. Consequently, when policy converts English into a credential and marker of modernity, a signifier of global readiness and institutional prestige (Al-Abed Al-Haq et al., 2024; Masri, 2000; Wall et al., 2021), reforms that treat language primarily as gatekeeping are likely to reproduce social inequality unless paired with targeted language support and revised assessment practices (Alhabahba et al., 2016; Zuraiq et al., 2023). These institutional expectations also interact with broader educational practices and teacher development structures in Jordanian schools, which shape how English is taught, evaluated, and experienced across educational levels (Bataineh & Bani Amer, 2023).

However, beneath policy promises sits a grimmer reality. Students from private and international schools in Amman and Irbid often arrive with long-standing exposure to English instruction, frequent access to anglophone media, private tutoring, and extracurricular supports, advantages that yield marked readiness. By contrast, their peers from public schools find the climb towards comparable proficiency steeper and more expensive due to limited resources, overcrowded classrooms, and scarce opportunities beyond the textbook (Zuraiq et al., 2020).

Still, official policy increasingly casts English as a reform engine and a marker of institutional prestige. In medicine and engineering programs, for instance, stricter graduation and hiring requirements position English less as a discipline for instruction than as proof of competence, shifting the responsibility for attaining workplace-ready fluency onto the students themselves. Prior research documents tangible consequences, escalating spending on private lessons, unpaid practice time, and pressure to "sound more international" that turn English into a filter that sorts learners by accent, fluency, and socioeconomic status (Barnawi & Alzahrani, 2024; Hopkyns et al., 2024). Regulatory demands, therefore, need be paired with tangible investments, such as funded support systems, bridging courses, assessments that prioritize intelligibility, and structured collaboration with employers, without which policy risks entrenching exclusion rather than expanding access.

This policy discourse generates two persistent paradoxes. The first is the meritocratic claim that English opens doors to opportunity, even as unequal access to its valued forms

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restricts entry into competitive programs. The second centers on quality assurance in EMI, where evaluations often reward surface markers, such as fluency, accent, and performative competence yet remain misaligned with disciplinary learning outcomes and the real instructional capacity of institutions.

Institutional capacity often lags behind the pace of Englishization. At Jordanian universities, policy expansion has often exceeded available resources, as faculty development remains inconsistent and diagnostic assessment systems limited, leaving EMI programs in fields, such as medicine and engineering, to reward students who already hold the linguistic capital prized in academia and the labor market (Dervin & Hahl, 2024). As a result, reforms intended to expand access often stratify cohorts by prior exposure, privileging graduates of urban private schools while sidelining peers from rural or under-resourced public-school contexts (Barrett et al., 2022; Lippi-Green, 2012; Zuraiq et al., 2020). Meeting these challenges requires aligning EMI rollout with bridging courses, sustained faculty training, and assessment that emphasize intelligibility rather than accent to ensure that reform narrows rather than amplifies inequality (Dervin & Hahl, 2024; Zuraiq et al., 2020).

Collectively, these dynamics show that Englishization in Jordan, as in other similar contexts, functions less as a neutral bridge to global engagement than as a system of selective inclusion. As an institutional test, it grants access to some students while leaving others excluded. Thus, unless the spread of EMI is paired with equity-oriented measures, such as targeted funding, sustained teacher development, scaffolded curricula, and community outreach, it risks reproducing, and deepening, existing social hierarchies, as meaningful disruption of these patterns requires policies that connect language reform to fairer distribution of resources and stronger pedagogical capacity (Pennycook, 2017; Phillipson, 1992). Yet, fewer studies have traced how these macro-level reforms translate into graduate EFL students' everyday experiences of classroom participation, institutional evaluation, and linguistic belonging.

Theoretical Framework

The current research adopts a framework that connects everyday language practices to broader structural forces that shape them. The analysis is anchored in three key theoretical lenses: intersectionality, theories of linguistic and cultural capital, and postcolonial critiques of EFL education. Each of these lenses rejects the value-neutrality of English, framing it as a socially produced resource whose worth is contingent upon historical trajectories, institutional logics, and entrenched inequities. This framework clarifies why fluency and accent are given disproportionate weight, how these evaluations intersect with prior schooling, and how pedagogy and policy in Jordanian higher education can reinforce or disrupt these hierarchies.

Intersectionality and the Matrix of Inequality

Intersectionality provides one lens for understanding why these divisions persist, as it highlights that experiences are shaped by overlapping rather than isolated factors. Class, region, gender, and prior schooling combine to produce uneven outcomes. A student from a rural public school, for example, does not face the same challenges as a peer from an urban private school, even if both sit in the same lecture hall. What looks like equal access to English reveals, under an intersectional lens, who has legitimacy and who is positioned as lagging and compelled to 'catch up' across linguistic, cultural, and professional domains.

Linguistic Capital and the Politics of Accents

A second strand of the framework draws on Bourdieu's (1991) concept of linguistic capital, where language operates as symbolic power distributed unequally across groups. In foreign language education, fluency and accent are interpreted not as neutral signs of ability but as markers of class, race, and cultural habitus (Barrett et al., 2022; Lippi-Green, 2012) since certain ways of speaking English, particularly those associated with Anglo-American or international-school norms, are esteemed while others are considered deviant or inferior.

These dynamics are exacerbated by the cultural valorization of native-like English. Research shows that, in Jordan and similar contexts alike, accented speakers face negative assumptions about their intelligence, credibility, and communicative competence regardless of their actual proficiency (Gluszek & Dovidio, 2010; Wang et al., 2013; Zuraiq et al., 2020). These biases generate the so-called *affective labor* of language learning (Zhang, 2020), an ongoing emotional work of monitoring, correcting, and policing one's own speech to approximate linguistic norms that, for many EFL learners, remain structurally out of reach.

Postcolonial and Critical Pedagogical Interventions

This study also draws on postcolonial and critical pedagogical traditions that critically recast English not as a neutral skill but as a socially produced resource that perpetuates educational privilege through historical legacies, institutional gatekeeping, and unequal access. EFL education often advances imperial and neoliberal agendas, functioning as a mechanism of selection and control rather than a vehicle of emancipation (Kumaravadivelu, 2016; Pennycook, 2017; Phillipson, 1992). Recent scholarship extends this critique to the classroom, showing that EMI, even when framed as inclusive, often acts as a form of epistemic governance, defining what counts as knowledge, who may speak, and whose voices are excluded (Hopkyns et al., 2024; R'boul, 2024).

In postcolonial contexts, the rise of English sharpens exclusion, as EMI seldom expands access evenly but instead operates as a barrier that widens opportunities for privileged groups while constraining those already marginalized. Exclusion is rarely explicit but rather surfaces in small, routine interactions. Over time, seemingly minor moments, such as a question left unasked, a presentation rehearsed until confidence ebbs, a hesitation that mutes a contribution, accumulate to reproduce inequality within the classroom.

In the Jordanian EFL context, English functions less as a subject and more as a bundle of performative demands, such as accent, fluency, and performative competence, that signal professional legitimacy and shape assessment, internship placement, and early career access. These expectations assign symbolic authority to particular linguistic forms, privileging some identities while marginalizing others. Accordingly, policy and assessment should move from native-norm benchmarks to measures that privilege intelligibility and disciplinary communicative competence, paired with targeted supports that build profession-specific language without erasing students' linguistic identities. The conceptual model in Figure 1 locates Englishization at the intersection of policy discourse, sociocultural stratification, and institutional practice, showing how these forces contour participation, evaluation, and long-term outcomes.

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Figure 1
Research Model of Englishization in Jordanian Foreign Language Education

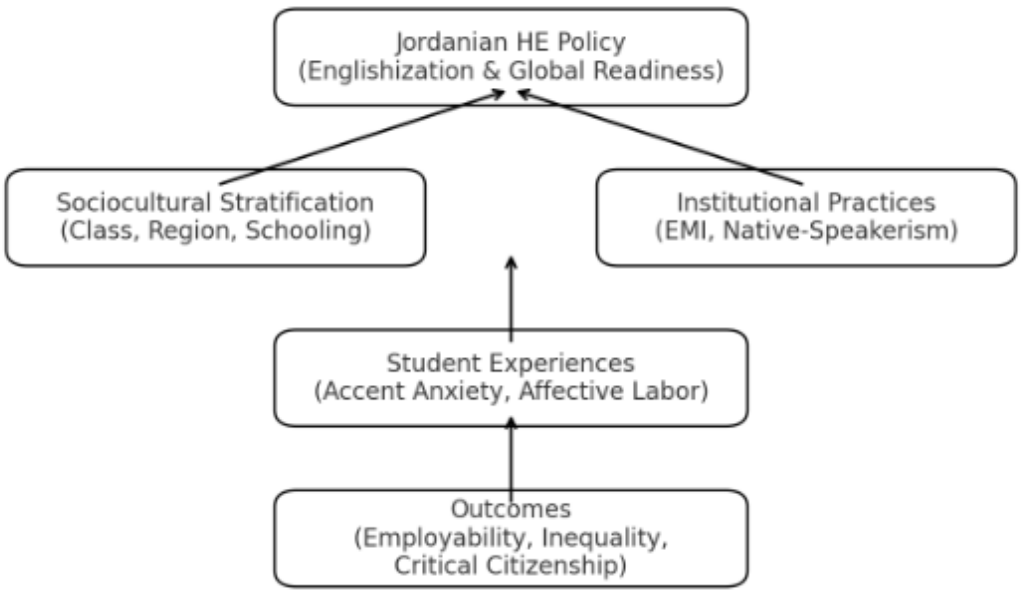

Figure 1 distills the conceptual framework into a compact visual, mapping policy discourse, sociocultural stratification, and institutional practice in relation to one another. The methodological design of the research is outlined in the next section, as the authors explain how these intersecting forces were examined with respect to student participation, assessment practices, and educational trajectories.

Methodology

Research Design and Rationale

The study adopted a qualitative case study design. Situated within a critical-interpretive frame, the study sought a rich, contextualized account of graduate students lived experiences rather than statistical generalization. Fieldwork at two Jordanian universities enabled sustained, dialogic engagement with advanced, discipline-specific cohorts. Language practices were treated as inseparable from their sociopolitical contexts, and reflexive memos were maintained during coding to track interpretive choices. Data generation prioritized contextual meaning through semi-structured interviews and narrative accounts rather than decontextualized proficiency measures. Consequently, the analysis foregrounded interpretive depth as the basis for claims about how linguistic legitimacy is negotiated, with direct implications for pedagogy and assessment.

Context and Participants

Fieldwork was conducted at two Jordanian universities, one public and one private, each of which offers graduate programs in English Language and Literature, Linguistics, Translation, and Teaching English as a Foreign Language. The institutions are not named to protect participant confidentiality, as graduate EFL cohorts are relatively small, and participants' educational trajectories and geographic backgrounds could render them indirectly identifiable. Both institutions were purposefully selected for their prominence and diverse cohorts to explore

how advanced disciplinary engagement with English shapes academic and professional pathways.

The study targeted 24 graduate students from varied schooling backgrounds (viz., public Arabic-medium, private Arabic-medium, and private international) and from cities such as Amman, Irbid, Mafraq, Ramtha, Salt, Fuhais, Zarqa, and Karak. While all identified as fluent, they differed sharply in accent, confidence, and exposure. Reflexive memos were maintained during coding to account for positionality, and the analysis highlighted how variation in preparation and exposure mediated negotiations of linguistic legitimacy and access to EMI-related opportunities.

Sampling and Recruitment

Using criterion- and stratified purposeful sampling, the research team recruited 24 graduate EFL students from the two universities. Participants were stratified by schooling history (viz., public Arabic-medium, private Arabic-medium, private international, and other) to maximize variation in participants' prior exposure to English and accent socialization. Participants were recruited primarily through departmental announcements, with a small number added through peer referrals to strengthen coverage across categories. The sample size (n = 24) was selected to support depth of interviewing while maintaining variation across schooling trajectories, consistent with qualitative case study conventions that prioritize analytic saturation over statistical representativeness.

Data Collection

The primary data-collection instrument was a semi-structured interview schedule, which included questions such as *How would you describe your accent? Have you ever avoided speaking in class due to fear of judgment? What kinds of feedback have you received about pronunciation or fluency? How do peers and instructors respond to different English accents? Do you associate English fluency with employability in Jordan? Have you ever tried to modify your accent? Why or why not?* and *What forms of support would reduce anxiety in the EMI classroom?*

The interview schedule was developed to elicit participants' experiences of accent, linguistic legitimacy, and classroom participation. Interviews were conducted in English, lasted 45 to 75 minutes, were audio-recorded with consent, and were transcribed verbatim. The protocol invited participants to reflect on their perceived competence, experiences of accent-related feedback, classroom participation, and interactions with peers and faculty. Special attention was paid to the affective dimensions of these experiences, including embarrassment, vigilance, and the emotional labor involved in speaking under evaluative pressure.

To supplement the semi-structured interviews, participants were invited to submit brief reflective responses to prompts such as *When did you first feel your English was 'good enough'?* and *have you ever felt judged for how you speak English?* These short-written accounts frequently surfaced moments of vulnerability, practical trade-offs, and internalized hierarchies that were less visible in spoken interviews. They, therefore, functioned as both mnemonic aids and affective windows, enriching the analytic reading of how linguistic legitimacy is lived and narrated.

Ethical Considerations

This study received ethical approval from the Institutional Review Board of Yarmouk University (IRB Approval No. IRB/2025/377). All participants provided informed consent prior to data collection and were informed of the voluntary nature of their participation, including

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their right to decline to answer any question or withdraw from the study at any stage without penalty. To ensure confidentiality, pseudonyms were used in transcripts and reports, identifying details were removed, and all audio recordings and written data were stored securely with access restricted to the research team.

Given the potentially sensitive nature of participants' reflections on language anxiety and belonging, participants were also provided with information about available support resources and were debriefed at the conclusion of their participation. These procedures were designed to safeguard participants' dignity and well-being while allowing the study to examine the affective dimensions of language learning.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to identify recurring patterns and tensions across the data. Following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework (viz., *familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes by collating codes, reviewing themes for accuracy, defining and naming themes to capture their essence,* and *producing the report of the analysis*), transcripts were coded inductively to glean emergent themes while also deductively engaging with concepts from intersectionality, linguistic capital, and critical pedagogy. Codes, such as *accent anxiety, urban privilege, linguistic self-surveillance,* and *institutional gatekeeping,* were iteratively refined into broader thematic categories.

To operationalize intersectionality, identity-marker codes (e.g., *schooling history*) were attached to each case, and cross-case matrices were used to identify co-occurring configurations of markers and themes (e.g., *public-school* × *accent anxiety*), with patterns validated through memoing and negative-case analysis.

Throughout the analysis process, memo-writing and peer debriefing were used to mitigate researcher bias and deepen reflexive awareness (Cooks, 2003; Freire, 1993). Analysis was not aimed at neutral discovery but rather at critical interpretation, reading with and against dominant narratives of meritocracy, professionalism, and global readiness that permeate Jordanian foreign language education.

To ensure analytic sufficiency, the research team systematically assessed whether additional interviews produced new insights into students' accent experiences. Analytic memos were maintained to record these observations and document the point at which thematic saturation was achieved. This process confirmed that the analysis reached a stage where no new significant themes emerged, indicating that the dataset was sufficient to support stable thematic interpretation.

To strengthen trustworthiness, the study drew triangulation across interviews and written reflections, peer debriefing during coding, analytic memoing, and negative-case analysis. These procedures enhanced credibility and dependability by ensuring that interpretations remained grounded in participants' accounts rather than researchers' expectations.

Researcher Positionality and Reflexivity

The research team consisted of professors who were educated in Jordan, two through public schools and one through a private school. They completed undergraduate degrees at a Jordanian public university before pursuing graduate study in the United States and the United Kingdom. These educational trajectories informed the team's perspectives on English learning and accent, particularly in relation to the stratification of opportunities within Jordanian schooling.

These shared educational and cultural backgrounds facilitated rapport with participants by enabling the research team to listen from a place of contextual familiarity. This proximity potentially sharpened interpretive sensibilities, as it made the team more attuned to subtle cues, local idioms, and the everyday contingencies that shape participants' accounts, ultimately supporting an analytic stance that sought to represent participants' voices with fidelity and nuance.

To mitigate bias, interview prompts were piloted specifically to avoid evaluative framing of 'correct' pronunciation, and Arabic was deliberately used during consent and debriefing to reduce any perception of English as a gatekeeping force. Throughout the analysis, the team maintained reflective memos to record occasions when assumptions about what counted as 'clear' English aligned with native-speakerist expectations, with the memos functioning as ongoing checks on interpretive tendencies. Peer debriefing was also used to test and contest emergent codes, helping to preserve analytic rigor and to keep the interpretation critically self-aware (Cooks, 2003; Freire, 1993). Together, these practices supported an empathetic yet disciplined reading of the data, aimed at honoring participants' perspectives while remaining vigilant to the research team's own positional influences.

The research team's proximity to the field not only provided valuable access but also introduced the potential for confirmation bias towards critical interpretations of Englishization. To address this, negative-case analysis was used to identify narratives in which English served as an empowering tool, codes were cross-compared across interviewers with different linguistic backgrounds, and counterexamples, even when they challenged analytical coherence, were preserved in the thematic write-ups. These steps do not eliminate positionality but rather make the effect of positional perspectives visible and subject to challenge within the analytic process.

Findings and Thematic Analysis

The findings suggest that English operates both as a medium of communication and a stratifying infrastructure within Jordanian foreign language education. Analysis of the narratives of twenty-four graduate students from diverse backgrounds revealed four interrelated themes. Students from urban backgrounds were often associated with global fluency, a quality that gave them an immediate advantage in academic and professional contexts.

Coupled with this advantage, participants described the persistent weight of accent anxiety, which pushed them into patterns of heightened self-surveillance and self-doubt. Institutional discourses reinforced these pressures by valorizing forms of English that approximated native-like norms, positioning other varieties as less legitimate.

Across the data, English itself emerged as a decisive gatekeeping mechanism in determining employability and professional mobility. Current evidence indicates that accent bias systematically depresses professional evaluations and perceived hireability (Hideg et al., 2024; Spence et al., 2024) even though structured, job-relevant selection procedures, such as standardized behavioral or situational interview questions with anchored rating scales and interviewer training, have been shown to attenuate these effects (Bergelson et al., 2022; Mokhtech et al., 2022).

Combined, the four themes indicate that language performance operates as a proxy for academic and professional legitimacy, entrenching, rather than ameliorating, existing background inequities. These themes are discussed and evidenced below through excerpts from the participants' interview transcripts.

Urban Privilege and the Embodiment of Global Fluency

Among participants who attended private or international schools where English is the primary medium of instruction, English typically appeared as an unmarked, readily accessible

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resource. Speech within this cohort was commonly characterized by a native-like accent and minimal anxiety about misunderstanding or negative appraisal in academic contexts. Under such conditions, fluency functioned less as a discrete cognitive milestone and more as a socially embedded performance, produced through sustained exposure to immersive English-speaking environments, Anglophone teachers, international curricula, extracurricular language programs, and English-dominated peer cultures.

One participant shared:

> "I don't even remember learning English. It was just part of everything, teachers, movies, even friends. At university, I never worry about speaking because I know how to sound 'right.'"

Here, *sounding right* was less about grammatical precision and more about aligning speech with the subtle codes of global Englishes, a hybrid registers that signified cosmopolitanism, professionalism, and education.

While participants expressed an implicit awareness of their privileged position, they framed it in meritocratic terms. "*I worked hard*," one noted. However, when probed further, she acknowledged that her *hard work* had taken place within resource-rich environments that had normalized her English long before even starting tertiary education.

This phenomenon aligns with Bourdieu's (1991) theory of habitus, which posits that fluency is not acquired in isolation but is rather socialized through family background, institutional privilege, and access to cultural capital. In this context, fluency becomes a bodily disposition, performed with confidence, appropriated effortlessly, and recognized by others as legitimate (Barrett et al., 2022; Lippi-Green, 2012).

Accent Anxiety and Linguistic Self-Surveillance

In contrast, participants who graduated from relatively under-resourced public schools described English as a matter of continuous struggle, not because they lack vocabulary or comprehension but rather because they feared being 'exposed' through their accents. Several participants articulated a deep-seated awareness that their speech marked them as 'outsiders', not just linguistically but also socially and institutionally.

One participant explained:

> "When I speak, I feel like all eyes are on me. It's not what I say, it's how I say it. My accent gives me away."

This anxiety was reportedly less a fear of error than a fear of misrecognition, a fear that one's voice would betray one's background, undermining their confidence, as participants reported constantly monitoring their linguistic output to avoid shame, ridicule, or perceived incompetence.

Another participant described rehearsing lines silently before speaking in class:

> "I go over every sentence in my head before saying it out loud. Even then, I still hear the village in my voice."

This self-monitoring is a form of affective labor, emotional and cognitive work that consumes time and energy, often unrecognized by instructors or peers (Gluszek & Dovidio, 2010; Sen, 2024). Rather than encouraging linguistic diversity, the classroom becomes a space where students learn to suppress variation in pursuit of imagined norms of fluency which remain elusive, their contours shaped by invisible criteria that few students from less privileged backgrounds get the opportunity to internalize.

Institutional Valorization of Native-Like English

Despite discursive claims of inclusivity, the institutional preference for native-like English was unmistakably evident in participants' accounts. Several reported being explicitly or implicitly encouraged to approximate British or American accents. One recalled:

> "Our phonetics instructor once said, 'You'll never get a good job if you sound local.' Everyone laughed, but we all knew he meant it".

Such moments exemplify the institutionalization of linguistic hegemony, where power operates not only through formal assessment but through everyday remarks, classroom modeling, and feedback practices (Kumaravadivelu, 2016; Phillipson, 1992). Even participants who had reached high levels of academic achievement expressed feelings of inferiority when their spoken English did not match the accentual expectations favored by instructors or peers.

Participants' descriptions of form-focused evaluation echoed what later scholarship calls a "technology of distraction," where classroom attention shifts toward fluency and accent rather than insight or substance. Such practices not only reproduce linguistic hierarchies but also obscure the material and epistemic inequities that underpin the global circulation of English in higher education. As one participant noted:

> "You can have ideas, but if you say them wrong, no one listens."

Even when students achieved high proficiency, many expressed ambivalences about their linguistic identity. One remarked:

> "Sometimes I feel fake when I try to change my accent, but if I don't, I feel left out".

This ambivalence is the moral cost of institutional gatekeeping, where success is conditional upon linguistic self-erasure and conformity to norms that privilege Anglophone performance over pluralism.

English as a Gatekeeper of Employability

The most pressing concern among participants was not academic success per se but ensuing future employability, as they repeatedly linked their career prospects to their perceived mastery of English, particularly spoken fluency. One stated:

> "In interviews, they judge you the moment you open your mouth. It doesn't matter if you have the qualifications; if your English is accented, they assume you're not ready."

This equation of accent with readiness and fluency with intelligence is a powerful disciplining mechanism, as students internalize these beliefs not only from employers but from within the university itself, where English is the language of opportunity, visibility, and legitimacy. Even in local job markets, English serves as a filter for social capital, rewarding those who had the resources to cultivate a polished performance and punishing those whose trajectories were shaped by structural marginalization (Barnawi & Alzahrani, 2024; Dhingra, 2007).

Masked by the rhetoric of a linguistic meritocracy is a terrain of profound inequity, as students are compelled to enact 'professionalism' in a linguistic register to which they have never been granted equitable access. The expectation is not merely to speak English but rather to embody a socially valorized accent, demeanor, and fluency that align with institutionalized ideals of global competence. Research suggests that English in these contexts functions as a subtle technology of exclusion, presenting a veneer of inclusion while quietly reproducing the hierarchies it purports to dismantle (e.g., R'boul, 2024).

Participants' accounts were not uniformly passive, as they described small but deliberate acts of resistance that unsettled dominant expectations. Some reportedly embraced regional accents as conscious assertions of identity, organized peer-led rehearsal circles to prepare

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presentations outside of institutional oversight, or openly contested prevailing language ideologies within classroom spaces, reframing them as spaces of negotiation rather than compliance. This recalls de Certeau's (1984) description of 'everyday tactics', subtle ways in which marginalized actors carve out agency, and echoes more recent work on 'linguistic citizenship', where learners claim voice and identity within restrictive conditions (Stroud, 2021).

The findings indicate that English in the context of Jordan's foreign language education is valued unevenly. Success depends not only on proficiency but on how performance is judged against fluency, accent, and performative competence. Students from elite schools tend to possess linguistic capital that universities readily recognize whereas public school graduates, even with similar ability, face the added pressures of monitoring their speech, reasserting their competence, and working within contexts that obscure their achievements. The demand to approximate a 'neutral' or 'polished' accent imposes additional labor and produces disadvantages that proficiency tests alone cannot capture.

Speaking English well is often presented as a neutral skill, but it is also an ideological act shaped by histories of colonialism, neoliberal reform, and cultural hierarchy (Tavares, 2022). Thus, without a shift in focus from instructional techniques to the broader question of whose English is recognized and rewarded, foreign language education risks reproducing the exclusions it claims to overcome.

Collectively, these findings delineate how accent anxiety, institutional preference, and linguistic gatekeeping intersect to shape belonging and opportunity. The following discussion interprets these patterns through the frameworks of intersectionality, linguistic capital, and postcolonial critique.

Discussion

This study examined how English, treated as institutional capital, shapes both the academic and affective experiences of graduate EFL students in two Jordanian universities. Findings suggest that English neither circulates equally nor is uniformly valued. Instead, it operates as a deeply stratified resource that privileges urban, internationally schooled students while disciplining and marginalizing those from public schools, rural regions, and less Anglophone social networks. In this sense, English functions less as a neutral ladder of mobility than as a selective mechanism that elevates some students while simultaneously defining who remains below. These findings, interpreted through the critical lenses of intersectionality, linguistic capital, and postcolonial critique, argue that English functions as a stratifying force under the guise of meritocratic language pedagogy.

These findings align with prior research documenting accent-based bias and linguistic gatekeeping in higher education settings (Gluszek & Dovidio, 2010; Lippi-Green, 2012; Zuraiq et al., 2020) and extend regional EMI scholarship by showing how fluency and accent function not only as linguistic measures but also as institutional signals of professionalism and employability (Barnawi & Alzahrani, 2024; Hopkyns et al., 2024). At the same time, the study nuances meritocratic accounts of proficiency by demonstrating that even highly capable public-school graduates experience participation constraints driven less by linguistic deficit than by anticipatory stigma and self-surveillance. Here, belonging is treated as institutional recognition, access to valued opportunities, validation of linguistic repertoires, and durable inclusion, rather than affect alone (Bolaji & Imonitie, 2025). Recent higher-education reviews converge on multidimensional definitions that foreground connectedness, safety, being valued, and inclusion while also noting inconsistency in how belonging is defined and measured (Allen et al., 2024; Dias-Broens et al., 2024).

English as Stratified Capital: Theoretical Reflections

The narratives of students from urban, elite educational backgrounds, many of whom described their English fluency as 'natural' or 'easy', reflect what Bourdieu (1991) conceptualizes as the invisible power of habitus. These students had internalized not only the formal structures of English but also the cultural, affective, and behavioral dispositions expected of 'global' speakers. Their fluency was read not merely as competence but as *correctness*, aligning closely with what Lippi-Green (2012) terms "standard language ideology," wherein certain Englishes are perceived as neutral, rational, and universal while others are marked as deviant or inadequate.

Fluency materializes not as an objective outcome but rather as a form of recognitional status, as legitimacy is granted only when speech aligns with specific bodies, voices, and identities. Recognition tends to be more easily afforded to learners whose socioeconomic and regional backgrounds fit the institutional ideal of the 'perfect' English speaker. For those aligned with this ideal, fluency is seen as authentic whereas for others, proficiency must be repeatedly proven, often at the cost of emotional and psychological strain. This is the mechanism of linguistic capital at work where inherited privilege is transformed into an apparent merit (Barrett et al., 2022; Gluszek & Dovidio, 2010; Islam et al., 2026).

Students from public-school backgrounds engage in what Zhang (2020) and Sen (2024) describe as "accent labor", a taxing and often invisible process of self-monitoring, performance, and emotional regulation. While students may know what to say, they are also deeply concerned with how their speech would be received. Anxiety, in this case, does not stem from insufficient linguistic knowledge but from the awareness that an accented English challenges the aesthetic and ideological expectations of fluency, associating proficiency with whiteness, international mobility, and a lack of local traces (Kubota & Lin, 2006; Wang et al., 2013). This affective vigilance parallels Zhang's (2020) concept of *"surviving with otherness,"* in which speakers internalize constant linguistic self-monitoring to maintain credibility and belonging.

These findings emphasize the importance of an intersectional approach to language education. In Jordanian communicative settings, linguistic choices are often interpreted through culturally embedded expectations about politeness, authority, and social positioning, which shape how speakers are evaluated and understood (Bataineh et al., 2023; Irni, 2017). As Crenshaw (1997) and Kayi-Aydar et al. (2022) argue, educational exclusion cannot be fully understood without considering how multiple factors, such as identity, class, region, and language background, intersect to create a systemic disadvantage. In the Jordanian context, fluency in English is not merely the result of individual ability or effort but is rather shaped by historical access, institutional orientation, and social capital accumulated across generations.

Native-Speakerism, Local Varieties, and Global Consequences

Institutional preference for native-like English emerged as a persistent theme. Instructors, assessment rubrics, and classroom interactions routinely privileged Anglo-American pronunciation, rhythm, and intonation so much so that clarity became shorthand for nativeness (Edge, 2003; Mahboob & Szenes, 2007; Okulu & Oguz-Unver, 2021). These evaluative practices do more than mark preference; they sort voices by proximity to dominant norms and, thereby, unevenly allocate epistemic authority.

Valuation intensifies in postcolonial contexts, where language preferences overlap with histories of exclusion and credentialed advantage. Participants described internalizing these expectations as personal shortcomings, a pattern that intersects with class and credential dynamics (Pennycook, 2017; Phillipson, 1992; R'boul, 2024). Reflexive memos, maintained during coding, traced how sustained self-monitoring improved surface performance while simultaneously curtailing risk-taking and critical engagement.

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This ultimately results in epistemic narrowing, as form often eclipses substance in assessment and internship selection and professional recognition rewards proximity to dominant accents rather than disciplinary insight. In Jordanian graduate seminars, evaluative feedback reportedly privileges pronunciation and rhetorical smoothness over argument quality. These patterns concretize Hopkyns et al.'s (2024) notion of the *"technology of distraction*," whereby EMI institutions prioritize linguistic polish over critical depth, as one intern reported, "*They judged me by how I sounded*". Therefore, assessment protocols should foreground intelligibility and task-specific communicative competence and be paired with supports that validate diverse repertoires to eventually shift policy from gatekeeping toward genuinely widening participation and inclusion (Kumaravadivelu, 2016).

English as an Engine of Stratification in Jordanian Education

Promoted as a bridge to global opportunity, English often gates access in Jordanian graduate EFL programs. Students from international schools enter EMI tracks with relative ease, while peers from under-resourced public systems shoulder disproportionate linguistic, emotional, and symbolic burdens. Field notes repeatedly recorded heightened self-monitoring and performance anxiety, as accent and register operated as visible signals of worth even when they bore little relation to disciplinary mastery. Consequently, assessment and curriculum should shift away from accent-based judgments toward measures of disciplinary communicative competence and demonstrable understanding to avoid unintentionally reproducing exclusion in the EFL classroom that, while purporting to promote inclusion, valorizes particular linguistic profiles and sidelines others.

For foreign language education, reform must extend beyond surface adjustments to curricula and assessments, demanding a shift toward intelligibility, discipline-specific communicative competence, and genuine equity rather than conformity to imported fluency norms. This entails revising syllabi, rewriting rubrics, and reshaping institutional discourse to value intelligibility, task fulfillment, and discipline-specific communication. The implication is clear, policy and pedagogy must acknowledge students' linguistic trajectories as historically and politically embedded, replacing symbolic rhetoric with funded support, such as bridging courses, revised assessments, faculty training, and structured employer engagement.

Conclusions, Limitations, Implications for Practice, and Future Research

The study shows that English in Jordanian EFL programs functions less as a neutral medium of instruction and more as a gatekeeping mechanism that reproduces existing social hierarchies. Fluency, particularly when judged against Anglo-normative models, operates not only as a communicative tool but also as a marker of institutional legitimacy. Students from private or international schools often align more readily with university expectations, while peers from under-resourced public schools carry the ongoing weight of self-monitoring their speech and managing its emotional toll. This way, while the formal curriculum foregrounds inclusivity and global readiness, the informal or hidden curriculum continues to reward certain performances of English while marginalizing others. Accent and fluency become aestheticized, reinforcing narrow conceptions of professionalism, competence, and employability.

These findings call for coordinated shifts in policy and practice. Oral assessment should privilege intelligibility and communicative effectiveness over nativeness, consistent with recent reconsiderations of the intelligibility principle and CEFR-aligned practice (Kang, 2023; Wang & Wen, 2023). Accordingly, oral-presentation rubrics should explicitly separate content quality from accent features and assign grading weight to argumentation, coherence, and task completion rather than pronunciation mimicry. Departments should implement low-stakes

speaking rehearsals and peer-feedback workshops before graded seminars to reduce performance anxiety for students from public-school backgrounds. Faculty development should include short modules on accent bias and feedback language, ensuring that instructors do not unintentionally frame local accents as professional deficiencies.

At the institutional level, graduate programs should establish structured EMI bridging support (e.g., speaking labs and academic discourse coaching) that is institutionally funded rather than privately outsourced. EMI-readiness programs must be equitably resourced and made available to all cohorts, with priority for those historically marginalized by existing language policies. Teacher-education programs also need to embed critical language awareness into their curricula so that future instructors can recognize native-speakerist expectations and develop pedagogical practices that respond to the sociocultural realities of English use in Jordanian classrooms (Bataineh & Bani Amer, 2023).

More importantly, linguistic diversity should be treated as a source of knowledge rather than a deficiency to be corrected. Within the foreign language classroom, participation structures and feedback practices must be designed with care so that accent does not become a source of stigma. At the system level, Englishization will only move toward equity if it is supported by targeted funding, sustained faculty development, and partnerships with employers that confront structural biases in access and evaluation.

This study carries several limitations. The sample was drawn from only two universities, which means the findings may not capture the full range of institutional practices. The data relied on self-reports, risking the possibility of recall lapses or socially desirable responses, especially on sensitive topics, such as accent anxiety or marginalization. Classroom observation and interactional recordings were not included, limiting the ability to connect linguistic features with participation as it unfolds in real time. In addition, no perspectives were collected from faculty, administrators, or employers, groups whose decisions and attitudes strongly shape the conditions students face.

Future research should combine longitudinal tracking with randomized, classroom-based interventions. A multi-year cohort that follows graduates into employment, annual semi-structured interviews, brief employer surveys, and archival hiring data would show how accent anxiety and linguistic stigma change when classroom stakes become workplace stakes. Such evidence would guide assessment reform and targeted pedagogies that actively reduce linguistic stigma and broaden equitable access to academic and professional opportunities.

Author Contributions

R.F.B. conceptualized the study and led the research design and data collection. R.F.B., R.F.B., and A.A.B. contributed to the methodological framework. R.F.B. conducted the primary data collection. Data analysis was carried out by R.F.B. and R.M.A. R.F.B. prepared the original manuscript draft, and all authors contributed to reviewing and editing the manuscript and approved the final version.

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The study was conducted in accordance with institutional ethical guidelines and was approved by the Institutional Review Board of Yarmouk University (IRB Approval No. IRB/2025/377).

Informed Consent Statement

Informed consent was obtained from all participants involved in the study prior to data collection.

Data Availability Statement

Due to the sensitive nature of the qualitative data and the need to protect participant confidentiality, the interview transcripts and reflective narratives used in this study are not publicly available. De-identified excerpts supporting the findings are included in the manuscript.

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The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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