



Original Research

A Middle East Pronunciation Assessment Framework for higher education: Evidence from Iraq, Oman, and Iran

Fatemeh Ranjbaran Madiseh^{1*}, Rizgar Qasim Mahmood^{2,3}, Christopher Denman^{1*}

¹Sultan Qaboos University, Muscat, Oman

²Salahaddin University-Erbil, Erbil, Iraq

³University of Wollongong, Wollongong, Australia

Despite its importance, pronunciation remains a marginalised skill in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms, often due to limited instructor training, assessment guidelines, and teaching material availability. This study offers an empirical examination of EFL teacher assessment practices and attitudes in the Middle East nations of Iraq, Oman, and Iran, through a mixed-methods exploratory design. The first research phase involved the collection of quantitative and qualitative data from 66 EFL teachers through a 20-item online survey. Quantitative data gathered via closed-response questions was analysed descriptively and compared with open-ended survey responses, before potential relationships between respondent country of practice and attitudes/experiences were examined with Pearson's chi-squared and Cramer's V tests. Survey findings were then triangulated with semi-structured interview data in the second research phase involving a subset of 13 participants. Results indicate that effective pronunciation assessment is often hindered in Middle East contexts by the lack of standardised practices, limited curriculum focus, and practical constraints on time and resources, while instructors from the three countries displayed statistically significant differences in assessment frequency. Despite these challenges, respondents described a growing focus on intelligibility and effective communication in pronunciation instruction, including through the use of technology-assisted teaching and testing, rather than the more traditional concern with encouraging learners to sound like Inner Circle speakers. Based on these findings, the study proposes a regionally grounded pronunciation assessment framework that connects intelligibility with L1-specific sound contrasts, locally accepted accent norms, and structured feedback practices within multilingual higher education settings.

Keywords: pronunciation assessment, automatic speech recognition (ASR), English as a Foreign Language (EFL), intelligibility, Middle East

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1. INTRODUCTION

Pronunciation is, by its nature, an interdisciplinary area grounded in research in psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics, and the speech sciences, in addition to being

closely tied to second language acquisition (SLA) and second language (L2) pedagogy (Isaacs & Trofimovich, 2017). As a core part of language learning and communication, pronunciation plays a central role in the development

* Corresponding author

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of linguistic proficiency and successful intercultural interaction (Derwing & Munro, 2015; Levis, 2005). Although it has been somewhat of a less visible area than, for example, speaking and listening, recent years have seen a surge of interest in L2 pronunciation, leading to greater attention within applied linguistics (Al-Nabhani & Ranjbaran Madiseh, 2025; Isaacs & Harding, 2017; Levis, 2015; O'Brien, 2021; Yağız et al., 2024).

However, while pronunciation research has grown steadily since the early 1990s, language assessment as a field has been slower to fully engage with this area (Isaacs & Trofimovich, 2017; Purpura, 2016). Although pronunciation is considered one of the key elements of successful L2 communication (Derwing & Munro, 2022; Levis & Zawadzki, 2022) within the language assessment community, enthusiasm for L2 pronunciation has been generally slower to develop (Isaacs & Trofimovich, 2017). This may also be the case in many of the nations of the Middle East where research exploring regional challenges and opportunities associated with pronunciation teaching and assessment is still relatively limited (Jahara & Abdelrady, 2021).

The Middle East region is characterised by high levels of linguistic diversity, both within and across national borders (Cotter, 2025; Habib, 2024). While the dominant regional languages include Arabic, Farsi, Turkish, and Kurdish, various dialects and other languages have either developed in the region or have otherwise been 'imported' from the Indian subcontinent, Africa, Europe, and further afield. In terms of European languages, however, it is English and, to a lesser extent, French, that now dominate higher education and inter-group communication (Curle, 2022). For many Middle East nations, the deeply entrenched role English plays in education is associated with the widespread upholding of a 'native standard' of the language in spoken and written communication, at least at the institutional level. This is often driven by student and instructor concern about future employability, ease of communication, and mutual intelligibility (Al-Ghareeb, 2016).

In this multilingual setting, where Inner, Outer, and Expanding Circle English varieties play prominent societal roles (Kachru, 1985, 1992, 1998), there is a growing need for effective, culturally sensitive approaches to assessing learner pronunciation in support of language acquisition. This study examines pronunciation assessment practices and reported challenges and opportunities faced by EFL teachers in three Middle Eastern countries – Iraq, Oman, and Iran – where published research on this topic remains limited. Specifically, the study addresses the gap, in that pronunciation teaching has received increasing scholarly attention, whereas far less is known about how pronunciation is assessed in multilingual higher education settings in the region, particularly where institutional criteria remain weakly specified. We argue that the main issue is not the dearth of research, but institutional underspecification

of pronunciation as an assessment construct. Thus, the study examines how teacher assessment literacy, institutional policy conditions, and the uneven uptake of international standards affect pronunciation assessment practices. In doing so, it proposes a context-sensitive pronunciation assessment framework grounded in institutional exigencies in Iraq, Oman, and Iran that specifies how pronunciation constructs are defined, interpreted, and enacted to support professional practice in multilingual higher education settings in the Middle East.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1. L2 pronunciation assessment

L2 assessment refers to the process of evaluating target language knowledge using a range of instruments and procedures while maintaining validity and reliability (Chapelle, 2020; Denman & Al-Mahrooqi, 2018). Although often traditionally referred to as 'language testing', *L2 assessment* or *language assessment* is the term generally preferred now due to the widespread integration of various assessment approaches that are not limited to formal testing (Bachman & Palmer, 2010; Brown, 2004; Shohamy, 1997). Assessment is a continuous process through which educators seek to obtain the fullest possible understanding of a language learner's abilities and needs. Every time a student answers a question, makes a comment, or experiments with a new word or sentence structure, the teacher instinctively assesses their performance. According to Bachman (2004), assessment encompasses any systematic method used to collect information about a subject of interest, including learner capabilities and learning processes. On the other hand, a test is a specific type of assessment where a performance is elicited, and a judgment or decision is made, often conveyed in the form of a test score. While all tests are a form of assessment, not all assessments involve tests, even if they remain the most prevalent type of formal assessment (Al-Mahrooqi & Denman, 2018; Hughes & Hughes, 2020).

Evaluating learner performance is a central component of the educational practice (Thomas et al., 2019). It can offer valuable data that help fulfil essential educational objectives, such as guiding learners in their studies and determining grades and awards. Ensuring that the assessment takes into account learners' pronunciation needs, including through the use of teacher-designed or standardised instruments (Isbell & Sakai, 2022; Levis & Sonsaat, 2019), and is grounded in robust theoretical principles, remains a subject of significant concern for EFL instructors (Davin & Heineke, 2016; Pang, 2019). However, despite this, traditional approaches to pronunciation assessment often involve treating it as little more than a subsection of speaking (Isaacs & Trofimovich, 2017; Isbell, 2021; Kang & Ginther, 2018) as reflected in the limited focus it has in the L2 assessment literature (Isaacs & Trofimovich, 2017). This is

despite the fact that teachers often informally assess their learners' pronunciation as a marker of overall language proficiency (Isaacs, 2018; Isaacs & Harding, 2017).

While there is an increasing interest in evaluating L2 pronunciation among EFL researchers and educators, a comprehensive overview integrating this work is, by and large, still lacking. Existing resources are limited to individual book chapters, each targeting distinct groups, which may include language test or SLA pronunciation research. As a result, pronunciation is often not well-defined in models of communicative competence or language ability (Isaacs & Harding, 2017), hence contributing to a somewhat desultory focus on its assessment in the literature (Nguyen, 2018).

Compounding these issues, Davidson and Coombe (2019) maintain that a substantial number of language teachers do not have the fundamental language assessment literacy required to create, utilise, and understand the results of classroom assessments. One reason for this might be that some instructors, including those in the Middle East, may feel they lack sufficient knowledge about assessment, often due to its cursory coverage in teacher training, professional development, and the literature. However, these issues may be addressed, at least in part, by automatic speech recognition (ASR) and AI technologies, which increasingly demonstrate the capacity to identify learner pronunciation problems (Xiao & Park, 2021), although fully automated standardised L2 speaking and pronunciation tests, such as those described by Isaacs and Harding (2017), may remain distant for teachers in many parts of the developing world.

2.2. Assessment criteria

As the above indicates, achieving effective pronunciation assessment remains a challenge for both researchers and EFL professionals. While certain effects of fluency, suprasegmental, and individual segmental errors have been recognised in L2 oral assessments, the specific influence of various pronunciation features on the oral proficiency of non-native speakers (NNSs) remains unclear (Kang, 2012). Although intelligibility, which emphasises producing L2 speech that can be readily understood by conversation partners, is often seen as a suitable objective for L2 pronunciation, there is ongoing debate about the most effective method of assessing it (Isaacs, 2008; Kang et al., 2017; Thi-Nhu Ngo et al., 2024). Furthermore, beyond these inconsistencies, limited empirical data indicate which pronunciation features are essential for achieving intelligibility, leaving teachers without clear guidance for their instructional decisions, especially when seeking to account for their learners' diverse needs (Isaacs, 2008; Isbell, 2021). As an example of this issue, Munro and Derwing (1997, 2021) presented evidence that speech considered by listeners to be unintelligible is often perceived

as that which is heavily accented, although, interestingly, the inverse is not necessarily true. The authors subsequently defined intelligibility as the degree to which a listener can understand an utterance. This conceptualisation, therefore, differs from the concepts of 'comprehensibility' and 'accentedness' in that the latter focus on perceptions of how easy it is to understand non-native speech and how much the speech deviates from native-speaker norms, respectively.

As this suggests, listeners may consider different aspects of NNS pronunciation when assessing speaker proficiency, including both segmental (i.e., vowels and consonants) and suprasegmental features (i.e., stress, pitch, and tone choices). Kang's (2012) investigation of how different pronunciation categories contribute to overall judgments of oral proficiency revealed that various pronunciation features, particularly stress and pitch, were significant factors, followed by fluency, segmental errors, and intonation choices. Furthermore, Isaacs (2008) reported that speakers who scored highly in intelligibility and comprehensibility ratings were also considered to have satisfactory pronunciation, thereby suggesting that teaching pronunciation should not be limited to the mere targeting of accent.

Bøhn and Hansen's (2017) exploration of the attitudes and approaches of EFL teachers towards pronunciation assessment revealed that teachers did, in fact, place a high value on intelligibility, but not on 'nativeness', or the holding of non-native speaker pronunciation to native production standards. Instructors in their study were moderately to strongly focused on evaluating segmentals, word stress, and sentence stress, but were either less concerned with, or uncertain about, using intonation as an assessment criterion. Isaacs (2018) subsequently argued that assessment must move beyond the contradictory principles of nativeness and intelligibility to consider such factors as the L1 backgrounds of both speakers and raters, and the nature of the task being assessed. These considerations play a critical role in determining which pronunciation features to prioritise in assessment, which methods to apply, and who should conduct the assessment. Isaacs further highlights the value of grounding rating scales in empirical evidence to ensure higher levels of accuracy. Saito and Plonsky (2019) support this contention by arguing for a new framework for conceptualising measures of instructed L2 pronunciation performance according to three sets of parameters: (i) the constructs (focused on global vs. specific aspects of pronunciation), (ii) the scoring method (human raters vs. acoustic analyses), and (iii) the type of knowledge elicited (controlled vs. spontaneous).

2.3. Pronunciation assessment frameworks

Assessing pronunciation involves measuring the quality and precision of spoken language in the target language. This has been done by relying on human raters

(Babaeian, 2023), although relatively recent advances have resulted in many organisations building L2 speaking and pronunciation assessments on emerging technologies (Bogach et al., 2021; Lim, 2018; Litman et al., 2018; Tejedor-García et al., 2020, 2021; Xiao & Park, 2021). The role of technology in education and L2 teaching is, of course, not novel, with AI-assisted instruction and assessment offering various possibilities for language testing and assessment (Al-Ghezi et al., 2023). Some of the newer educational technologies available in EFL combine ASR and AI tools to assess pronunciation (Babaeian, 2023; Goh & Aryadoust, 2025; Tejedor-García et al., 2021; Saeki et al., 2024). Platforms such as *Language Confidence* and *Speechace* feature frameworks that use similar technologies to assess L2 learner pronunciation and provide detailed feedback on segmental and suprasegmental features. These platforms can also estimate scores based on standardised tests, such as IELTS. However, despite the technological advances, the literature indicates a lack of established pronunciation assessment frameworks that L2 teachers can apply when assessing their EFL learners' pronunciation.

It is within this context that the current study investigates the state of EFL pronunciation assessment in three Middle Eastern countries: Iraq, Oman, and Iran. To the best of the researchers' knowledge, no previous study has examined pronunciation assessment practices among higher education EFL instructors across Iraq, Oman, and Iran in a single investigation. Having specified this gap, the study addresses the following research questions.

1. What are the pronunciation assessment practices of EFL teachers in Iraq, Oman, and Iran?
2. How do teachers in Iraq, Oman, and Iran perceive pronunciation assessment, including its challenges and opportunities?
3. Does country of employment influence teachers' pronunciation assessment practices and their views on related challenges and opportunities?
4. What components should be integrated into a pronunciation assessment framework specifically designed for the Middle East region?

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Sampling and ethical considerations

The investigation employed a mixed-methods sequential exploratory design that collected quantitative and qualitative data across two research phases: (i) an online survey and (ii) online semi-structured interviews. To recruit participants for the first phase, the research team used their academic and professional networks, as well as EFL lecturer online communities, to raise awareness about the study in the three targeted countries. EFL teaching colleagues were informed about the nature and purpose of the research before being invited either in person or through online communication to participate by completing an

anonymous online survey. Invitations included information about the voluntary nature of participation, the measures taken to ensure participant anonymity, and the right to withdraw at any time before the survey was submitted.

Given the classification of the study as low-risk research that did not collect any personally identifying information and presented no foreseeable risk to respondents other than inconvenience, no formal application for ethical approval was required by the authors' educational institutions. Criteria for selecting survey participants included that they were currently teaching university-level EFL courses in either Iraq, Oman, or Iran, had at least five years of teaching experience within their country of practice, and reported awareness of or engagement with pronunciation assessment practices in their institutions.

Following the recruitment period, which lasted approximately three weeks during the 2023–2024 academic year, a total of 66 EFL lecturers (37 female, 28 male, and one who did not indicate gender) had submitted completed surveys as follows: Iraq (n=23), Oman (n=20), and Iran (n=23). Participants were equally divided between master's and doctoral degrees as their highest level of educational attainment (n=33 in each group), while the majority (n=57) had more than five years of teaching experience in the region. Although 64 respondents identified teaching as their main profession, two identified their main profession as EFL administration. Courses taught included phonetics, phonology, and general or academic English.

Survey participants were asked in the final question if they would like to volunteer for the second research phase involving individual online semi-structured interviews. Those indicating interest were asked to provide a name and email address, which were stored separately from the survey data and digitally deleted following completion of the interviews. Potential interviewees were contacted via email with information about the same ethical considerations outlined above, in addition to steps taken to ensure their anonymity and the confidentiality of the information provided. Following this process, a subset of 13 respondents agreed to be interviewed, with three currently working in Iraq and five each in Oman and Iran. To help maintain the research team's assurances of confidentiality and anonymity, no other interviewee background data was collected or otherwise recorded. Interviews commenced one week after the closing of the online survey and continued for approximately three months.

3.2. Data collection instruments

Due to the exploratory nature of the study and the researchers' desire to gain a broad overview of as many themes pertaining to the research questions as possible, a Google Forms online survey featuring both open- and closed-ended questions was considered the most suitable main data collection instrument. Online surveys and their

resultant nonprobability samples are described in the literature as appropriate for exploratory research and multi-method approaches (Sue & Ritter, 2012), both of which are characteristic of the current research.

The survey was designed by the first and second authors, drawing on a range of similarly focused research instruments and studies on pronunciation instruction and corrective feedback in the literature (Baker & Murphy, 2011; Breikreutz et al., 2001; Couper, 2017; Foote et al., 2011; Jarosz, 2019; McCrocklin, 2019; Trofimovich & Isaacs, 2017), as well as their own regional EFL classroom experiences. The initial version of the instrument was reviewed by the first two authors independently to examine wording, redundancy, and contextual fit, before they met to discuss and agree on suggested revisions. This process led to the rephrasing of several statements and questions for clarity and conceptual coverage, the consolidation of overlapping prompts, and the simplification of some response options. The finalised version featured 20 questions across six sections, as follows.

I. Participant Background: seven items eliciting respondents' job title, age, gender, years of experience in the Middle East, country of current employment, highest level of educational attainment, and courses taught.

II. Pronunciation Assessment Practices: three closed-response questions about the frequency of pronunciation assessment in respondents' institutions, commonly used methods, and the effectiveness of these methods.

III. Challenges: two items, including (i) a closed-response question about the main challenges encountered in conducting pronunciation assessment, and (ii) an open-ended question about how these are addressed.

IV. Perceptions of Pronunciation Assessment: three questions, namely a closed-response question about participants' perceptions of the importance of pronunciation assessment for language learning, followed by two open-ended questions about the impact of assessment on learners' overall language proficiency and the role of technology in this process.

V. Proposed Assessment Framework: four open-ended questions regarding participants' ideas about the key components of an ideal pronunciation framework for the Middle East, how such a framework could incorporate linguistic, cultural, and religious factors, and strategies and guidelines for providing meaningful learner feedback on these assessments. In this study, the term *components* refers to the conceptually distinct elements required to design a pronunciation assessment framework. These include: (i) construct specifications (i.e., what aspects of pronunciation are assessed); (ii) assessment criteria/design principles (how performance is judged and contextualised); and (iii) implementation/feedback guidelines (how assessment and feedback are implemented in practice). This definition is informed by prior work on pronunciation assessment

constructs and scoring design (Isaacs, 2008; Saito & Plonsky, 2019) and is used to organise the analysis of participants' recommendations.

VI. Interview Interest: one open-ended question asking for contact details from participants interested in volunteering for the semi-structured interview research phase.

When Section I Participant Background items and the interview interest question in Section VI are excluded, the survey thus features five closed- and eight open-response questions. Three of the five closed-response questions (questions 8, 10, and 13) require participants to select only one response. For example, question 8 (*How often are pronunciation assessments conducted in your educational institution?*) had the response options 'daily', 'weekly', 'monthly', 'semesterly', 'annually', and 'other'. However, questions 9 and 11 ask respondents to select as many responses as apply, as exemplified by question 9 (*Which methods are commonly used for pronunciation practice in your institution?*), with the available responses 'recorded speech evaluations', 'peer assessments', 'self-assessments', 'pronunciation software/tools', and 'other'. All questions and response scales are detailed in the Results. To avoid the potential for uneven response rates between closed- and open-ended questions often observed in online surveys (Lavidas et al., 2022), all questions were marked as required.

Guiding questions for the semi-structured interviews were based on the literature and themes identified in the first research phase. All online interviews were conducted in English and recorded electronically with the interviewees' permission. The researchers then transcribed the interviews verbatim before checking all transcripts against the original recordings until they were satisfied that they provided complete and accurate accounts of all interviews, while also taking the necessary steps to remove any information that could potentially identify the interviewees. Examples of the guiding questions are provided below, although the semi-structured format allowed interviewees to elaborate on issues they considered relevant to the topic.

1. How would you describe the current state of pronunciation assessment in your educational context?
2. What types of pronunciation assessments are commonly used in your educational context?
3. How do you believe cultural and regional factors influence how pronunciation is assessed and taught in your institution?
4. To what extent do EFL teachers in your context see nativeness as an important criterion in the assessment of pronunciation?
5. What is the role of technology in pronunciation assessment in your context?
6. Are there any best practices or innovative approaches in pronunciation assessment and teaching that should be used in your context?

7. In your context, are assessment practices based on established national or international guidelines (for example, the CEFR)?

3.3. Data analysis

As stated above, the research instrument collected quantitative and qualitative data through closed- and open-response questions, respectively. Although question 10's Likert scale yielded ordinal data (Wu & Leung, 2017), responses to the remaining closed-item questions were treated as categorical. Therefore, to address research questions 1 and 2, descriptive analysis, with a focus on frequency counts or, for the Likert scale question, means and standard deviations, was employed to provide an overview of respondents' assessment practices and attitudes.

To address research question 3, the non-parametric Pearson's chi-squared test was used to examine the potential impact of participants' country of practice on responses to closed questions with single response options (questions 8, 10, and 13). Test assumptions, including mutually exclusive categorical variables representing independent groups and expected values of five or more in at least 80% of test cells (McHugh, 2013), were met by the survey sample size and research design. These assumptions, however, could not be assured based on sample size and the number of cells for questions 9 and 11 since these allow for large numbers of permutations of checklist selections (i.e., 120 and 720, respectively). As a result, these two questions were excluded from the chi-squared tests.

A Bonferroni correction was applied to adjust for the possibility of inflated Type I (false positive) error, with the acceptable probability level, taking into account the three separate tests, being set at $p \leq 0.02$. In cases where the chi-squared test revealed statistically significant results, Cramer's V test was used to determine the strength of association between variables, interpreted using the following

value ranges: 0.0–0.09 negligible; 0.10–0.19 weak; 0.20–0.39 moderate; 0.40–0.59 relatively strong; 0.60–0.79 strong; and 0.80+ very strong (Rea & Parker, 1992, as cited in Sapra & Saluja, 2021).

To address research questions 1–4, qualitative data collected through the survey's open-ended questions and semi-structured interviews were analysed thematically (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2022). Both interview transcripts and written survey responses underwent the same coding process.

In the first coding phase, the researchers independently read the transcripts and survey responses and assigned codes to relevant sections of text. During focused coding, they refined the initial codes and grouped them into categories to identify common themes. Based on the codes employed, relationships between categories were explored to develop a more comprehensive account of the data (Scott & Medaugh, 2017). The analysis then proceeded to identify recurring themes and subthemes across interviews and open-ended responses (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2022). Identified themes were then cross-referenced with the quantitative data to provide a more detailed interpretation of the study's results.

4. STUDY RESULTS

4.1. Survey results

Participant background information elicited in Section I of the survey is detailed in the sample information above. Survey Section II (questions 8–14) inquired about EFL teacher pronunciation assessment practices. Table 1 provides an overview of responses to question 8, showing that most respondents ($n=21$) indicated that they assess pronunciation on a semesterly basis. This was followed by weekly ($n=14$), monthly ($n=10$), daily ($n=9$), and other frequencies ($n=8$), with only four participants stating that they performed this assessment annually.

Table 1
Frequency of assessment practices (question 8)

REPORTED ASSESSMENT FREQUENCY	NUMBER OF RESPONSES	%
Daily	9	13.6%
Weekly	14	21.2%
Monthly	10	15.2%
Semesterly	21	31.8%
Annually	4	6.1%
Other	8	12.1%
Total	66	100.0%

Question 9 asked about the most used assessment practices, allowing respondents to make multiple selections. Figure 1 indicates that participants made 89 selections across the response options. Recorded speech evaluations were the most frequently used methods (n=27), followed by self-assessments (n=19) and other assessment forms (n=17), including non-recorded assessments and the evaluation of pronunciation as part of speaking tests. The two methods least frequently employed by respondents were peer assessments (n=15) and pronunciation software/tools (n=11). Despite their reported frequency of use, participants rated these methods as only moderately effective, as indicated by the mean response to question 10 of 3.02

(SD=0.97) on a five-point scale ranging from ineffective (1) to highly effective (5) (Figure 1). Survey Section III asked participants to identify the main challenges encountered in their assessment practices (question 11) before explaining how they addressed these in response to the open-ended question 12. In response to the former, participants made 148 selections across the six response options (see Figure 2), with the main challenges identified by at least 30 teachers in the study including the lack of standardised assessment criteria (n=38), limited resources (n=36), and the difficulty of providing timely feedback (n=31). These were followed by students' lack of motivation (n=23) and cultural barriers (n=16) (Figure 2).

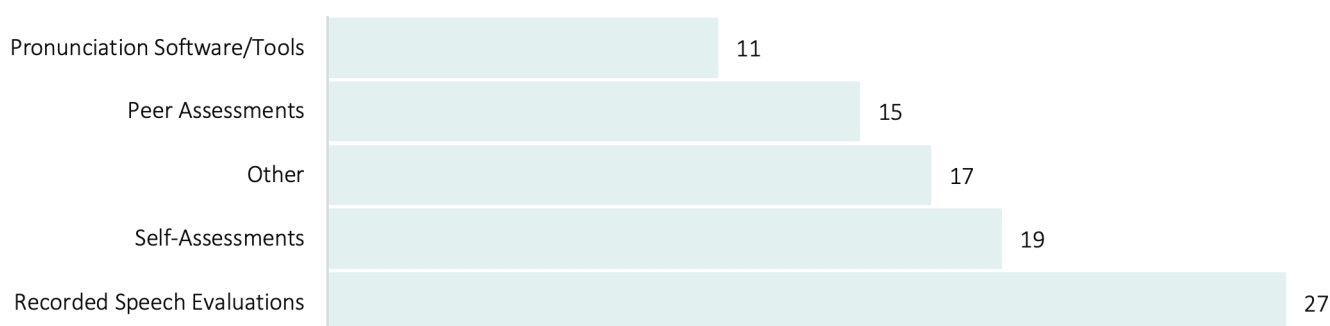


Figure 1. Most used methods for pronunciation assessments (question 9)

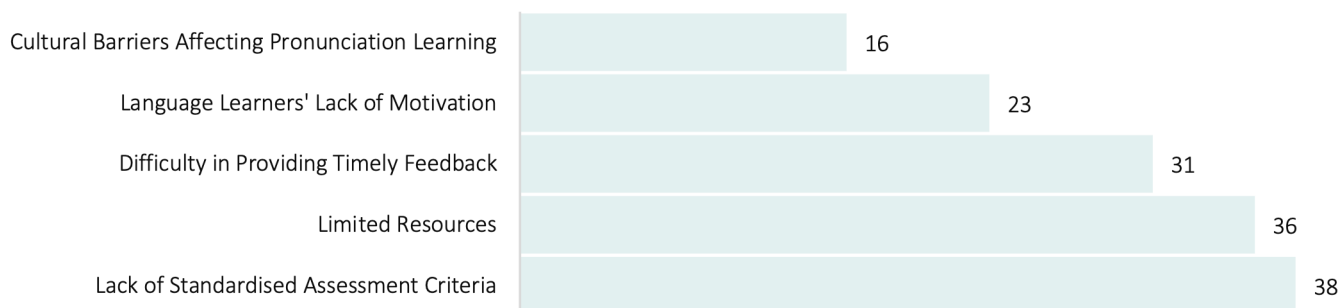


Figure 2. Main challenges in conducting pronunciation assessments (question 11)

When asked in question 12 to explain how these challenges were addressed, a number of participants noted that, in response to the lack of standardised assessment criteria, they individually 'make assessment criteria according to what we teach and our students'. Several participants further described creating assessment instruments from scratch, including 'constructing my own assessment tools' or forming 'a committee of two or three teachers to interview the students one by one to assess their pronunciation'. The challenges posed by limited resources, including the lack of 'a sound lab', dedicated computer labs, and funds for 'purchasing any online tools' or acquiring 'large speakers for pronunciation and listening modules', were addressed by some re-

spondents by resorting to freely available software and apps. These apps were also useful in overcoming the challenge of providing timely feedback, with participants reporting either 'using speech-recognition tools for immediate pronunciation feedback and encouraging students to record themselves' or encouraging learners to 'use pronunciation apps or online tools that provide instant feedback on their pronunciation'. Additional actions taken to assist with the provision of timely feedback included creating more opportunities for 'in-class presentations and discussion', encouraging students to engage in 'out-of-class activities focusing on pronunciation', and facilitating learner autonomy and collaboration.

Section IV, which examined EFL teacher perceptions of pronunciation assessment, started with a single closed-item question asking whether respondents believed such assessment to be essential for language learning (question 13). The vast majority (n=56) maintained that pronunciation assessment is, in fact, a vital component of EFL, with the remainder either stating that it was not (n=4) or that they were unsure (n=6). This was followed by two open-ended questions about the impact of these assessments on learner proficiency (question 14) and respondents' views on the role of technology in enhancing assessment (question 15).

In response to the former, participants consistently emphasised the significance of pronunciation assessment in fostering clarity and comprehension in communication, as evidenced in the reply that *'good pronunciation will provide and guarantee clarity and help listeners comprehend the message to a great extent'*. Participants also generally agreed that pronunciation assessment *'enhances fluency, builds confidence in learners, and helps learners communicate more successfully'*, while pointing out the connection between pronunciation assessment and the core language skills, particularly listening and speaking. Overall, most participants reported that systematic assessment *'aids learners in becoming more confident in their speaking skills'* and *'improves their motivation overall'*.

In question 15 responses, several interviewees pointed out the practical benefits of technology, especially in terms of its efficiency and effectiveness. One stated that *'technology helps us do things faster, more effectively, and to produce a reliable outcome'*, while another noted that *'it helps to gain access to authentic materials, increases learners' motivation, and saves time'*. Participants claimed that technology *'enables learners to get involved in the process of learning a language'*, thus suggesting its support for learner-centric educational approaches, while another emphasised how it *'provides learners with good models and allows them to practise and receive feedback.'* An additional affordance of technology noted was how it *'provides more input and makes it easier to assess pronunciation in terms of time and accuracy'*. Numerous respondents cited ASR as an example, as *'ASR tools can analyse pronunciation accuracy, allowing learners to identify and correct specific errors.'* Although most respondents acknowledged the positive impact of technology, a few nonetheless expressed a degree of scepticism, as illustrated by the response: *'I think technology cannot assist pronunciation assessment to a great extent; teachers can do that'*.

Survey Section V was concerned with participant input to help develop a pronunciation assessment framework for the Middle East. Question 16 asked what key components an ideal framework in the region should include. Respondents offered the following 10 key considerations: phonetic focus; cultural sensitivity; real-time feedback; personalisation; awareness of challenges; cultural context;

integration with the curriculum; teacher involvement; progress tracking; and motivational features. Following these responses, question 17 sought further information on how these components could be presented in a framework to address learners' unique cultural and regional characteristics. Respondents offered the following insights across five main themes.

First, with regard to regional accent variation, they maintained that the framework should expose learners to a range of accents and dialects prevalent in the region, including by incorporating exercises presenting regional accent variations so as to develop a better understanding of pronunciation features specific to various linguistic backgrounds. Next, cultural context integration should involve incorporating cultural scenarios and dialogues into pronunciation exercises to encourage learners to connect with the material on a personal level, thereby illustrating how pronunciation is influenced by cultural norms and social contexts. The third main theme concerned phonemic mapping and common mispronunciations to assist learners in identifying and practising challenging sounds and providing targeted guidance for overcoming pronunciation issues. The fourth theme involved explicitly addressing suprasegmental aspects of pronunciation, such as intonation and stress features, to enhance learners' ability to convey meaning effectively, while the final theme was concerned with feedback customisation and progress tracking to enable learners to monitor their pronunciation development over time, thereby supporting a sense of achievement and motivation.

Question 18 elicited participant strategies and guidelines for providing meaningful feedback to language learners about pronunciation assessment results. Several responses pointed out the potential benefits of a cyclical model grounded in recording, diagnosis, and guided rehearsal. For example, some respondents observed that *'students can record their speech and analyse it later'* or submit *'a short video then have it checked by their instructors'*. These approaches facilitate self-monitoring and peer review, where students are encouraged to obtain *'feedback from peers and by recording themselves'*. Emphasising the value of specificity and encouragement, some respondents noted that practical commentary, such as asking learners to *'pinpoint particular sounds, words, or features that need attention'*, must be emphasised while offering *'positive reinforcement... to boost learners' confidence'*. Instructors further noted how digital tools enhance immediacy and precision, even noting the ways in which AI could be used to *'do the evaluation; that is why using technology in assessing pronunciation plays an important role'*. Despite this, several respondents emphasised the continued importance of teacher oral modelling, with instructors providing correct pronunciation models, asking learners to repeat them, and offering one-on-one oral corrective feedback when necessary.

Finally, participants noted the importance of transparency and standardised criteria in the feedback process, with a number contending that feedback is actionable only when learners ‘*understand the assessment criteria very well before they are assessed*’. They also emphasised that sustained student progress is a vital component of this, thereby presenting feedback not merely as a terminal judgment but as an iterative, learner-centred dialogue that links clear standards to immediate diagnosis and concrete practice recommendations, supporting continuous improvement.

The final open-ended question elicited any additional information about pronunciation practice in the region that participants believed the researchers should be aware of. Only 16 participants, or around one-quarter of the survey sample, offered responses (apart from well-wishes), with these generally reinforcing responses given elsewhere in the survey. Of these, six emphasised the need for a more specific focus on pronunciation in the curriculum and in teaching and learning materials and/or in teacher training, while two stated that more research is needed to help create empirically informed standardised rubrics and assessment tools. While three participants detailed the importance of effective feedback for pronunciation teaching,

one instructor warned about the possibility of a regional framework reinforcing the dominance of Standard English at the expense of learner communicability and intelligibility.

In examining research question 3, Pearson’s chi-squared test revealed a statistically significant relationship at the Bonferroni-corrected level of $p \leq 0.02$ between participant country of practice and responses to question 8 about the frequency of pronunciation assessment. As seen in Figure 3, while EFL teachers in Iraq, Oman, and Iran displayed somewhat similar responses in terms of daily and other use of these assessments, instructors in Iraq generally employed these most often on a weekly basis ($n=9$), whereas those in Oman predominantly assessed pronunciation each semester ($n=14$). Moreover, although participants in Iran mostly used pronunciation assessments either weekly or at other times ($n=5$ for both responses), responses were nonetheless fairly evenly distributed for these teachers across all six options. In addition, no teachers in Oman and Iraq claimed to perform these assessments weekly or annually, respectively. The Cramer’s V test value of 0.47 further supports the nature of these disparities by indicating a relatively strong association between respondent country and frequency of assessment.

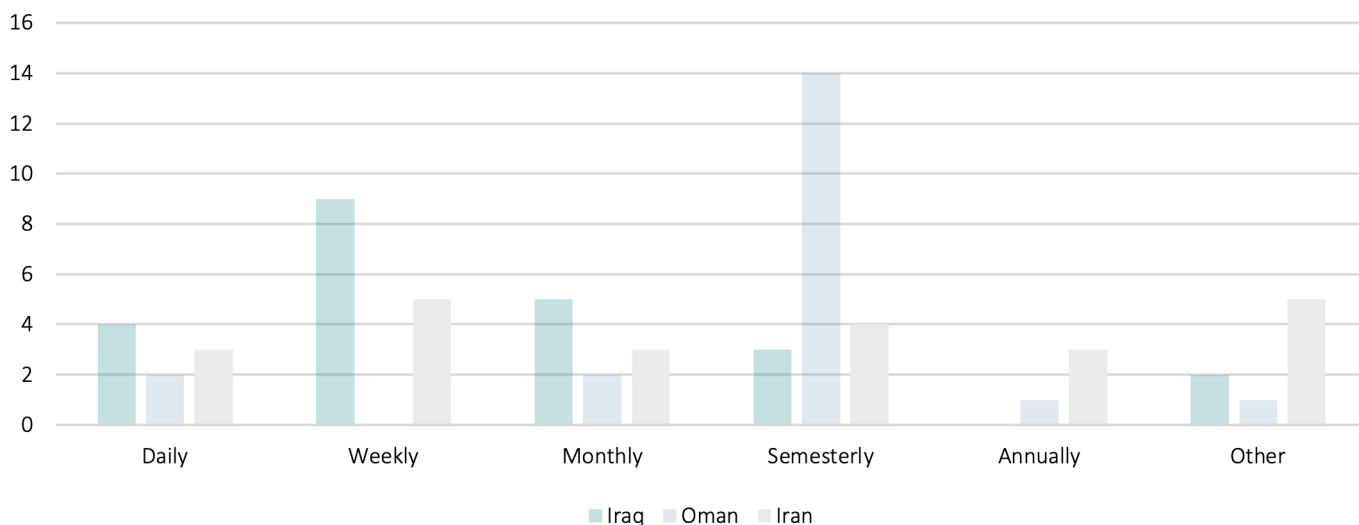


Figure 3. Country of practice and frequency of pronunciation assessment (question 8)

4.2. Interview data

Semi-structured interview data was thematically analysed and triangulated with survey findings to help address all four research questions. The first interview question asked respondents how they would describe the current state of pronunciation assessment in their educational contexts. Four common themes emerged, with respondents reporting a general lack of focus on pronunciation assessment because it was often overshadowed by other language components in assessment and teaching, as illus-

trated by Interviewee 5’s (Oman) reply: ‘*I’ve observed that pronunciation is often neglected. The primary focus is on the four main skills, plus grammar and vocabulary. Pronunciation tends to take a back seat, possibly due to priorities in enhancing overall English skills and limited class time*’.

Issues associated with this situation included considerable variability in assessment practices, particularly in Iran, due to high levels of teacher assessment autonomy and a lack of standardised tests. Instructors also referred to systematic and practical constraints, including curriculum

design that does not explicitly incorporate pronunciation and the limited availability of time and resources, with the former especially noted by respondents in Oman. In response to the obstacles posed by this marginalisation, several respondents placed emphasis on intelligibility in assessment, as illustrated by Interviewee 4's (Oman) contention that *'intelligibility is considered important'*, even if the various *'micro-components of pronunciation are not explicitly examined'*.

Respondents next described how pronunciation is often evaluated as part of tests or other assessments primarily concerned with the core language skill of speaking, including oral presentations, role plays, speeches/monologues (recorded or live), reading aloud, and pair or group dialogues. While this practice offered advantages in terms of flexibility and efficiency, the inclusion of pronunciation alongside other spoken language components, such as accuracy and fluency, and the possibility of conflating it with overall assessment content and task achievement led some interviewees to view it as insufficiently foregrounded. This possibility was described in Interviewee 8's (Oman) belief that *'if a student performs well overall, including content, pronunciation issues are often overlooked'*. Due to the predominance of this indirect practice of assessing pronunciation, standardised marking criteria were reported to be often lacking, with only two Omani participants noting pronunciation as an explicit criterion on speaking test rubrics.

Interviewees were next asked how cultural and regional factors influence pronunciation assessment. L1 interference emerged as a recurring theme across the three countries, with learners' native languages, dialects, and diverse accent variations reported to affect their ability to pronounce English sounds. For example, Interviewee 7 (Oman) noted that, for Arabic L1 students of English, *'certain sounds are not present in their native language, so learners have difficulties in enunciating them'*. For this reason, several respondents suggested the need to adapt pronunciation assessment methods to cultural and regional conditions, as characterised by Interviewee 4's (Oman) contention that *'when assessing pronunciation, we acknowledge and consider these influences, adopting a flexible method to accommodate the impact of the learners' native language on English speaking'*.

Further, cultural attitudes and priorities towards communication and pronunciation were described by interviewees as varying, with several prioritising effective communication over flawless pronunciation, as described by Interviewee 11's (Iran) comment: *'As long as it [student pronunciation] is accurate and comprehensible, that's fine. Because of Englishes in the world today, it's not just about one type of English'*. The importance of accuracy and comprehensibility versus achieving native-like pronunciation was not agreed upon by all instructors, as exemplified by Interviewee 8's (Oman) argument that though *'some instructors*

and policymakers might think that if students can communicate, even with major pronunciation issues, it's sufficient. I believe this is not correct'.

Developing the theme further, participants were next asked about the extent to which EFL teachers in their countries view the concept of nativeness as an important criterion in pronunciation assessment. The majority stated that their primary focus on intelligibility meant that the traditional emphasis on nativeness is being re-evaluated in favour of recognising the diversity of English accents and prioritising effective communication. In pursuit of this, respondents reported mainly adopting holistic methods to achieve clear communication. Such a method is illustrated in Interviewee 3's (Iraq) explanation:

'In my view, this trend has changed to a great extent as the concept of English as a global language or a lingua franca. Being clear and understood is now more important than how close or similar the accent of a particular student is to a native pronunciation. Two aspects are important to us, as teachers: production of the sounds and perception of them.'

This, however, was challenged by several respondents who insisted on their learners striving to sound like Inner Circle native speakers. This was exemplified by Interviewee 2's (Iraq) insistence that *'I don't let my students be in peace until they get the correct native pronunciation of words and sentences'*. Interviewee 8 (Oman) noted that, although sounding like a native speaker was not an explicit goal, they nonetheless encouraged learners to use authentic materials, including native speaker videos, to improve awareness of their pronunciation, as this *'helps students understand the importance of clear and understandable pronunciation, which improves their linguistic performance and confidence in using the language outside the classroom'*.

Although participants were asked to express their viewpoints on the nativeness—intelligibility debate, the present study does not aim to revisit or resolve this discussion. Rather, the authors sought to empirically document how teachers in the region position themselves in the debate through their everyday assessment practices. Although the results correspond with the literature in terms of a shift from nativeness to intelligibility, their value lies not in conceptual novelty but in their contextual specification. In this sense, they provide systematic evidence of how teachers in the Middle East interpret and respond to intelligibility-oriented positions. They further show how instructors apply intelligibility and nativeness within multilingual institutional environments characterised by diverse L1 backgrounds and uneven assessment standardisation.

Interviewees were next asked to talk about the role of technology in their pronunciation assessments. Across all contexts, both the potential benefits of, and challenges associated with, these technologies were acknowledged. Advantages included the support that technology provides to

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teachers and students in facilitating pronunciation assessment in terms of ease of use, objectivity, and time. Respondents noted that they used a variety of tools and methods for this purpose, including audio recording and speech recognition apps, chatbots, augmented reality, and digitised assessment, and that these could support learner access through institutional facilities such as advanced computer laboratories.

Despite this, as also expressed in the survey responses, technical and resource availability issues were a concern for many instructors. Some teachers also stated that the technology still needed to catch up with classroom demands, noting that *‘if technology can be programmed to be flexible and accommodating, its use in assessing speaking skills would be welcomed’* (Interviewee 4, Oman). Some teachers reported their own limited familiarity with suitable assessment technologies, while Interviewee 13 (Iran) stated that *‘because we don’t have enough facilities, technology does not play a significant role. We had certain labs, specific computers, but most of them are out of order, we cannot use them’*.

The next question asked for examples of best practices and/or innovative methods in pronunciation assessment and teaching. In addition to the potential of technology discussed above, teachers also described the importance of individualised instruction and personalised feedback across a diverse range of practices and methods. These included incorporating pronunciation instruction and assessment across language courses for continuous practice and evaluation and creating opportunities for consistent feedback, including those offered by AI chatbots and other technological tools.

Most interviewees reaffirmed the importance of tailoring assessment methods to fit diverse learner needs, as reflected in Interviewee 9’s (Iran) observation that *‘there is no one-size-fits-all best method. The method should fit the learners’ objectives, attitudes, and the setting in which they plan to use English’*.

The final interview question asked whether respondents’ pronunciation assessment practices are based on established national or international guidelines. Four of the five Omani interviewees stated that they were based on CEFR or IELTS guidelines, with only one reporting uncertainty, while instructors in Iran were almost evenly divided about whether their practices follow such guidelines or whether teachers adapt them into localised rubrics. While all Iraqi participants stated that such guidelines were not considered in their assessments, one (Interviewee 3) nonetheless pointed to their potential value, noting that the *‘CEFR is more organised and academic to follow, as you can easily detect the students’ current levels and also set the target language where you want your students to reach’*. Across participants, the recurring issue is not only the absence of ready-made criteria but also the transfer of assessment design responsibility to teachers, which reframes rubric construction as an indicator of both professional agency and policy gaps.

The findings reported here suggest that, at least in the three featured higher education settings, pronunciation assessment is affected by two main forces: institutional standardisation and locally negotiated intelligibility. For example, although teachers identified intelligibility as their main guiding principle, their actual practices varied widely in how often they assessed pronunciation, what criteria they applied, and how they provided feedback. This indicates that, although pronunciation is considered important, it has not yet been consistently built into university English programmes as a clear and stable component of assessment. This raises questions about whether the field’s growing emphasis on intelligibility has actually affected what happens in classrooms on a day-to-day basis.

Overall, three overlapping forces affecting how teachers assess pronunciation can be observed: their own beliefs about teaching, the constraints of their institutions, and the tools technology makes available. Teacher reliance on informal judgement, openness to accent variation, and cautious use of ASR tools all point to a field that is still evolving. In this region, pronunciation may no longer be measured against native-speaker norms; however, shared and transparent criteria have not yet generally taken their place. These findings across the three Middle Eastern contexts thus show how wide the gap can be between what researchers agree on and what teachers actually do in practice.

5. DISCUSSION

This investigation examined EFL teacher assessment practices and attitudes in the Middle East nations of Iraq, Oman, and Iran. The first research question concerned the pronunciation assessment practices of EFL teachers in the three Middle Eastern countries of Iraq, Oman, and Iran. Almost all participants acknowledged that pronunciation

is a core component of EFL instruction (Derwing & Munro, 2015; Levis, 2005), due to its associations with clarity of speech, fluency, listening comprehension, and communicative success. Pronunciation was also linked with learners' speaking confidence and overall language learning motivation. Teachers noted that they generally employed holistic methods of pronunciation teaching and assessment that focused, like much of the recent literature, on the effectiveness of communication and intelligibility rather than holding students to an Inner Circle standard of nativeness (Böhn & Hansen, 2017; Isaacs, 2008; Kang et al., 2017; Thi-Nhu Ngo et al., 2024). This was associated with an acceptance of the diversity of English accents encountered across the region and in other settings due to learners' cultural and linguistic backgrounds (Cotter, 2025; Habib, 2024), and of the value of World Englishes for intercultural communication and global classrooms (Hemmy & Balasubramanian, 2022), even if this stance was challenged by a minority of instructors who sought a native standard based on communicative concerns (Al-Ghareeb, 2016).

As noted elsewhere in the literature, participants' reported assessment practices were often subsumed within the assessment of other language skills, especially speaking (Isaacs & Trofimovich, 2017; Isbell, 2021; Kang & Ginther, 2018). This marginalisation was reported as being compounded by the lack of standardised rubrics, assessment tasks, and curriculum inclusion (see below), and resulted in the risk that pronunciation assessment outcomes may offer little more than a reflection of overall speaking proficiency (Isaacs, 2008), thereby indicating the need for explicit reference to pronunciation in EFL models of communication and evaluation (Isaacs & Harding, 2017; Saito & Plonsky, 2019). Despite the limitations imposed by the lack of explicit criteria, respondents reported evaluating pronunciation during assessment tasks that include recorded speech, speaking tests, presentations, role plays, monologues, and similar activities.

Research question 2 examined teachers' attitudes towards, and experiences of, the assessment practices reported above. Respondents maintained that their pronunciation assessment practices and methods were only marginally effective. Reasons for this belief included not only the limited availability of explicit pronunciation assessment criteria as discussed – with the only notable exception being Oman, where marking rubrics were based on the CEFR – but also a lack of curriculum focus, which has been reported in some, but by no means all, university-level EFL programmes in the region (Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2016; Jahara & Abdelrady, 2021). This was compounded by limited financial and material resources and the associated difficulty of providing timely learner feedback. Rather than indicating a simple lack of assessment literacy, the data suggest a pattern of uneven and institutionally un-

supported assessment literacy, in which teachers demonstrate substantial local adaptive expertise but often without access to shared pronunciation-specific criteria or formally endorsed rubrics.

Instructors dealt with these issues in a number of ways, including developing their own assessment criteria and working individually or with colleagues to create assessment instruments, even though, in support of Isaacs (2018), they acknowledged the importance of basing these on empirical evidence as far as possible. Respondents added that another way to deal with resource challenges was by using free software and apps, including ASR technology (Isaacs & Harding, 2017; Xiao & Park, 2021), AI (Al-Ghezi et al., 2023), or even a combination of the two (Babaeian, 2023; Tejedor-García et al., 2021; Saeki et al., 2024). This was reported to offer several benefits, such as making pronunciation assessment more reliable and objective, decreasing the gap between assessment and feedback, and increasing student autonomy and motivation. The adoption of technology was also noted as allowing learners to access more pronunciation input and authentic spoken texts in the classroom and in other learning settings. This was reported as enhancing the student-centred nature of pronunciation practice and increasing learner motivation, while the potential negative outcomes of using authentic online texts, such as learner anxiety and frustration (Erbbaggio et al., 2012), were also noted as a concern.

Another aspect of these recurring references to instructors constructing their own rubrics is that this practice reflects not only a technical classroom solution, but also a wider institutional and policy condition. On the one hand, the instructors' ability to create locally relevant criteria, sometimes collaboratively, suggests the presence of practical assessment literacy and professional agency rather than a simple absence of assessment knowledge. On the other, the need to routinely design rubrics from scratch indicates weak institutional standardisation of pronunciation constructs, descriptors, and rating procedures, which may reduce comparability across classes and increase the risk that pronunciation judgements are determined by individual teacher priorities. In this case, rubric construction appears to compensate for the lack of a unified policy. The interview data further suggests that the diffusion of international standards is uneven: while Omani participants reported CEFR/IELTS-informed practices, participants in Iraq and Iran described greater reliance on teacher-developed or locally adapted criteria. This indicates the selective uptake and local adaptation of international standards, mediated by institutional support and curriculum design rather than straightforward adoption or rejection.

Other opportunities for continued improvement in assessment practice included positioning feedback as a learner-centred dialogue with demonstrable links to expected standards. Participants maintained that feedback

should be iterative and offer practical recommendations for learners' continued improvement in meeting or exceeding standards, and that pronunciation instruction should take place across all EFL classes, not just those explicitly concerned with speaking. Finally, in addition to the inclusion of the technologies already discussed, respondents described the necessity of using a wide range of speaking and pronunciation activities and assessments as part of their learners' holistic development with due consideration of the diversity of their needs and cultural-linguistic backgrounds (Isaacs, 2008; Isbell, 2021).

The third research question examined whether participant country of practice affected the above results. Based on the survey data, the only area where a statistically significant difference was found between respondents from Iraq, Oman, and Iran was the frequency of pronunciation assessment. Although, overall, most respondents conducted pronunciation assessment on a semesterly basis, instructors in Iraq generally reported conducting these on a weekly basis, those in Oman on a semesterly basis, and instructors in Iran generally conducted their assessments weekly or at other times, while also displaying a fairly even spread across all other response options. In addition, interviewee responses indicated that instructors in Oman tended to base their pronunciation assessments on standardised international guidelines, such as the CEFR, while those in Iraq and Iran usually did not.

More generally, this study suggests a recurring situation in multilingual university settings: pronunciation is central to communicative success but often remains at the margins of formal assessment systems. Teachers value and assess pronunciation yet frequently do so through general speaking tasks and without specific pronunciation criteria, which makes judgements dependent on local teacher practice. The data also shows a dual orientation in which intelligibility and communicative effectiveness are prioritised, while native-speaker norms nonetheless remain influential in some settings. Technology is similarly marked by tension. For instance, ASR/AI tools are widely valued, but uneven infrastructure and resources limit implementation. Overall, the findings suggest that in the regional contexts examined, pronunciation assessment remains highly important pedagogically yet only weakly institutionalised, with teachers often taking individual measures to compensate for policy and system gaps.

The final research question built upon the need to ensure pronunciation has as clear a place as possible in EFL teaching models, as proposed by Isaacs and Harding (2017) and Saito and Plonsky (2019), by examining the components participants believed should be incorporated into a region-specific pronunciation assessment framework. Respondents identified 10 core concerns that included phonetic focus, cultural sensitivity, real-time feedback, etc., organised under the five main themes below.

1. Regional accent variation. To address the diverse linguistic situation of EFL learners in the Middle East, the framework should support exposing students to a spectrum of accents and dialects prevalent in the region. This view corresponds with the participant suggestion that the system should focus on *'letters and sounds which create errors in pronunciation'*. Exposure to regional accent variation in classroom exercises helps learners better understand pronunciation forms associated with different linguistic backgrounds.

2. Cultural context integration. The integration of cultural scenarios and dialogues into pronunciation exercises was identified as an essential framework theme. Participants maintained that this allows Middle Eastern EFL learners to connect with the material on a personal level, while showing how pronunciation is influenced by cultural norms and social expectations.

3. Phonemic mapping and common mispronunciations. Recognising that Middle Eastern languages may contain phonemes absent in English, respondents stated that the framework should incorporate phonemic mapping to assist learners in identifying and practising challenging sounds. Additionally, addressing commonly mispronounced words or sounds specific to the region can provide targeted guidance for overcoming pronunciation difficulties.

4. Intonation and stress patterns. Respondents emphasised the importance of addressing suprasegmental aspects of pronunciation, such as intonation and stress. Lessons addressing rhythm and stress found in Middle Eastern languages can help learners convey meaning more effectively.

5. Feedback customisation and progress tracking. Participants stated that feedback should be tailored to address pronunciation challenges common among Middle Eastern EFL learners. They also noted that progress-tracking features allow learners to monitor their pronunciation development over time, supporting a sense of achievement and motivation.

These components and themes are reflected in the proposed Middle East Pronunciation Assessment Framework detailed in Figure 4.

The proposed framework has been designed to differ from other available frameworks, such as intelligibility-based models and CEFR-aligned rating scales (see below). In this respect, it is a regionally grounded assessment framework that specifies how pronunciation constructs are defined, interpreted, and enacted within multilingual higher education settings in the region. The framework reflects the realities identified in the three university systems (i.e., Iraq, Oman, and Iran) under investigation, including the uneven use of CEFR standards, strong teacher autonomy in rubric design, and the common integration of pronunciation within broader speaking assessment. The

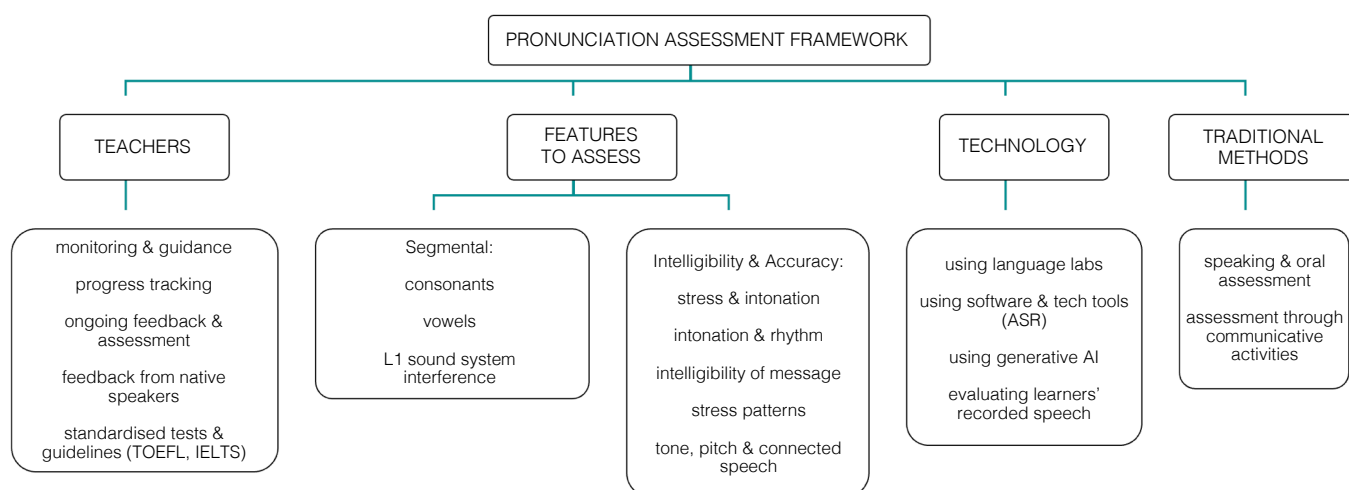


Figure 4. Proposed Middle East Pronunciation Assessment Framework

framework does not assume full institutional standardisation and instead presents a structured yet flexible system informed by multilingual learner backgrounds and local assessment practices. For example, the framework first focuses on segmental and suprasegmental features by identifying recurrent segmental contrasts and prosodic features that systematically affect intelligibility among learners with Arabic, Persian, and Kurdish linguistic backgrounds. Secondly, accent variation and cultural integration function as mediating variables. These two aspects affect how raters set their standards and how much variation they are willing to accept. This viewpoint repositions the accent from a deviation from a native-speaker norm to a socially situated variable constrained by intelligibility boundaries. Finally, personalised feedback tailored to learner needs supports diagnostic cycles.

Overall, the framework treats evaluation as an ongoing and developmental process rather than a one-time event. It differs substantially from both the intelligibility-based models and CEFR scales offered above. For example, intelligibility research focuses on whether listeners can understand speakers but rarely accounts for regional L1 influence or local institutional factors. The proposed framework addresses this gap through the explicit connection between intelligibility, specific sound contrasts relevant in specific linguistic settings, and locally accepted accent norms. CEFR descriptors, while useful for measuring proficiency levels, also fall short because they do not account for regional accent differences or include feedback within the assessment process. The framework incorporates both sociolinguistic conditions and structured feedback into its core design and is therefore grounded in the realities of multilingual Middle Eastern settings rather than simply borrowing models from elsewhere for local application. Furthermore, in light of current findings regarding a lack of institutional standardisation of pronunciation criteria,

inconsistent integration of rubrics, and uneven access to phonetic training resources across the selected settings, the framework places particular emphasis on stabilising assessment practices in systems where pronunciation is acknowledged as important but nonetheless lacks coherent structural integration.

6. CONCLUSION

The study reported in this paper examined EFL teacher assessment practices in the three Middle Eastern countries of Iraq, Oman, and Iran using a mixed-methods exploratory design encompassing both an online survey and semi-structured interviews. Before conclusions are drawn, however, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the exploratory nature of the study lent itself to a wide-ranging survey as the main data collection instrument, featuring a mixture of closed- and open-ended questions. The former largely produced categorical data, which meant that the researchers relied mostly on descriptive statistics, such as frequency counts and Pearson's chi-squared tests. Future researchers could therefore develop some or all of the survey concepts into more standardised questionnaire scales or subscales yielding interval or ratio data that would allow higher-level inferential analysis.

In addition, the self-selected online sample, despite allowing the researchers to gather EFL teacher responses from across three nations with relatively minimal financial and temporal resources, means that the risks of self-selection bias and the limited ability to generalise findings associated with nonprobability samples apply here. Finally, the steps taken to help ensure participant anonymity meant that procedures for verifying thematic analysis outcomes, such as peer debriefing and member checking, could not be applied. These limitations may be addressed through wider-scale descriptive and/or explanatory research in the future.

With these limitations acknowledged, it appears that, based on the current findings, EFL instructors in Iraq, Oman, and Iran are aware of the importance of pronunciation instruction and assessment in helping their learners achieve intelligible, clear pronunciation, while generally not requiring an Inner Circle native-speaker-like standard. They do not, however, believe that their current pronunciation assessment practices are very effective, as these are constrained by the lack of standardised assessment frameworks and methods, a limited curriculum focus on pronunciation, and various resource limitations.

The adoption of technologies, including ASR and AI, was identified as an actual or potential means of addressing these concerns, although most instructors were required to

seek freely available technological solutions for their learners. Finally, most participants believed that their efforts to achieve effective pronunciation assessment were associated not only with challenges but also with opportunities, all of which are acknowledged in the proposed Middle East Pronunciation Assessment Framework presented in the Discussion. Participant country of practice had only a relatively minor impact on these results. It should be noted, however, that these results are exploratory, and the resultant assessment framework is itself intended as an early-stage model that other EFL professionals across the Middle East and elsewhere are encouraged to apply and refine to best serve the needs of their culturally and linguistically diverse learners.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Fatemeh Ranjbaran Madiseh

PhD in Applied Linguistics, Assistant Lecturer
English for Sciences Department, Centre for Preparatory Studies
Sultan Qaboos University, Muscat, Oman
Postal address: CPS Building, Seeb, PC123 Muscat, Oman
Email: f.madiseh@squ.edu.om
ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9326-4475>

Rizgar Qasim Mahmood

MA in Linguistics, Doctoral Researcher
Salahaddin University-Erbil, Iraq and
Faculty of Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities
University of Wollongong, Wollongong, Australia
Postal address: 2 Northfields Ave, 2522 Wollongong, Australia
Email: rizgar.mahmood@su.edu.krd
ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5987-8884>

Christopher Denman

DSc in Education, Researcher (Humanities)
Office of the Deputy Vice-Chancellor for Postgraduate Studies & Research and Humanities Research Centre
Sultan Qaboos University, Muscat, Oman
Postal address: Administration Street, PC123 Muscat, Oman
Email: denman@squ.edu.om
ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5852-5000>