



Exploring the interplay between cultural identity and mutual intelligibility: A study on EFL learners' pronunciation attainment in intercultural communication

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Abstract

This study investigated the complex intersection of cultural identity, intercultural sensitivity, and pronunciation adaptability among undergraduate English majors at a Vietnamese public university. Utilizing an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design, the research examined how learners navigate the psychological tension between preserving their regional accent and ensuring mutual intelligibility in global contexts. Quantitative survey findings revealed that intercultural sensitivity strongly and positively predicts a learner's willingness to pragmatically modify speech features. Qualitative interview data further demonstrated that this balance is maintained through a strategic phonological hierarchy; learners actively prioritize features aligned with the Lingua Franca Core to prevent communication breakdown while comfortably retaining localized accent markers to preserve their cultural roots. Ultimately, the study suggests shifting from rigid native-speaker norms toward an intercultural language framework that rewards pragmatic flexibility, adaptive communication strategies, and co-constructed mutual understanding.

Keywords: Intercultural willingness to communicate, pronunciation attainment, lingua franca core, cultural identity, adaptive strategies, English majors

Introduction

The paradigm shift from native-speakerism to English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) has fundamentally redefined communicative success, prioritizing mutual understanding and pragmatic adaptability over the flawed mimicry of native models (Almusharraf, 2022; Boonsuk, 2026; O'Neal, 2015) [2, 3, 18]. This sociolinguistic evolution creates a complex conceptual tension between The Identity Goal where pronunciation serves as an immediate, audible marker of cultural roots and personal sovereignty (Smit & Dalton, 2000; Maeder-Qian, 2018) [14, 29] and the intelligibility goal, which necessitates active phonetic modifications to prevent real-time communication breakdowns (Gilakjani, 2012; O'Neal, 2015) [5, 18]. Navigating this delicate equilibrium demands a high degree of Intercultural Sensitivity. When learners possess a refined awareness of cultural differences and view communication as a co-constructed responsibility, they exhibit a greater willingness to adapt their speech features, transforming potential anxiety into confident, highly intelligible global interactions (Boonsuk, 2026; Luu, 2026a) [3, 10].

Despite the rise of the ELF paradigm, traditional pronunciation pedagogy still overemphasizes rigid native-norm corrections, ignoring the intense linguistic insecurity and identity conflicts learners face when pressured to completely discard their regional accents (Boonsuk, 2026; Luu & Nguyen, 2026) [3, 13]. Furthermore, conventional instructional frameworks often relegate pronunciation to isolated drills rather than addressing internal psychological constructs such as motivation, self-efficacy, and personal attitudes which empirical evidence proves hold far stronger predictive power over pronunciation outcomes (Luu *et al.*, 2025; Pardede, 2018) [11, 19]. Even modern immersive technologies like VR, AR, and AI tools remain bound to native-speaker software standards, failing to adapt to

localized socio-cultural realities (Rashidova, 2026; Yaqoob *et al.*, 2025) [25, 31]. This mismatch leaves learners trapped under conflicting ideologies, where institutional rubrics penalize non-native features while real-world peer interactions actively demand adaptive, intelligible strategies (Boonsuk, 2026) [3]. Without exploring how internal attributes like intercultural sensitivity mediate the negotiation between identity preservation and clarity, pronunciation pedagogy will continue to render EFL students technically trained yet interculturally vulnerable.

To address these critical gaps, this study examines how EFL learners manage the psychological and linguistic demands of intercultural communication through a clearly structured inquiry. Mechanically, the investigation begins by exploring learners' perceptions regarding the underlying conflict between maintaining their native cultural identity and achieving high mutual intelligibility in intercultural settings. This objective directly addresses the first research question, which investigates how EFL learners perceive the tension between their regional accent and the demands of real-world clarity. Moving from perception to psychological prediction, the study further examines the impact of learners' intercultural sensitivity on their willingness to adjust their speech features during interactions with international interlocutors. This objective corresponds to the second research question, which asks to what extent a learner's intercultural sensitivity influences their willingness to modify pronunciation for global partners. Finally, the research aims to identify the specific phonological elements and adaptive strategies that learners consciously retain or alter, answering the third research question regarding the precise phonetic choices made to balance identity preservation and intelligibility during real-time cross-cultural encounters. This study will address the following questions:

1. How do EFL learners perceive the conflict between maintaining their native cultural identity (accent) and achieving high mutual intelligibility in intercultural settings?
2. To what extent does a learner's intercultural sensitivity influence their willingness to modify their pronunciation features for global interlocutors?
3. What specific phonological features do learners consciously retain or alter to balance identity and intelligibility during intercultural interactions?

To provide empirical verification for the quantitative phase of this sequential mixed-methods study, the following hypotheses have been formulated:

- H1: There is a significant correlation between EFL learners' Intercultural Sensitivity and their Pronunciation Attitudes.
- H2: High intercultural sensitivity positively predicts a learner's willingness to modify pronunciation features for international listeners to achieve mutual intelligibility.

Literature review

1. Theoretical framework

The theoretical exploration of pronunciation acquisition necessitates an understanding of identity as a dynamic, non-static construct. Grounded in Poststructuralist Identity Theory (Norton, 2000) ^[16], language learning is conceptualized as a critical site of identity negotiation and investment, where learners constantly navigate who they are and how they wish to be perceived within a given social space. This identity-based lens stands in direct dialogue with the foundational tension between the Nativeness Principle, which enforces an absolute approximation of native models, and the Intelligibility Principle, which prioritizes functional, clear communication over accent erasure (Levis, 2005) ^[9].

To operationalize how learners successfully regulate these competing demands during cross-cultural encounters, the study integrates Intercultural Communication Competence (ICC), specifically leveraging the Intercultural Sensitivity model (Chen & Starosta, 2000) ^[4]. This framework underscores that a learner's capacity to exhibit cognitive, affective, and behavioral sensitivity toward cultural diversity dictates their willingness to adapt their communicative habits, shifting the goal of pronunciation from rigid phonological conformity to flexible, empathetic interaction.

2. Reconceptualizing pronunciation in the ELF and EIL paradigms

As English transitions from an institutional classroom subject to a global vehicle of interaction, proficiency must be re-evaluated through the lenses of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) and English as an International Language (EIL). A critical framework in this domain is the Lingua Franca Core (LFC) by Jenkins (2005), which empirically isolates specific segmental and suprasegmental features crucial for maintaining mutual intelligibility among non-native speakers, while treating non-essential features as areas for local variation (Jenkins, 2005) ^[7]. This paradigm signals a shift from norm-bound instruction to culture-bound teaching, where educators are encouraged to teach English as an Intercultural Language (EiCL) to prioritize

interlocutors' mutual comprehensibility and national identity (Sifakis, 2004) ^[28].

Within today's globalized context, Intercultural English Learning/Teaching (IELT) operates as a pivotal contextual factor facilitating success among world Englishes (Lee, 2012) ^[8]. Without adequate development in intercultural communication and an active commitment to learners' diverse background realities, students' progress toward communicative competence remains under threat (Lee, 2012) ^[8]. Therefore, evaluating speech in high-stakes settings must move away from rigid, traditional testing structures that rely on construct-irrelevant criteria and unauthentic models (Peltekov, 2021) ^[23]. Instead, modern speech valuation requires an interactional approach where competence is viewed as a co-constructed responsibility across diverse cultural boundaries (Boonsuk, 2026) ^[3].

3. The socio-psychological dilemma: accent, identity, and motivation

The intersection of phonology and identity often plunges EFL learners into a complex psychological dilemma characterized by linguistic insecurity, perceived accent prestige, and the distinct fear of losing one's roots (Jarosz, 2019; Rindal, 2010) ^[6, 26]. Because an accent acts as a transparent expression of social identity, learners utilize distinct stylistic practices to reshape and adapt the social meaning of phonological variables, aligning their speech with localized constructions of self (Rindal, 2010) ^[26]. In genuine global interactions, multilingual speakers actively negotiate their linguistic identities by evaluating different ways of speaking, which directly influences their personal linguistic production (Park, 2022) ^[20].

These identity negotiations are heavily mediated by internal, learner-centered variables such as motivation and personal beliefs, which hold stronger predictive power over pronunciation outcomes than external instructional factors alone (Luu *et al.*, 2025; Pawlak *et al.*, 2014) ^[11, 22]. For instance, successful pronunciation learners consistently demonstrate outstanding positive attitudes and high intrinsic motivation (Tominaga, 2009) ^[30]. When examining motivational orientations, research indicates that total articulation and pronunciation skills correlate strongly with both instrumental and integrative motivations (Yousofi & Naderifarjad, 2015) ^[32]. These motivational paths are not adversarial; rather, language learners who recognize the practical, instrumental value of clear speech also maintain an integrative desire to connect with a broader community without rejecting their own cultural identity (Shabani & Alipoor, 2017; Yousofi & Naderifarjad, 2015) ^[27, 32].

4. Pedagogical interventions and adaptive communication strategies

To accommodate the cognitive and emotional complexities of language learners, modern pronunciation pedagogy must pivot toward culturally responsive and technologically enhanced instructional approaches. Methodologically, a broad focus on pronunciation within discourse structures, integrating voice-setting, prosodic adjustments, and coarticulatory phenomena, is vital for building interactional meaning (Pennington & Richards, 1986) ^[24]. In multicultural classrooms, optimizing Culturally Responsive Pedagogies (CRPs) through peer collaboration, differentiated instruction, and contextually relevant

materials significantly increases learner engagement by respecting their native linguistic heritage (Matiso, 2024) ^[15]. Furthermore, when instruction integrates explicit teaching approaches with structured digital tools such as AI-generated speech checkers, VR/AR simulations, and mobile text-to-speech software learners display substantial improvements in speech accuracy, autonomous learning habits, and oral confidence (Al-Jarf, 2026; Noviyanti, 2020; Pardede, 2018) ^[13, 17, 19]. Lowering affective barriers can also be achieved through engaging classroom strategies, such as the deliberate implementation of English songs, which facilitates a more fluid acquisition of phonetic features (Yusmita & Angraini, 2017) ^[33].

Beyond formal pedagogy, the ultimate realization of intercultural willingness to communicate depends on the learner's deployment of adaptive, strategic competencies in real-world environments (Luu, 2026b) ^[10]. When participating in multicultural settings, learners face distinct communication challenges, where hesitation is frequently linked to a fear of mistakes and negative evaluation (Luu, 2026a ^[10]; Parris-Kidd & Barnett, 2009). To sustain respectful cross-cultural interactions and maintain mutual intelligibility, speakers must actively reframe these challenges and apply coping mechanisms such as the modification of problematic consonants, speech simplification, clarification requests, and active listening (Luu, 2026a; O'Neal, 2015) ^[10, 18]. Normalizing errors and promoting reciprocal cultural interchanges allow learners to navigate the tension between institutional native-speaker expectations and real-world peer demands, empowering them to utilize pronunciation not as a tool for conformity, but as an adaptive instrument for global connection (Boonsuk, 2026; Luu, 2026a) ^[3, 10].

Methodology

1. Research design

This study employs an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design to comprehensively investigate the interaction between Intercultural Sensitivity, Pronunciation Attitudes, and Adaptive Strategies among EFL learners. In the first, quantitative phase, cross-sectional survey data are gathered to test statistical correlations and predictive models regarding learners' internal psychological constructs and their willingness to modify speech features. The subsequent qualitative phase utilizes semi-structured interviews to deeply explore the subjective experiences, identity negotiations, and specific phonetic adjustments made by learners during real-time encounters. By explicitly using the qualitative findings to elaborate upon and contextualize the statistical trends, this sequential approach provides a more robust and responsive understanding of the socio-psychological and linguistic pressures operating within the ELF paradigm.

2. Research context and participants

The study was conducted at a prominent public university in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, focusing specifically on undergraduate English majors who routinely navigate the pedagogical tension between native-speaker curriculum standards and real-world intercultural communication. Through a combination of purposive and convenience sampling, a total of 215 English majors participated in the initial quantitative survey phase. From this baseline cohort, a subset of 19 students was carefully selected based on their diverse levels of intercultural engagement to participate in deep, semi-structured qualitative interviews, ensuring a rich representation of localized communicative realities.

Table 1: Participants' Demographic Profile

Demographic Variables	Categories	Quantitative Sample (N=215)	Qualitative Sample (n=19)
Gender	Male	65 (30.2%)	6 (31.6%)
	Female	150 (69.8%)	13 (68.4%)
Academic Year	Year 3	112 (52.1%)	10 (52.6%)
	Year 4	103 (47.9%)	9 (47.4%)
Target Accent Aim	Native-like Norms (e.g., British/American)	124 (57.7%)	11 (57.9%)
	Adaptive/Intelligible Global English	91 (42.3%)	8 (42.1%)

3. Research instruments and psychometric properties

The primary quantitative data generation instrument consisted of a composite, closed-ended questionnaire divided into distinct psychometric subscales, evaluated through Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) and Cronbach's alpha coefficients to ensure structural validity and internal consistency. Intercultural Sensitivity was operationalized using a modified 15-item scale adapted from Chen and Starosta's (2000) ^[4] model, measuring the cognitive, affective, and behavioral responsiveness of learners toward cultural differences. Pronunciation Attitudes and Willingness to Modify Speech features were measured using a 12-item scale developed by adapting Levis's (2005) ^[9]

pronunciation principles and Jenkins's (2005) ^[9] core framework.

Prior to final modeling, the data underwent a rigorous EFA using Principal Axis Factoring with Promax rotation to confirm construction authenticity and suppress cross-loading items. The extraction safely generated three distinct, statistically clean factors with all individual factor loadings exceeding the critical threshold of .50, a cumulative explained variance of 62.45%, and an Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of .86, demonstrating robust sampling adequacy. Reliability analysis confirmed that all subscales exceeded acceptable psychometric parameters, proving that the instrument was free from construct-irrelevant variance and highly stable for empirical testing.

Table 2. Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) and Reliability Results

Scale Constructs and Sample Items	Number of Items	Factor Loadings	Cronbach's α
Intercultural Sensitivity (IS)	7	.58 – .81	.87
Identity Preservation Attitude (IPA)	4	.62 – .79	.81
Pragmatic Speech Modification (PSM)	4	.53 – .84	.83

For the qualitative phase, a semi-structured interview guide was designed to target real-world communication challenges, experiences of linguistic insecurity, and specific adaptive strategies. The questions were structurally aligned with the survey constructs to cross-verify how high or low intercultural sensitivity manifested in actual speech modifications, prompting participants to reflect on strategic pauses, speech simplification, and gestural support during cross-cultural encounters.

4. Data collection

The data collection process was systematically executed in two distinct stages to maintain the sequential integrity of the mixed-methods design. Initially, the quantitative questionnaire was distributed digitally via Google Forms to the cohort of English majors during the second semester of the academic year, yielding 215 valid, fully completed responses over a three-week period. Once the survey data were compiled and baseline statistical trends were established, the researcher contacted and scheduled individual face-to-face semi-structured interviews with the 19 selected qualitative participants. These interviews were conducted in quiet, comfortable university settings, lasting approximately 40 to 60 minutes each, and were digitally audio-recorded with explicit permission to capture precise student reflections regarding their strategic pronunciation adjustments.

5. Data analysis

Quantitative and qualitative datasets were processed using distinct, complementary analytical techniques to synthesize the final research outcomes. The survey data were analyzed quantitatively using IBM SPSS software, applying descriptive statistics to map overall trends, Pearson correlation analysis to evaluate the relationship between Intercultural Sensitivity and Pronunciation Attitudes (H₁), and multiple linear regression to determine how cultural awareness predicts willingness to modify pronunciation features (H₂). Concurrently, the qualitative interview recordings were transcribed verbatim and subjected to a rigorous thematic analysis using Braun and Clarke's

framework. This involved iterative cycles of open coding, sub-theme generation, and final thematic mapping to extract recurring patterns of learner hesitation, strategic speech adaptation, and identity negotiation, directly explaining the statistical mechanisms identified in the quantitative phase.

6. Ethical considerations

To safeguard the rights and well-being of all human subjects involved, strict ethical protocols were maintained throughout every phase of the research. Prior to data collection, institutional clearance was obtained, and all prospective participants received a comprehensive plain-language statement detailing the study's purpose, the voluntary nature of their involvement, and their right to withdraw at any stage without academic penalty. Informed written consent was explicitly secured from every survey respondent and interview participant. To guarantee absolute confidentiality, all personal identifying details were permanently removed, and pseudonyms were assigned to the qualitative participants, while all digital data, including audio recordings and spreadsheets, were stored securely in encrypted folders accessible only to the primary researcher.

Findings and discussions

1. RQ1: EFL Learners' Perceptions of the Identity-Intelligibility Conflict

To address the first research question, descriptive survey data for two core attitudinal constructs, Identity Preservation Attitude (IPA) and Pragmatic Speech Modification (PSM) were analyzed. The descriptive results indicate that EFL learners experience a profound cognitive tension between preserving their regional accent and ensuring functional clarity in global encounters. The overall mean score for IPA is high ($M = 3.82$, $SD = 0.68$), reflecting a strong consensus that a localized accent constitutes an inseparable element of personal cultural identity. However, the pressure to achieve mutual understanding in intercultural settings is equally compelling, as evidenced by the high mean score for PSM ($M = 3.95$, $SD = 0.61$). This perceived conflict is explicitly mirrored in the item-level response distribution.

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics

Variable Indicators (Likert 1-5)	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)	Strongly Disagree/Disagree (%)	Neutral (%)	Strongly Agree/Agree (%)
Identity Preservation (IPA)					
1. My regional accent is an important part of my cultural identity.	3.91	0.64	8.4%	14.9%	76.7%
2. I feel a sense of inauthenticity when forcing a native accent.	3.73	0.72	12.1%	23.3%	64.6%
Pragmatic Modification (PSM)					
3. I am willing to alter my pronunciation to avoid communication breakdown.	4.08	0.55	3.7%	11.2%	85.1%
4. Achieving mutual understanding is more important than sounding native.	3.82	0.67	9.3%	20.9%	69.8%

Qualitative insights from the 19 semi-structured interviews clarify the psychological mechanisms underlying these statistical patterns. The majority of participants report that the institutional pressure to replicate inner-circle models (Native-Speakerism) triggers intense linguistic insecurity and a perceived loss of cultural authenticity. Many students recall feeling ashamed or fearing peer negative evaluation, worrying they might sound pretentious or unnatural when

strictly forcing a native-like model. However, within real-world ELF interactions, this dilemma is resolved by prioritizing functional clarity over mechanical phonetic precision. Learners deliberately retain specific Vietnamese phonological undercurrents as a declaration of personal identity and cultural sovereignty, yet they willingly implement real-time speech modifications whenever they detect signs of communication breakdown.

2. RQ2: Influence of Intercultural Sensitivity on Pronunciation Modification

The second research question examines the extent to which Intercultural Sensitivity (IS) influences learners' willingness to modify their speech features, testing hypotheses H1 and H2. Pearson correlation analysis confirms a statistically significant, strong positive relationship between Intercultural Sensitivity and Pragmatic Speech Modification ($r = .584, p < .001$), fully supporting H₁. This indicates that learners who possess higher levels of respect, open-mindedness, and affective attentiveness toward cultural differences naturally view speech adaptability as a positive and necessary interactional tool.

Table 5: Multiple Regression Analysis Predicting Speech Modification

Predictor Variables	Unstandardized B	Standard Error (SE)	Standardized β	t-value	Significance (p)
(Constant)	1.542	0.241		6.40	< .001
Intercultural Sensitivity (IS)	0.591	0.058	.576	10.19	< .001
Identity Preservation (IPA)	-0.014	0.052	-.016	-0.28	.782
Note: Dependent Variable: Pragmatic Speech Modification (PSM); R ² = .341					

The empirical results validate H₂, showing that Intercultural Sensitivity is a highly powerful positive predictor of adaptive speech behaviors ($\beta = .576, t = 10.19, p < .001$). Conversely, identity preservation values exert no statistically significant negative impact on communicative flexibility ($\beta = -.016, t = -0.28, p = .782$). This crucial finding proves that a strong desire to retain one's regional accent does not inhibit global intelligibility, provided the speaker operates with a refined sense of intercultural awareness.

The qualitative data reinforce this link, demonstrating that highly culturally sensitive individuals approach cross-cultural dialogue as a shared, co-constructed responsibility. Rather than experiencing paralyzing anxiety, these learners translate empathy into action. They adjust their speech delivery not out of linguistic inferiority, but out of genuine

Table 4: Intercorrelation Matrix for Core Research Variables

Research Variables	1. IS	2. IPA	3. PSM
1. Intercultural Sensitivity (IS)	1.00		
2. Identity Preservation Attitude (IPA)	-.115	1.00	
3. Pragmatic Speech Modification (PSM)	.584***	-.082	1.00
Note: *** $p < .001$			

To evaluate H₂, a multiple linear regression analysis was performed with Pragmatic Speech Modification (PSM) as the dependent variable, while Intercultural Sensitivity (IS) served as the primary predictor alongside Identity Preservation Attitude (IPA) as a controlled variable. The regression model exhibits a robust fit ($F(2, 212) = 54.67, p < .001$), accounting for 34.1% ($R^2 = .341$) of the variance in learners' speech modification behaviors.

respect for their interlocutor's comprehension capacity, actively fostering an egalitarian communicative space.

3. RQ3: Specific Phonological Features Retained or Altered

The third research question identifies the specific phonological features that learners consciously alter or retain to negotiate the balance between cultural identity and mutual intelligibility. Triangulating the survey response frequencies with interview thematic codes reveals a highly selective phonological strategy. Learners prioritize cognitive effort toward features critical for message decoding aligned with Jennifer Jenkins's Lingua Franca Core (LFC) while relaxing their focus on non-essential, prestige-driven phonetic markers.

Table 6: Frequency of Conscious Phonological Retentions and Alterations

Phonological Categories & Features	Strategy Employed	Frequency (N=215)	Percentage (%)	Primary Communicative Function
Segmental Features (LFC Core)				
1. Correcting consonant cluster reductions (e.g., strict instead of strik).	Alter/Correct	184	85.6%	Prevents lexical ambiguity
2. Maintaining clear vowel length distinctions (e.g., ship vs. sheep).	Alter/Correct	172	80.0%	Ensures semantic accuracy
3. Modifying interdental fricatives (substituting /θ, ð/ with /t, d/).	Retain L1 Trait	155	72.1%	Preserves cognitive ease & L1 identity
Suprasegmental Features				
4. Maintaining nuclear stress within a sentence.	Alter/Correct	161	74.9%	Signals critical information
5. Mimicking native-like connected speech (linking, flapping).	Retain/Relax	148	68.8%	Reduced priority; localized comfort

The patterns compiled in Table 4.4 indicate a distinct strategic hierarchy. At the segmental level, 85.6% and 80.0% of the participants prioritize the correction of consonant cluster reductions and vowel length distinctions. In follow-up interviews, students explain that dropping final consonants or conflating long and short vowels immediately compromises semantic accuracy, causing total communication breakdown. In contrast, challenging sounds

that rarely impede global understanding, such as the interdental fricatives /θ, ð/, are comfortably retained or replaced with L1-influenced substitutes (/t/ or /d/) by 72.1% of the learners to preserve cognitive ease and local identity. At the suprasegmental level, emphasis is placed on maintaining nuclear sentence stress to signal prominent information (74.9%), whereas replicating native-like connected speech features is largely abandoned (68.8%), as

forced linking often compromises fluency and diminishes individual confidence.

This equilibrium is further supported by non-phonological adaptive practices. When experiencing hesitation or a fear of mistakes, learners utilize strategic pauses to restructure their utterances rather than falling into passive silence. Coping mechanisms such as speech simplification, gestural support, explicit clarification requests, and a reflective mindset are frequently deployed. Crucially, the qualitative findings confirm that learners feel most empowered and willing to communicate when their international partners show reciprocal appreciation, active listening, and a genuine interest in Vietnamese culture. This underscores that intercultural willingness to communicate is an ongoing, dynamic process co-constructed through a combination of affective sensitivity and strategic phonological flexibility.

Discussion

The empirical findings reveal a highly sophisticated renegotiation of linguistic identity and communicative priorities among Vietnamese EFL learners. Rather than passively conforming to inner-circle standards, these students actively challenge traditional native-speakerism, balancing their regional accent with functional clarity. This shift strongly supports Norton's (2000) [16] Poststructuralist Identity Theory, which conceptualizes language learning as an ongoing site of identity investment and negotiation. The high mean score for Identity Preservation Attitude underscores that an accent is a crucial marker of cultural belonging and social heritage, rather than a mere index of structural errors (Jarosz, 2019; Park, 2020) [6, 17]. However, the corresponding high willingness to modify speech features demonstrates that learners seamlessly reconcile this identity with the practical demands of mutual intelligibility (Levis, 2005) [9].

Furthermore, the acceptance of H1 and H2 highlights the powerful role of Intercultural Sensitivity (IS) as a core predictor of pragmatic speech modification. Learners with high intercultural awareness view cross-cultural encounters through a lens of mutual comprehensibility and shared responsibility rather than rigid linguistic conformity (Sifakis, 2004) [28]. The deliberate phonological choices observed such as prioritizing consonant cluster preservation while relaxing the execution of non-essential interdental fricatives provide strong empirical backing for Jennifer Jenkins's Lingua Franca Core (LFC). Rather than aiming for an unrealistic native-like ideal, these English majors strategically allocate their cognitive and phonetic resources toward features that directly prevent lexical ambiguity, confirming that intercultural communicative competence is highly dynamic, adaptive, and co-constructed in real-world settings (Boonsuk, 2026; Lee, 2012) [3, 8].

Implications

The findings yield several actionable pedagogical implications for higher education institutions and EFL educators. First, English pronunciation curricula must shift from an outdated, norm-bound native-speaker paradigm to an Intercultural Language (EiL) framework. Classroom instruction should explicitly introduce World Englishes and ELF principles, actively validating diverse non-native accents to alleviate linguistic insecurity and the fear of peer negative evaluation.

Second, pronunciation pedagogy should prioritize the core features of the Lingua Franca Core (LFC), such as consonant clusters and sentence-level nuclear stress, over non-essential suprasegmental features like native-like connected speech.

Finally, training programs should optimize Culturally Responsive Pedagogies (CRPs) by embedding intercultural sensitivity development directly into language courses. Teachers can implement collaborative task-based activities and leverage structured technological supports such as AI-based pronunciation checkers and interactive text-to-speech tools to build student autonomy. By normalizing errors as natural communicative deviations and teaching strategic communication skills such as strategic pauses, speech simplification, and explicit clarification requests educators can empower learners to utilize pronunciation as a flexible, adaptive instrument for global connection.

Conclusion

This study examined the complex interplay between Intercultural Sensitivity, Pronunciation Attitudes, and Pragmatic Speech Modification among undergraduate English majors at a public university in Vietnam. Utilizing an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design, the research explored how learners navigate the socio-psychological dilemma between preserving their native cultural identity and ensuring global intelligibility within the ELF paradigm.

The quantitative results confirmed that while Vietnamese learners highly value their regional accent as a marker of identity, their willingness to adapt their speech is strongly and positively predicted by their intercultural sensitivity. The qualitative data further demonstrated that this linguistic balance is achieved through a strategic phonological hierarchy, where learners prioritize features crucial for message decoding while employing non-phonological coping mechanisms to manage real-time communication challenges.

Ultimately, this study underscores that pronunciation attainment in global settings should not be measured by proximity to native-speaker norms, but by a speaker's capacity for pragmatic adaptability and intercultural empathy. Future research should implement longitudinal designs to observe how these adaptive strategies evolve across diverse professional contexts, ensuring that language policies remain responsive to the needs of multilingual global citizens.

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