Pedagogy of English as an International Language and the Social Attractiveness and Comprehensibility of English Varieties: Nexus Between Teacher and Learner Beliefs

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Abstract

Investigating the nexus between the teachers' and learners' beliefs about English as an International Language (EIL) and the social attractiveness and comprehensibility of English varieties can provide insights into effective EIL pedagogy. To this end, the present study examined the beliefs of teachers and learners about teaching English as an International Language (EIL) and the social attractiveness and comprehensibility of English varieties. The first phase investigated participants' beliefs about English varieties and teaching EIL. Questionnaire data from 505 nonnative teachers and learners and follow-up interviews indicated that while teachers legitimized all intelligible varieties of English, learners did not assign legitimacy to nonnative varieties. However, both groups agreed that only native varieties should be used for language instruction. In the second phase, findings from a Verbal Guise Test (VGT) revealed that teachers and learners rated American and British English relatively higher than nonnative varieties in terms of both comprehensibility and social attractiveness. The study suggests the teachers' and learners' prioritization of native varieties, which runs counter to the established EIL theoretical foundations.

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Introduction

Throughout the past few decades, English has succeeded in claiming its position as an international language with the greatest number of native and nonnative speakers (Crystal, 2008; Hino, 2018; Matsuda, 2019), leading to its widespread use in all sorts of international communication from politics to business, education, and even arts (Jenkins, 2015; Kang et al., 2020; Matsuda, 2019). While English has more than two billion speakers worldwide, only one-fifth of them use English as their mother tongue (Crystal, 2008). The so-called nonnative English speakers have developed their local English varieties (e.g., Indian English or Nigerian English) to fulfill their diverse linguistic needs (Kumaravadivelu, 2016). These varieties have been recognized as legitimate (Jenkins, 2015), and their emergence has triggered studies of English as an International Language (EIL) and World Englishes (WE) since the 1970s. EIL as a revolutionary framework has questioned the theoretical underpinnings of dominant native-based English language teaching (ELT), which views English varieties as either native and legitimate or nonnative and illegitimate (Bolton, 2019). Consequently, some ELT researchers (e.g., Alsagoff et al., 2012; Flores & Rosa, 2023; Matsuda, 2012) have suggested the idea of modifying ELT based on the EIL paradigm and further stated that ELT has to rise against the linguistic and cultural norms of native-speakerism (e.g., Cogo, 2022; Kumaravadivelu, 2016). This new paradigm has encouraged the reformation of the ELT curriculum and materials to fine-tune them with the understanding of the ownership of English in the new millennium (Cogo, 2022), modification of teaching methodology to explore new ways of delivering materials to language learners (Bayyurt & Selvi, 2021), reshaping of language testing to substitute intelligibility for native-likeness as a measure of linguistic achievement (Lowenberg, 2012), and reframing of teacher-education programs (Sifakis, 2007).

While the theoretical underpinnings of EIL have been firmly established in the last five decades (e.g., Smith, 1976), in practice, however, teachers in the ELT classrooms do not represent EIL-informed pedagogy (Flores & Rosa, 2023; Hashemian et al., 2024; Manzouri et al., 2024; Vodopija-Krstanović & Marinac, 2019). American and British English are still dominant English varieties for teaching and learning around the globe (Modiano, 2009; Rose & Galloway, 2019), and other English varieties still struggle to be considered legitimate. Therefore, many studies (e.g., da Costa & Rose, 2024; Manzouri et al., 2024, 2025; Saito & Turner, 2025; Tajeddin et al., 2020; Tajeddin & Manzouri, 2025; Tarrayo et al., 2021; Zhang, 2022) in a variety of contexts (Inner, Outer, and Expanding Circles) have explored teachers' and learners' beliefs about English varieties, suggesting prioritization of native English varieties in status, comprehensibility, and desirability. However, the majority of the studies explored the beliefs of teachers and learners separately, neglecting the interrelatedness of their beliefs. Therefore, the final picture provided by those studies is rather incomplete. Inspired by this significant gap, the current study investigates the beliefs of Iranian English language teachers and learners regarding English varieties and EIL pedagogy.

Literature Review

As Crystal (2008) discussed, the need for a lingua franca for international communication has been felt since the 1950s, and the role of EIL has been recognized worldwide since the 1980s. English has consequently become the favorite language to be taught and learned around the world (Hino, 2018). With the tremendous increase in English users worldwide, borders between native and nonnative speakers have started to vanish. Accordingly, ELT professionals have argued that it is time to see the world through the lens of EIL. Sharifian (2017) considered EIL as the language used for intercultural communications among language users with different linguistic and cultural origins. In this regard, EIL has the potential to save language learners from the sociopragmatic conflict they encounter when making attempts to copy norms of native varieties of English. Furthermore, Modiano (2009) argued that EIL-aware pedagogy is not simply teaching English with international objectives for international users, but it is the expansion of multicultural consciousness that liberates English varieties from being measured against the yardstick of native forms of English. Therefore, EIL maintains that intelligibility, rather than sounding native-like, needs to be brought to the fore for successful intercultural communication (Flores & Rosa, 2023). Similarly, Jenkins (2015) contended that since communication in English mainly occurs among nonnative speakers, concentration on native English forms is no longer pedagogically justified, and intelligibility could be prioritized over native-likeness.

Since the 1990s, a large body of studies has explored English teachers' and learners' beliefs about the legitimacy of English varieties, EIL-aware instruction, syllabus, and materials development (e.g., Christou et al., 2024; Kim, 2024; Manzouri et al., 2025; Meer et al., 2022; Monfared, 2022, 2025; Saito & Turner, 2025; Tajeddin & Manzouri, 2025). Inspired by the Kachruvian codification of concentric circles of English speakers, several studies have been launched in the Inner Circle (e.g., Dragojevic & Goatley-Soan, 2022;), Outer Circle (e.g., Hundt et al., 2015; Lee & Ahn, 2021), and Expanding Circle (e.g., Manzouri et al., 2024; Monfared, 2022, 2025; Tajeddin & Manzouri, 2025; Zhang, 2022). In the Inner Circle setting, Sadeghpour and Sharifian (2017) explored the teachers' beliefs about the legitimacy of nonnative English varieties and found that only 42% of the participants agreed that all varieties of English were legitimate. Other studies also echoed similar findings (e.g., Manzouri et al., 2024). Research in the Outer Circle countries also suggests the prioritization of native English varieties. In India, for instance, Bernaisch and Koch (2016) reported that language learners judged British English as being more formal and polite than Indian English. In the Republic of Fiji, a former British colony in the South Pacific Ocean, Hundt et al. (2015) reported highly positive beliefs about British English among language learners. Lee and Ahn (2021) concluded that while Singaporean English is used by Singaporean students for social solidarity purposes, it can also bring embarrassment to its users.

In the Expanding Circle context, Tarrayo et al. (2021) explored the beliefs of 60 English teachers in Thailand about varieties of English. Findings suggested that the majority of the teachers prioritized native forms of English for teaching vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation; however, they admitted the existence of nonnative English varieties such as Thai English. Misir and Gurbuz (2022) investigated Turkish teachers' beliefs about English varieties and concluded that most of the teachers favored American English. Results of their studies also suggested that only native varieties are legitimate to be included in the ELT coursebooks. Tajeddin et al. (2020) conducted a study on 210 Iranian teachers of English and found that while the teachers believed in the legitimacy of intelligible nonnative varieties of English, they showed strong aspirations for American and British English. Furthermore, in many studies carried out in East Asian countries, learners evaluated native English as superior to nonnative varieties in grammatical accuracy, phonological intelligibility, and social desirability (e.g., Lim, 2020; Saito & Turner, 2025; Wang, 2015).

The majority of the studies have used semi-structured interviews and questionnaires to collect data; however, fewer studies have explored perceptions through the Verbal Guise Test (VGT) and the Matched Guise Test (MGT) (e.g., Bozoglan & Gok, 2017; Dragojevic & Goatley-Soan, 2022). Both VGT and MGT are aimed at examining attitudes toward variables through an evaluation process where people listen to different varieties to judge them on a semantic-differential scale (McKenzie, 2008). While MGT requires a single speaker to represent different varieties (e.g., through reading the same texts with various dialects or accents), VGT uses multiple speakers, each representing their variety. As McKenzie contends, VGT, as an indirect method of data collection, can extract more authentic data by touching upon individuals' unconscious awareness. Zhang and Hu (2008) investigated the beliefs of Chinese students about English varieties through VGT and concluded that the students expressed positive preferences for American and British English. Similarly, He and Li (2009) explored the perspectives of Chinese students toward American, British, and Chinese English and concluded that they prioritized native varieties over Chinese English. Other studies have reported similar findings in the European Union countries (e.g., Groom, 2012), Hong Kong (e.g., Chan, 2018), Iran (e.g., Rezaei et al., 2019), Sri Lanka (e.g., Bernaisch, 2012), Turkey (e.g., Bozoglan & Gok, 2017), and the USA (e.g., Dragojevic & Goatley-Soan, 2022).

The current study is inspired by the fact that the majority of previous studies on EIL, except for a few studies (e.g., Galloway & Rose, 2021; Wang & Fang, 2020), have investigated perceptions of teachers and learners in separate studies, indicating that teachers' and learners' perceptions are independent of one another. The lack of studies investigating the beliefs of both teachers and learners of English in the same context evidences a significant gap in the EIL-informed research. This gap needs to be addressed because if the EIL paradigm is to be translated into the everyday practice of English teaching and learning, it is vital to understand how teachers and learners in every given

context perceive English varieties. This understanding is vital as teachers are believed to be the main agents of change (Galloway & Rose, 2021; Selvi & Yazan, 2021), and learners, on the other hand, are the targets of all pedagogical activities. Successful EIL pedagogy necessitates positive attitudes of both parties. The contributions of the present study can be manifold. First, the investigation of teachers' and learners' beliefs simultaneously in a single study can present a broad view of the legitimacy of English varieties, providing researchers, language teachers, and policy-makers with rigorous data about EIL in the context of Iran as a sample of Expanding Circle countries. Researchers and language teachers can see how the match or mismatch between beliefs of English teachers and learners relates to the theoretical foundations of EIL and what it means to the practice of teaching English. Additionally, from a local perspective, this study can shed light on EIL pedagogy and its desirability among teachers and learners in the country where there is a rapidly growing interest among its people to learn English (Sadeghi & Richards, 2016). These data can inform policymakers to reshape language teaching policies to cope with the real needs and wants of language teachers and learners. Motivated by the above gap in the literature, the current study set out to explore how Iranian teachers and learners legitimize the teaching of EIL and how they judge English varieties based on comprehensibility and social attractiveness attributes. To this end, the following research questions were formulated:

RQ$_1$: What are teachers' and learners' beliefs about EIL-aware language teaching?
RQ$_2$: What are teachers' and learners' beliefs about the comprehensibility and social attractiveness of English varieties?

Method

Design of the Study

The current study took advantage of qualitative and quantitative methods of data collection by employing a mixed-methods research (MMR) design. MMR can enhance the validity of the research, make the study more robust by minimizing the weaknesses of a single method, and involve collecting, analyzing, and interpreting data using both methods (Dörnyei, 2007). For the present study, the researchers used Creswell's (2003) concurrent triangulation strategy, which entails the use of both research methods to cross-validate the findings of a single study. Therefore, questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and a test of comprehensibility and social attractiveness were used for data collection.

Participants

A total of 251 nonnative Iranian teachers and 254 learners of English voluntarily participated in the current study. The teachers consisted of 113 males and 138 females, ranging in ages from 23 to 48. The majority of the teachers (n = 239) stated that they had never resided in an English-speaking country. The participating teachers held different educational degrees (i.e., B.A., M.A., Ph.D.) and worked as English language instructors in private language institutes in different cities in Iran. Their experience in English teaching ranged from 2 to 26 years. The learners included 98 males and 156 females, with their

ages ranging from 16 to 31. Most learners (n = 248) stated that they had never visited an English-speaking country. Their English learning experience ranged from 2 to 8 years. English is offered as a compulsory course to high school students across grades 7 to 12. Also, at the university, general English courses along with ESP courses are offered to students. Before grade 7, English is not formally offered in Iranian public schools. Using state-developed English books that advertise Islamic and Iranian values, the public education system is mainly focused on reading and writing skills. In private language institutes, on the other hand, language learners learn all four language skills through internationally developed book series that advertise Anglo-American values (e.g., *Interchange, Headway, Topnotch*).

Data Sources
Data sources in this study consist of an EIL questionnaire to investigate teachers' and learners' beliefs about the teaching of EIL. To arrive at a deeper understanding of teachers' and learners' perspectives, semi-structured interviews were also employed. In addition, to investigate the perceptions of the participants about the comprehensibility and social attractiveness of English varieties, VGT was utilized.

The questionnaire
The questionnaire was an adapted version of Tajeddin et al. (2020) EIL questionnaire and was modified to focus on the area of inquiry of the current study. Consisting of 16 items, the questionnaire aimed at investigating teachers' and learners' beliefs about teaching EIL. Ranging from "strongly disagree=1" to "strongly agree=5", the items of the questionnaire were on a five-point Likert scale. The questionnaire underwent two phases of piloting to clarify its content and language. First, five experienced teachers were asked to read items and evaluate the questionnaire's content and language. Additionally, the questionnaire was piloted on 42 teachers and 46 learners to ensure its reliability. Calculation of the index of internal reliability using Cronbach's alpha showed a reliability coefficient of .78 for teachers and .86 for learners, which according to Pallant (2010) are acceptable reliability indexes.

The interviews
The current study took advantage of semi-structured interviews to provide a more detailed account of teachers' and learners' beliefs. There were five interview questions corresponding to the themes of the questionnaire. The first question aimed at exploring teachers' beliefs about emerging varieties of English and their acceptability. Interview question two asked whether language learners should learn English to communicate with native speakers of English, nonnative speakers, or both. Questions three and four explored the beliefs of the interviewees about the variety (or varieties) of English that need to be prioritized in English language teaching. Finally, interview question five examined beliefs about the acceptability of nonnative English norms of politeness and speech acts (e.g., refusal, request, approval) as long as they are intelligible.

Verbal guise test

In the current study, VGT was employed to examine the teachers' and learners' attitudes toward the social attractiveness and comprehensibility of English varieties. A VGT is a combination of several sets of adjectives paralleled with their antonyms. The scale, which is an adapted version of McKenzie's (2008), consisted of six sets of opposite adjectives (e.g., clear vs. unclear) "positioned sometimes on the right and sometimes on the left to avoid left-right bias" (p. 143). It included six pairs of bipolar adjectives arranged on a five-point semantic-differential scale describing the comprehensibility and social attractiveness of the language varieties. Three pairs of adjectives (i.e., understandable vs. not understandable, correct vs. incorrect, and clear vs. unclear) evaluated the comprehensibility of the varieties of English. Three other pairs of adjectives (i.e., pleasant vs. not pleasant, funny vs. not funny, and nice to listen to vs. not nice to listen to) examined the social attractiveness of English varieties. An elicitation paragraph read by different speakers was selected from George Mason University's Speech Accent Archive to obtain data from the participants about English varieties. The Archive provides speech samples of English from speakers with different linguistic and demographic backgrounds. Therefore, to represent different varieties of English, 6 recordings were selected. Two recordings represented Inner Circle English (i.e., American and British), two represented Outer Circle English (i.e., Indian and Nigerian), and two others exemplified Expanding Circle English (i.e., Persian and Japanese). All samples were readings of a 69-word passage in English representing a comprehensive sample of English sounds and their sequences (Weinberger, 2014).

Data Collection

Since three distinct instruments were used in this study, data was collected in three separate phases. First, the EIL questionnaire was administered to 251 teachers and 254 learners to obtain data regarding their demographic information as well as their perceptions of teaching EIL. In the second phase, 20 teachers and 20 learners took part in online semi-structured interviews through WhatsApp®. The purpose of the study, the format of the interview, and the codes of confidentiality of their responses were explained to the participants. Attempts were made by the researchers to take an unbiased position throughout the interview. The participants were assured of the confidentiality of their responses and were informed that they would be assigned pseudonyms in the final report. The participants could opt to answer in English or Persian, and all of the teachers and the majority of the learners opted to respond in English. Persian interviews were translated verbatim into English by the researchers. The interviews with each participant lasted 20-30 minutes, depending on the number of details they provided in their responses. All interviews were recorded and analyzed. In the third phase, 50 teachers and 54 learners voluntarily participated in evaluating the comprehensibility and social attractiveness of different varieties of English. A virtual room with Adobe Connect® (a widely used server for virtual classrooms) was created and the participants were asked to join the meeting for free. Speech samples of each

selected variety of English were played online for the participants and they were asked to evaluate the variety on a five-point semantic differential Likert scale. Upon completing the survey, the participants were required to send their evaluations to the chat box of the room. The speech samples were played twice and the order was randomized to minimize the ordering effect.

Data Analysis

To analyze the data collected through the EIL questionnaire, descriptive statistics (i.e., mean (M), and standard deviation (SD)) were calculated. Additionally, kurtosis and skewness of items and the questionnaire, in general, were calculated to ensure the questionnaire items' normality. Concerning the qualitative data, interviews were transcribed and analyzed to extract the main themes through content analysis using a systematic coding method. The researchers extracted themes by comparing the responses of each participant with those of other participants. First, the first participant's response to the first interview question was analyzed and explored for the themes and then compared with the responses of the other parties to the same question. The same process was followed for all of the interview questions. Then, the responses of each individual to all the questions were compared and analyzed to extract the themes as accurately as possible. Names of the codes were extracted from the participants' responses. For instance, the sentence "I think a native pronunciation or native variety of English should be prioritized in language pedagogy" was categorized under the code *"prioritization of native English."* The same is true about the sentence "I think only one variety and that is the native variety for example American English needs to be the center". Extractions of the themes continued until no more themes could be identified in the reflection notes' data. Attempts were made by the researchers to take an unbiased position throughout the analysis of the reflection notes. Cohen's Kappa coefficient, as an index of reliability between independent coders, was calculated and found to be .83, which is an appropriate level of agreement because, as Pallant (2010) contends, values above .70 denote good agreement. For VGT, the mean ratings and standard deviations for each variety were calculated by the researchers using SPSS software. Moreover, a one-way repeated measures analysis of variance (ANOVA) and Bonferroni pairwise comparisons were conducted to investigate any significant difference between varieties of English.

Findings

Questionnaire Findings for the Teachers and Learners

Analysis of the data extracted from the questionnaire indicated both similarities and differences between teachers and learners in their beliefs about varieties of English and teaching EIL (Table 1). Overall, the majority of teachers and learners agreed that nowadays English is a means of intercultural communication and belongs to all its native and nonnative speakers (Items 1 and 3). Despite this, teachers and learners stated that only linguistic norms of native English varieties should be taught and learned. As

presented in Table 1, the mean ratings of Item 6 for teachers and learners were 3.92 and 4.22, respectively, meaning that they agreed with the statement that language learners should learn native forms of English. Similarly, item 12 received mean ratings of 4.03 and 4.62 for teachers and learners, respectively, which means the majority of the teachers and learners believed that native speaker norms of correct grammar should be taught to language learners. Furthermore, the majority of the participants disagreed with teaching intelligible English instead of a native variety (Item 2), teaching/learning intelligible nonnative varieties of English (Items 5 and 8), nonnative accent and pronunciation (Items 7 and 9), intelligible nonnative grammar (Item 10), and intelligible nonnative vocabulary items (Item 11). However, analysis of Item 4 revealed disparities between teachers' and learners' beliefs regarding the legitimacy of nonnative English varieties. As Table 1 shows, teachers evaluated nonnative English varieties as legitimate forms of English; however, learners delegitimized those varieties (Item 4, Teachers' M = 4.09; Learners' M = 2.78). The same is true for Items 13, 14, 15, and 16, which revealed that teachers partially agreed that learners should be taught how to modify their linguistic, cultural, politeness, and speech act norms to boost mutual understanding. However, mean ratings of learners for the mentioned items attested to their disagreement with the statements.

Table 1

Mean Ratings for Teachers and Learners

Items	Participants	1 (%)	2 (%)	3 (%)	4 (%)	5 (%)	Mean
1. Language learners may learn English for communication with both native and non-native speakers.	Teachers	2	14.7	13.1	34.7	35.5	3.87
	Learners	2.9	26.8	17.3	32.5	20.5	3.46
2. Language learners should be taught to communicate intelligibly (i.e. in an understandable way) in English rather than following native speaker norms.	Teachers	.8	48.6	20.3	29	1.3	2.81
	Learners	37.4	33.9	8.3	16.1	4.3	2.72
3. Today, English belongs to all its native and nonnative speakers.	Teachers	2.4	10.8	16.7	34.7	35.5	3.9
	Learners	2.8	12.6	19.3	38.6	26.8	3.84
4. All varieties of English (e.g., American, British, Indian, Nigerian …) are legitimate and acceptable forms of English.	Teachers	7.2	5.9	13.9	19.1	54.6	4.09
	Learners	9.8	40.6	16.9	26.8	5.9	2.78
5. As English is no longer limited to the native speaker variety, learners should learn the language norms of both native and non-native varieties of English.	Teachers	37.8	34.3	6	21.5	.4	2.12
	Learners	52	13.8	13.4	16.9	3.9	2.07
6. Language learners should be taught native speaker accents (e.g., British or American	Teachers	4.8	12	5.2	39.3	38.7	3.92
	Learners	.5	1.2	15.4	35	48	4.29

		1	2	3	4	5	Mean
accent) as the only correct model.							
7. In every country where a non-native variety of English is used, its non-native accent should be taught.	Teachers	15.5	72.5	5.2	2.8	4	2.07
	Learners	24.4	52	11	8.3	4.3	2.16
8. Language learners should be taught non-native varieties of English (e.g., Indian English and Singaporean English) for effective international communication.	Teachers	29	55	7.2	3.2	5.6	2.01
	Learners	35.4	34.3	11	9.1	10.2	2.24
9. Language learners should be taught intelligible (i.e., comprehensible) pronunciation of English rather than native speaker pronunciation.	Teachers	12	75.7	3.2	7.6	1.6	2.1
	Learners	27.6	47.2	7.1	12.6	5.5	2.2
10. Language learners should be taught appropriate use of grammar of English rather than native speaker grammar.	Teachers	24.2	54.2	10.8	3.2	7.6	2.16
	Learners	23.6	48.8	9.4	7.8	10.3	2.32
11. Language learners should be taught appropriate use of English words and phrases rather than native speaker vocabulary.	Teachers	32.3	45.4	11.6	2	8.7	2.1
	Learners	40.9	33.5	9.5	4.4	11.7	2
12. Language learners should learn native speaker norms of correct grammar.	Teachers	7.2	6	13.1	24.3	49.4	4.03
	Learners	.9	4.9	3.2	21	70	4.62
13. Language learners should be taught how to modify their language norms to create mutual understanding when communicating with other speakers of English.	Teachers	8.8	19.9	34.7	20	16.6	3.46
	Learners	18.1	42.9	11	24.8	3.1	2.54
14. Language learners should be taught how to modify their cultural norms to create mutual understanding when communicating with other speakers of English.	Teachers	8	13.9	35.1	22.3	20.7	3.84
	Learners	16	28.7	22.8	17.7	14.8	2.78
15. Language learners should be taught how to modify their norms of using speech acts to establish mutual understanding when communicating with other speakers of English	Teachers	8.9	14.3	34.9	24	17.9	3.68
	Learners	27.6	39	16.5	11.4	5.5	2.28
16. Language learners should be taught how to modify their norms of politeness to establish mutual understanding when communicating with other speakers of English	Teachers	9.6	15.9	35.9	7.9	30.7	3.74
	Learners	11.8	70.9	3.5	9.1	4.7	2.24

Note: 1 = strongly disagree; 2 = disagree; 3 = neither agree nor disagree; 4 = agree; 5 = strongly agree

Interview Findings for the Teachers and Learners
Analysis of teachers' interview data revealed two major themes: (a) the legitimacy of all intelligible English varieties for international communication, and (b) the prioritization of native varieties of English as the only standard varieties for instruction. Each of them is described below.

The first theme revealed the teachers' belief in the legitimacy of all intelligible English varieties (native and nonnative) for international communication. They maintained that all nonnative English varieties are legitimate provided that they are intelligible. The teachers argued that English is a means of international communication and that all native and nonnative intelligible varieties can be considered a legitimate variety. The following statement by Teacher 13 reflects this view:

> *Personally, I believe that all varieties of English, for example, American, British, Indian, or Nigerian English, are acceptable and legitimate for communication if you can understand what the speakers mean.* (T13)

One of the teachers, who has lived in Pakistan for three years, discussed that intelligibility rather than native-like proficiency needs to be the standard of legitimacy. He stated that:

> *Varieties of English are like different versions of the same color. For example, there can be 10 different varieties of blue but in the end all of them are blue. When I can understand what Pakistani and Indian people say in English, it is legitimate.* (T17)

The second theme showed the teachers' prioritization of native varieties of English for instruction. While the majority of the teachers agreed that nonnative varieties of English are legitimate and acceptable for intercultural communication, they all agreed that only American and British English should be taught and learned. Teacher 11, who has the experience of living in Nigeria for some time, stated that:

> *Nigerian English is acceptable for communication but for instruction, I think all emerging varieties of English are a threat! Different varieties will cause problems in the comprehensibility of English.* (T11)

Another teacher contended that intelligibility itself comes from adherence to native varieties of English. He further warned that teaching nonnative varieties of English may undermine intelligibility:

> *I believe teaching English should be based on a standard model; otherwise, there would be educational chaos. Every teacher teaches the variety he likes, and since varieties differ in many aspects, learners will get confused. Teaching standard American or British English can bring intelligibility.* (T1)

Analysis of data obtained from the interviews with language learners revealed two main themes: (a) the legitimacy of native varieties of English for international communication, and (b) the prioritization of native English varieties as the standard varieties for instruction.

The legitimacy of native varieties of English for international communication was the focus of the first theme. Learners' responses to the legitimacy, acceptability, and correctness of varieties of English revealed that only native varieties were perceived as legitimate forms of English. The excerpts below from the learners reflect this view:

> *Native speakers' English is more legitimate, why? because it's the original version not a manipulated one. Standard English is accepted everywhere but nonnative varieties are only for one country.* (L20)

As evident by the above excerpt, nonnative English varieties, regardless of whether they are intelligible or not, are considered manipulated and hence, less legitimate than the native varieties. In the same line, another learner contended that:

> *Nonnative varieties of English are funny and incorrect. I can understand them, but I don't really like and appreciate them.* (L6)

Similar to what Learner 20 stated, Learner 6 maintained that while nonnative varieties of English are intelligible to them, they evaluate these varieties as being funny and incorrect forms of the English language. The above excerpts indicate that nonnative English varieties are not evaluated as independent forms that can be used as legitimately as the native varieties. In fact, these varieties are judged as inferior to the "original" native varieties, represent distorted forms of English as spoken by people in a specific locality, and are not worthy to be considered legitimate and correct even if they are intelligible.

The second theme indicated the learners' prioritization of native English varieties for instruction. Exposing language learners to nonnative varieties of English was strongly opposed by the learners since those varieties were not judged genuine and were disapproved by others. Learners 7 and 5 argued that:

> *When we can learn English which belongs to the USA and UK why should we include nonnative varieties and their standards? They are not genuine English to learn.* (L7)

The above excerpt attests to the genuineness of native varieties of English for language teaching. Moreover, it bears witness to the learners' beliefs regarding ownership of English by its native speakers. Similarly, Learner 5 prioritized native English varieties:

> *I love American English because it is admired by everybody. I don't like to have a nonnative accent like Indian or African, everybody will laugh at me!* (L5)

The above two excerpts show that learners are strongly influenced by the hegemony of native English varieties, especially American English, in language learning. As interviews with learners indicate, learning "*genuine*" English and having a native(-like) accent are prioritized over intelligibility and successful communication.

VGT Findings

Analysis of the teachers' and learners' answers to VGT showed that native English varieties were judged to be more socially attractive and comprehensible compared with nonnative varieties. Tables 2 and 3 portray mean ratings for each attribute and its components for different varieties. Moreover, to examine the significance of the means, a one-way repeated measures analysis of variance (ANOVA) was also run in SPSS software. The results (for learners: F = 608, p < .05, and for teachers: F = 291, p < .05) showed that varieties of English were evaluated differently. Data analysis revealed that both teachers and learners evaluated the American English speaker as the most attractive (M = 4.84 for teachers, and M = 4.92 for learners) and the Japanese speaker of English as the least socially attractive speaker among the six speakers (M = 1.96 for teachers, and M = 1.46 for learners). Similarly, results showed that American English was evaluated as the most comprehensible (M = 4.94 for teachers, and M = 4.96 for learners) while the Japanese speaker was judged as the least comprehensible (M = 1.54 for teachers, and M = 1.94 for learners). Furthermore, other nonnative speakers of English (i.e., Indian, Persian, Nigerian) were evaluated significantly lower than native speakers in terms of social attractiveness and comprehensibility. Generally, findings suggest a pattern of AM > BR > PER > NGR > IND > JPN.

Table 2

Mean Evaluations for Social Attractiveness

Social Attractiveness	Participants	AM*	BR*	IND*	NGR*	PER*	JPN*
Pleasant	Teachers	4.80	4.14	1.28	2.64	1.88	1.90
	Learners	4.94	4.37	2.50	2.11	1.94	1.35
Nice to listen to	Teachers	4.88	4.40	1.96	2.94	2.82	2.14
	Learners	4.93	4.44	1.31	2.59	2.81	1.50
Not funny	Teachers	4.82	4.34	2.76	3.28	3.10	1.84
	Learners	4.91	4.41	2.52	2.87	3.07	1.54
Mean	Teachers	4.84	4.29	2.33	2.95	2.60	1.96
	Learners	4.92	4.40	1.77	2.52	2.61	1.46

*AM (American), BR(British), IND(Indian), NGR(Nigerian), PER(Persian), JPN(Japanese)

Table 3

Mean Evaluations for Comprehensibility

Comprehensibility	Participants	AME	BRE	IND	NGR	PER	JPN
Correct	Teachers	4.98	4.76	2.54	2.32	2.14	1.76
	Learners	4.98	4.87	1.91	1.80	2.17	1.43
Understandable	Teachers	4.95	4.20	2.94	3.04	3.02	2.22
	Learners	4.94	4.28	2.57	2.98	3.04	1.93
Clear	Teachers	4.92	4.32	3.40	3.24	3.34	1.84
	Learners	4.96	4.48	3.07	2.98	3.35	1.28
Mean	Teachers	4.94	4.42	2.96	2.86	2.83	1.94
	Learners	4.96	4.54	2.51	2.58	2.85	1.54

Discussion

The current study investigated the beliefs of nonnative teachers and learners about teaching EIL and the social attractiveness and comprehensibility of different English varieties. As to the first research question, data analysis evidenced differences between teachers' and learners' beliefs about English varieties. English teachers recognized intelligible nonnative English varieties as legitimate (see results of Item 4 in the questionnaire, and interview excerpts from T13 and T17). This finding indicates teachers' consciousness of the existing linguistic and cultural plurality of today's English and is congruent with the line of studies on this topic (e.g., Christou et al., 2024; Manzouri et al., 2025; Monfared, 2022, 2025; Tajeddin & Manzouri, 2025; Tarrayo et al., 2021). Not surprisingly, as evidenced in the interview excerpts from L20 and L6, language learners did not attribute legitimacy to nonnative varieties, and perceived native varieties as the only correct and original varieties. This finding is aligned with other similar studies on this discrepancy (e.g., Kim, 2024; Monfared, 2022, 2025; Zhang, 2022). Christou et al. (2024), for instance, showed that while Chinese pre-service teachers believed in the existence of multiple varieties of English, they did not agree with teaching nonnative English varieties to language learners. Similarly, Kim (2024) found that while international students in Japan did not negatively evaluate the nonnative English varieties, they showed a strong aspiration to attain native-like proficiency in English. The discrepancy between the beliefs of teachers and learners observed in this study may spring from the fact that teachers were exposed to varieties of English throughout their long experience in language learning and teaching, which made them more tolerant of differences. It has been argued that first-year students of English, mainly because of their less exposure to nonnative varieties, are less tolerant of nonnative varieties compared with third- and fourth-year students (e.g., Yoshikawa, 2005). On the contrary, language learners in Expanding Circle contexts learn English mainly through ELT textbooks published by international publishers. The majority of these textbooks promote American or British English as the standard models of English (Rose & Galloway, 2019). It follows that language learners who were exposed only to native English varieties delegitimize nonnative varieties of English and judge them as being funny, inauthentic, unoriginal, and fake varieties. Kim (2024) found that learners' familiarity with native English varieties and their willingness to attain a native-like accent were among the main reasons for their strong preference for American English. Discrepancy between the

beliefs of teachers and learners evidenced in the present study can potentially act as an obstacle before the implementation of EIL pedagogy as learners' negative attitudes toward the legitimacy of nonnative varieties discourage teachers' attempts to introduce those varieties in ELT classrooms.

As to the teaching of EIL, the findings also revealed that teachers and learners opposed teaching/learning nonnative English varieties and strongly advocated the use of native varieties in ELT classrooms (see results of Items 5 and 6 in the questionnaire, and interview excerpts from T11 and L7). Teachers, however, partially agreed that learners need to be taught how to boost mutual understanding by modifying their linguistic, cultural, politeness, and speech act norms. These results resonate with those of similar studies that substantiated participants' inclination toward native varieties of English (e.g., Groom, 2012; Lim, 2020; Sadeghpour & Sharifian, 2017; Tarrayo et al., 2021; Wang, 2015). Wang (2015) found that Chinese learners and teachers were reluctant to accept Chinese English as a model for learning and teaching English. Similarly, in Tajeddin et al (2020) study, English teachers in Iran legitimized all varieties of English for intercultural communication while they unanimously agreed that only native varieties of English should be used for teaching English. To explain teachers' decision not to teach nonnative English varieties, some studies (e.g., Vodopija-Krstanović & Marinac, 2019) suggest that teachers do not know how to teach EIL, while others (e.g., Dewi, 2017) argue that it is due to the unavailability of EIL-aware materials. Furthermore, to explain the teachers' prioritization of native English varieties for language pedagogy, previous research indicates that the socio-historical backgrounds of language learners are perceived as another significant factor in shaping their beliefs about English varieties. For instance, Tokumoto and Shibata (2011) compared the perceptions of Malaysian and Japanese learners toward English and concluded that positive attitudes of Malaysian learners toward nonnative varieties, compared with negative attitudes of Japanese students, may be rooted in Malaysia's status as a former British colony. Contrary to such former British colonies, where a locally developed variety of English functions as the dominant medium of education and communication, Iranian society and its educational system use native varieties of English, especially American English, without any local rivals. As Monfared and Khatib's (2018) study of Indian and Iranian teachers' perceptions about the legitimacy of varieties of English showed, Indian teachers appreciated the Indian variety of English while Iranian teachers prioritized native varieties of English. Similar findings were reported in Sri Lanka (e.g., Bernaisch, 2012) and Fiji (e.g., Hundt et al., 2015). Other factors for the prioritization of native varieties include learners' desire to interact successfully with native speakers (e.g., Kim, 2024), widespread reach of American mass media (e.g., Bernaisch, 2012), positive self-image related to native varieties (e.g., Sung, 2014), and higher chances of employment in international corporations and studying abroad for learners with a native-like accent (e.g., Irham, 2022).

The second research question was aimed at examining the beliefs of Iranian teachers and learners concerning the comprehensibility and social attractiveness of the English varieties. Overall, American English, followed by British English, was ranked as the most socially attractive and comprehensible variety of English for Iranian teachers and learners. Teachers and learners described native varieties as pleasant, correct, and clear, and labeled nonnative varieties as not understandable, funny, and wrong. Teachers and learners ranked accented Persian English, to which they were excessively exposed, as moderately low for both attributes. These findings corroborate the findings of other studies that demonstrate that native varieties of English were evaluated relatively higher in both attributes compared to nonnative varieties (e.g., McKenzie, 2008; Groom, 2012; Rezaei et al., 2019; Misir & Gurbuz, 2022). For instance, Rezaei et al. (2019) found that American and British English were judged relatively higher than other varieties of English, suggesting the prestige and high social status of the native English varieties. It is argued that such a strong aspiration for native accents of English convinces language teachers to take a monolithic perspective on language teaching, which blocks the representation of emerging varieties of English in the ELT profession and paves the way for stronger hegemony of native norms (e.g., Misir & Gurbuz, 2022). Results of the VGT also corroborate our findings from the questionnaire and interviews, attesting to the prioritization of the native English varieties.

What distinguishes the present study from other similar studies is the fact that the picture provided through the findings of the current study presents a far more comprehensive picture of teachers' and learners' beliefs regarding EIL in a single study. While the previous studies have mainly focused on teachers or learners alone, the present study illustrates how the two most significant parties of language pedagogy (i.e., teachers and learners) approach varieties of English in an Expanding Circle context. Moreover, this study triangulated data on the teachers' and learners' beliefs about English varieties through interview, questionnaire, and VGT data.

The results of the present study bear implications for language teachers, materials developers, and other stakeholders. First, findings suggest that language teachers legitimize nonnative varieties of English but are reluctant to opt for teaching those varieties. This mismatch between teachers' beliefs and practices evidences the hegemony of native norms in ELT, which requires that teachers follow these norms in language teaching (Cavalheiro, 2016; Manzouri et al., 2025). Therefore, teacher education programs need to be reshaped to engender awareness and consciousness regarding emerging varieties of English in language teachers as the main agents of change (Galloway & Rose, 2021; Selvi & Yazan, 2021). EIL-informed programs of teacher education can assist language teachers in deemphasizing the native speaker model of linguistic competence. Second, assigning legitimacy to native English varieties, learners in the present study contended that nonnative varieties of English were not legitimate. Such a strong affinity for native English stems from sole reliance on native-centered

curricula in practice despite the conceptual recognition of EIL. As such, teaching practices and materials need to be reframed (Manzouri et al., 2025) to embrace all varieties of English and to expose learners to the pluricentric reality of EIL (Kumaravadivelu, 2016). Third, language teaching macro-policymakers in Expanding Circle contexts should aim at reshaping the pedagogical policies to enable learners to use English in today's increasingly globalized world with interlocutors who speak their unique varieties of English. It follows that, instead of adhering to native speaker norms, observing mutual intelligibility should be brought to the fore.

Conclusion

The results of the present study can deepen the knowledge about teachers' and learners' beliefs about English varieties and EIL pedagogy. The findings are significant as they present a comprehensive picture of EIL status in an Expanding Circle context, both regarding the legitimacy and teaching of nonnative varieties. Overall, the study suggests the prioritization of the native English varieties among nonnative teachers and learners of English in an Expanding Circle context of ELT. This runs counter to the fact that teachers legitimized both native and nonnative English varieties for intercultural interactions. It can be concluded that the teachers' awareness of the multiplicity of English varieties does not guarantee that they assign legitimacy to the nonnative English varieties to be used for language teaching. Similarly, the findings of the study revealed that language learners did not assign legitimacy to the nonnative English varieties. This implies that language teaching and learning in the Expanding Circle is still dominated by the hegemony of the idealized native speaker model.

While the findings of the current study are promising in shedding light on the beliefs of nonnative teachers and learners about teaching the varieties of English and social attractiveness and comprehensibility of those varieties, the present study had a few limitations. Participants in this study were exposed to different varieties of English only throughout one educational semester. While this can bring invaluable experiences to participants to be familiarized with EIL, studies with a longitudinal nature can produce more accurate results and richer data. Meanwhile, further studies can focus on the reasons for teachers' and learners' strong aspirations for native varieties of English. Such understanding is paramount for EIL practitioners because they can recognize the impediments before accepting nonnative English varieties as standard models for teaching and learning EIL. Still, more studies can center on understanding the beliefs of the policy makers and teacher educators about the legitimacy of different varieties of English.

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There are no conflicting interests.

Data Availability

Data are available upon request.

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