

Difficulties in Pronunciation in Teaching English

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Abstract. *The purpose of this article is to analyze the most common pronunciation difficulties faced by ESL learners and explore effective teaching strategies to address these challenges. Factors leading to these problems are interference of the native language, learners' age, attitude, and their insufficient knowledge of phonology and phonetics systems of the English language. Besides, phonetic ability was reported as the factor that mostly caused problems in phonetics learning. It could be concluded that the opinion of the difference in sound systems between English and the native language and some factors, including phonetic ability, native language, prior English pronunciation learning, instruction, and motivation, caused the students' problem in phonetics learning as well. Teaching students how to use their mouth, tongue, throat, and voice (articulatory phonetics) helps them produce the sounds of English. Understanding where the sounds are produced (place of articulation) and how (manner of articulation) helps them visualize movements that would not normally be visible.*

Key words: sounds, phonetic ability, caused problems, pronunciation, lack of.

Introduction. Pronunciation is a fundamental aspect of language learning, yet it remains one of the most challenging areas for English as a Second Language (ESL) learners. Pronunciation affects not only the intelligibility of speech but also the confidence and communicative effectiveness of learners. Kenworthy argues that “even advanced learners may struggle with pronunciation due to their native language influences.”¹ Factors such as phonological differences between the native language and English, inadequate exposure to spoken English, and lack of systematic pronunciation training contribute to these difficulties. Pronunciation plays a fundamental role in communication, as mispronunciations can lead to misunderstandings and hinder effective interaction. According to Celce-Murcia, Brinton, & Goodwin “Pronunciation is not just about articulating sounds correctly; it also involves stress, rhythm, and intonation, which contribute to intelligibility.”² However, many learners struggle with pronunciation due to factors such as native language interference, lack of phonetic awareness, and limited exposure to authentic English speech.

Literature Review. Research on English pronunciation difficulties has highlighted several key areas of concern. According to Avery and Ehrlich, learners often transfer phonetic patterns from their first language, leading to mispronunciations. This phenomenon is particularly evident among speakers of languages that lack certain English sounds³. For instance, Japanese learners frequently struggle with distinguishing /r/ and /l/, while Arabic speakers may have difficulty pronouncing /p/ as it does not exist in their phonetic inventory. Another major challenge is English’s irregular spelling-to-sound correspondence. Celce-Murcia, Brinton, and Goodwin note that English vowel sounds are highly

¹ Kenworthy, J. (1987). *Teaching English Pronunciation*. Longman.

² Celce-Murcia, M., Brinton, D. M., & Goodwin, J. M. (2010). *Teaching Pronunciation: A Course Book and Reference Guide*. Cambridge University Press.

³ Avery, P., & Ehrlich, S. (1992). *Teaching American English Pronunciation*. Oxford University Press.

inconsistent, making it difficult for learners to develop accurate pronunciation.⁴ The issue of stress and intonation also plays a significant role, as incorrect stress placement can lead to misunderstandings. Gilbert asserts that “proper intonation and stress are essential for intelligibility.”⁵ Brown further explains that connected speech features, such as linking, elision, and assimilation, add another layer of complexity to pronunciation learning.⁶

Despite these challenges, researchers have proposed various strategies to improve pronunciation. Roach emphasizes the importance of phonetic training, while Underhill advocates for minimal pairs exercises to help learners differentiate between similar sounds.⁷ Additionally, the use of technology in pronunciation training, such as speech recognition software, has been widely discussed by Derwing and Munro⁸. These studies suggest that a multifaceted approach combining phonetic instruction, listening practice, and technology-assisted learning can significantly enhance pronunciation skills.

Methodology, This study employs a qualitative approach to analyze pronunciation difficulties and the effectiveness of teaching strategies. Data was collected through:

- ****Observations**:** Classroom interactions were observed to identify common pronunciation errors among ESL learners.
- ****Surveys and Interviews**:** ESL learners and teachers were surveyed to understand the perceived difficulties and the methods used to address them.
- ****Experimental Teaching Methods**:** Different pronunciation training techniques, including phonetic instruction, minimal pairs practice, and technology-based learning, were implemented in an ESL classroom to evaluate their effectiveness.

The participants included 50 ESL learners from various linguistic backgrounds, ranging from beginner to advanced levels. Data analysis was conducted using thematic coding to identify recurring pronunciation difficulties and assess the impact of different teaching strategies.

Common Pronunciation Difficulties.

Several pronunciation difficulties arise among learners, depending on their first language. These include:

1. Phonemic Differences.

Different languages have distinct phonemic inventories. English, for example, has approximately 44 phonemes, while other languages may have fewer or different sounds. According to Avery & Ehrlich “Learners often substitute unfamiliar English sounds with the closest equivalent from their native language, which leads to pronunciation errors”⁹. For instance, Russian and Uzbek speakers may struggle with the /θ/ and /ð/ sounds, replacing them with /s/ and /z/, respectively.

2. Stress and Intonation Patterns.

English is a stress-timed language, whereas many other languages, such as Uzbek and Russian, are syllable-timed. As a result, learners may struggle with word stress, sentence stress, and intonation. “Misplaced stress can alter the meaning of words and sentences, making communication less effective”¹⁰.

⁴ Celce-Murcia, M., Brinton, D. M., & Goodwin, J. M. (2010). *Teaching Pronunciation: A Course Book and Reference Guide*. Cambridge University Press.

⁵ Gilbert, J. B. (2008). *Teaching Pronunciation: Using the Prosody Pyramid*. Cambridge University Press

⁶ Brown, G. (2011). *Listening to Spoken English*. Longman.

⁷ Roach, P. (2009). *English Phonetics and Phonology: A Practical Course*. Cambridge University Press.

⁸ Underhill, A. (2005). *Sound Foundations: Learning and Teaching Pronunciation*. Macmillan Education.

⁹ Derwing, T. M., & Munro, M. J. (2015). *Pronunciation Fundamentals: Evidence-Based Perspectives for L2 Teaching and Research*. John Benjamins Publishing.

¹⁰ Avery, P., & Ehrlich, S. (1992). *Teaching American English Pronunciation*. Oxford University Press.

¹⁰ Kenworthy, J. (1987). *Teaching English Pronunciation*. Longman.

3. Connected Speech and Weak Forms.

In natural speech, native English speakers use connected speech, linking words together and reducing unstressed syllables. Learners often struggle with understanding and producing these features, making their speech sound unnatural. Brown emphasizes that “teaching pronunciation should not only focus on individual sounds but also on the rhythm and flow of speech”¹¹.

Causes of Pronunciation Difficulties.

Several factors contribute to learners' pronunciation difficulties:

First Language Influence: Learners tend to transfer phonetic features from their mother tongue, leading to interference errors.

Age Factor: Younger learners are more likely to acquire native-like pronunciation than adults.

Lack of Exposure: Limited interaction with native speakers and authentic English materials can hinder pronunciation development.

Teaching Methods: Traditional grammar-based teaching often neglects pronunciation, resulting in fossilized pronunciation errors.

4. Pedagogical Strategies for Teaching Pronunciation

To address pronunciation difficulties, educators should implement various strategies:

4.1. Phonetic Training.

Teaching students the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) can help them recognize and produce English sounds accurately¹².

4.2. Minimal Pairs Practice.

Practicing minimal pairs (e.g., ship/sheep, bat/bad) helps learners distinguish between similar sounds and improve accuracy.

4.3. Listening and Imitation.

Exposure to native speech through audio materials, shadowing exercises, and pronunciation drills enhances learners' speech patterns.

4.4. Stress and Intonation Drills

Teaching rhythm and intonation through sentence stress activities and contrastive analysis improves learners' spoken fluency.

4.5. Technology-Assisted Learning.

Using speech recognition software and pronunciation apps, such as ELSA Speak or Forvo, can provide learners with real-time feedback.

Results and Discussion.

The findings revealed several significant pronunciation challenges among ESL learners:

- ****Vowel and Consonant Confusions**:** Many learners struggled with vowel length distinctions (e.g., ‘ship’ vs. ‘sheep’), as well as certain consonant sounds that do not exist in their native languages.
- ****Stress and Intonation Errors**:** Learners frequently misplaced stress in polysyllabic words, affecting their intelligibility. For example, saying ‘REcord’ instead of ‘reCORD’ altered the intended meaning.

¹¹ Brown, A. (1990). *Pronunciation Models*. Singapore University Press.

¹² Celce-Murcia, M., Brinton, D. M., & Goodwin, J. M. (2010). *Teaching Pronunciation: A Course Book and Reference Guide*. Cambridge University Press.

- **Connected Speech Issues:** Features like linking ('go on' → /goowan/), elision ('next day' → /nekst dei/), and assimilation ('good boy' → /gub bɔɪ/) were particularly challenging for learners, making their speech sound unnatural.

The effectiveness of various pronunciation teaching strategies was also examined. **Phonetic training**, involving the use of the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA), helped learners visualize and produce challenging sounds more accurately. **Minimal pairs practice** improved learners' ability to distinguish similar sounds, while **listening and repetition exercises** enhanced their speech fluency. Furthermore, **technology-assisted learning**, such as speech recognition software and interactive pronunciation apps, provided instant feedback and accelerated improvement. Derwing and Munro highlight that "Technology-assisted learning significantly enhances pronunciation acquisition."

Overall, the study found that a combination of explicit pronunciation instruction, interactive practice, and technological support yields the best results in improving learners' pronunciation.

Conclusion. Pronunciation remains a complex yet essential component of English language learning. The difficulties learners face stem from various factors, including native language interference, irregular English phonology, and challenges with stress and intonation. However, targeted pronunciation training, such as phonetic instruction, minimal pairs exercises, and the integration of technology, can significantly improve learners' pronunciation accuracy and overall communicative competence.

As future research directions, further studies could explore the long-term impact of different teaching methodologies on pronunciation development. Additionally, the role of artificial intelligence in personalized pronunciation training remains an exciting area for investigation. Ultimately, the goal of pronunciation teaching should be to help learners develop clear, intelligible speech that enables them to communicate effectively in English. Pronunciation difficulties in English learning are influenced by phonemic differences, stress patterns, and lack of exposure to native-like speech. Effective teaching strategies, including phonetic training, minimal pairs practice, and technology-assisted learning, can significantly enhance learners' pronunciation skills. As Celce-Murcia et al. state, "Pronunciation should not be an afterthought in language teaching but an integral part of communicative competence."¹³

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