

ESL Learners' Pronunciations Skills: Its Role in Communication Skills Development

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated ESL learners' pronunciation skills and their contribution to communication development, based on the perceptions of secondary English teachers. It examined students' abilities in vowel and consonant accuracy, stress and intonation, and overall clarity and intelligibility. Using a correlational design, data were collected from 50 public secondary English teachers in Isabela through a structured questionnaire. Descriptive and inferential statistics, including t-test and ANOVA, were applied. Findings showed that students demonstrated high pronunciation competence across all areas, supporting effective oral communication. Additionally, no significant differences were found in teachers' perceptions when grouped by demographic variables. Overall, results indicate consistent teacher perceptions and highlight the need for continued pronunciation instruction to further improve learners' communicative competence.

INTRODUCTION

Pronunciation is a crucial element of communicative competence in English language teaching worldwide. It is essential for effective oral communication and plays a significant role in language acquisition. Despite its importance, pronunciation often receives less emphasis in language teaching, particularly in EFL settings, as highlighted by a study conducted in Vietnam (Nguyen et al., 2021).

Pronunciation, the bedrock of effective spoken communication, is not just about accurately articulating sounds; it is the intricate tapestry woven from phonemes, syllables, stress, and intonation, enabling individuals to express themselves clearly, comprehend spoken language, and navigate diverse social contexts with confidence (Derwing & Munro, 2009; Nassaji & Fotos, 2011). However, research reveals that many students grapple with pronunciation difficulties, hindering their communication abilities and impacting their overall learning experiences (Goh, 2013). Addressing these challenges effectively requires a thorough understanding of the key concepts that shape students' pronunciation skills and the implementation of impactful pedagogical strategies.

Central to this understanding is the fundamental building blocks of pronunciation: phonemes, the smallest sound units capable of differentiating words (Ladefoged & Johnson, 2015); syllables, the fundamental units of words comprising vowels and surrounding consonants (Lass, 2014); and stress, the emphasis placed on specific syllables within a word or phrase (Hayes, 2009). Mastering these components forms the foundation for accurate and fluent speech.

However, pronunciation goes beyond mere mechanics. Mastering the place of articulation (the location within the vocal tract where consonant sounds are produced) and manner of articulation (how the vocal tract is constricted to produce different sounds) is crucial for accurate sound production (Clark et al., 2018). Similarly, understanding voicing (the vibration of the vocal cords) allows students to differentiate between voiced and voiceless sounds (Clark et al., 2018).

The concept of mora, a unit roughly corresponding to the time it takes to pronounce a single syllable, helps students analyze the rhythmic structure of words and phrases (Hayes, 2009). Understanding foot structure and the organization of syllables around stressed syllables further enhances fluency and allows students to predict pronunciation patterns (Hayes, 2009).

Pronunciation is not static; it is a dynamic system influenced by factors like phonological processes, which are systematic sound changes that modify phonemes in specific contexts (Kenstowicz, 2014). Recognizing these processes helps students understand natural variations in pronunciation and avoid fossilized errors.

Furthermore, neutralization refers to situations where phonological distinctions are obscured, highlighting the complexity of pronunciation and the need for flexibility in application (Kenstowicz, 2014).

Understanding variation is crucial, as pronunciation can differ systematically across geographical regions, social groups, and individuals (Wardhaugh, 2011). Recognizing and appreciating this diversity fosters tolerance and understanding of diverse dialects and pronunciation styles.

A student's native language plays a significant role in their pronunciation development, with L1 influence referring to the inherent impact of their native language sound system on their acquisition of a second language's pronunciation (Derwing & Munro, 2009). This influence can manifest in sound production and comprehension challenges, requiring tailored instruction to address individual needs (Caliboso, et.al., 2025)

Pronunciation anxiety, the fear of being judged on pronunciation, can further impede students' progress (MacIntyre et al., 2014). Addressing this anxiety through a supportive and encouraging learning environment is crucial for fostering confidence and fluency.

Research highlights several effective pedagogical strategies to promote pronunciation development: Explicit instruction, providing clear instruction on the sound system of the target language, including phonemes, allophones, stress patterns, and intonation, equips students with the necessary knowledge base; meaningful practice, engaging in minimal pair drills, role-playing, and oral presentations allows students to apply their knowledge in context and develop fluency; feedback and correction, providing immediate and specific feedback on pronunciation errors helps students effectively identify and correct their mistakes; technology integration, utilizing audio recording software, speech recognition programs, and online resources can provide personalized feedback and enhance learning experiences. Collaboration and peer interaction, engaging students in collaborative activities allows them to practice pronunciation with peers, fostering confidence and a supportive learning environment; cultural awareness, integrating cultural aspects into pronunciation instruction helps students understand the nuances of communication and develop a deeper appreciation for the language.

Educators can create effective learning environments that address individual needs and foster clear communication by understanding the key concepts that shape students' pronunciation skills. This journey begins with acknowledging the intricate interplay of phonemes, syllables, stress, intonation, and the various influences that shape pronunciation. By equipping students with the tools and confidence to navigate this dynamic landscape, we empower them

to embrace new learning opportunities, navigate diverse social contexts, and contribute their voices meaningfully to the world around them.

METHODOLOGY

Correlational research design involves a systematic investigation of variable relationships (Miksza, 2018). Correlational research design is a non-experimental quantitative method that identifies and analyzes relationships between two or more variables without manipulation, often used for descriptive or predictive purposes.

Data were collected to profile teacher respondents, including their age, gender, civil status, teaching position, years of teaching experience, and highest educational attainment. The study assessed students' pronunciation skills.

Furthermore, correlational analyses were then used to explore the relationships and differences in these variables based on teachers' profiles. The study is conducted in Isabela, Philippines, with 50 public secondary English teachers.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1. Respondents' Demographic Profile (n = 50)

Profile Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Age	19-30 (Early Adulthood)	16	32.0
	31-40 (Middle Adulthood)	30	60.0
	51 and above (Late Adulthood)	4	8.0
Sex	Male	18	36.0
	Female	32	64.0
Civil Status	Single	20	40.0
	Married	30	60.0
Teaching Position	Teacher I	6	12.0
	Teacher II	18	36.0
	Teacher III	23	46.0
	Master Teacher I	3	6.0
Years of Teaching Experience	1-5 years	10	20.0
	6-10 years	22	44.0
	11-15 years	13	26.0
	15 years and above	5	10.0

Highest Educational Attainment	Master's Degree (with units)	20	40.0
	Master's Degree Graduate	26	52.0
	Doctorate Degree Graduate	4	8.0

Table 1 presents the demographic profile of the respondents in terms of age, sex, civil status, teaching position, years of teaching experience, and highest educational attainment. Most of the respondents (60%) belong to the 31–40 age group, indicating that the majority are in their middle adulthood, while 32% are in early adulthood and only 8% are in late adulthood. This suggests that the respondents are relatively mature and professionally experienced, which may influence their teaching perspectives and practices, particularly in English phonology instruction.

In terms of sex, the respondents are predominantly female (64%), compared to male respondents (36%). This finding aligns with the observation of Tašner and Čeplak (2017) that teaching is often perceived as a profession associated with female roles and favorable work–life balance. Such a distribution reflects broader trends in the teaching profession and may affect classroom interaction and instructional approaches. Regarding civil status, the majority of the respondents are married (60%), while 40% are single. Married teachers may bring varied life experiences that can influence their attitudes toward teaching and student engagement. As to teaching position, most respondents hold higher ranks, with Teacher III comprising the largest group (46%), followed by Teacher II (36%). This indicates that many respondents have advanced professionally, suggesting considerable experience and competence in instructional practice.

In terms of teaching experience, 44% of the respondents have been teaching for 6–10 years, while 36% have more than 10 years of experience. This level of experience supports the claim of Muhinat (2022) that years of teaching are related to instructional approaches and teaching strategies. Finally, most respondents possess advanced academic qualifications, with 52% holding a Master's degree and 40% having earned Master's degree units, while a small percentage (8%) have completed a Doctorate degree. The high level of educational attainment suggests that the respondents are well-equipped with theoretical knowledge and pedagogical skills, which may positively influence their effectiveness in teaching English phonology.

Table 2. Level of student pronunciation skills in English as perceived by teachers in terms of accuracy of vowel and consonant sounds

Indicators	Mean	Interpretation
1. Students accurately produce vowel sounds in different words.	4.10	Always
2. Students can distinguish and produce different consonant sounds.	4.00	Always
3. Students' pronunciation of vowels is consistent in various contexts.	4.05	Always
4. Students demonstrate an understanding of minimal pairs in pronunciation.	4.20	Always
5. Students correctly articulate consonants in various word positions.	3.85	Always
6. Students accurately produce vowel length and quality.	4.10	Always
7. Students pronounce consonant clusters correctly.	4.00	Always
8. Students avoid common pronunciation errors in vowel sounds.	4.05	Always
9. Students accurately use consonants in different phonetic environments.	4.00	Always
10. Students show improvement in vowel and consonant pronunciation over time.	4.15	Always
Overall Mean	4.05	Always

Table 2 shows that teachers perceive student pronunciation skills to be high, with an overall mean of 4.05. The highest mean score (4.20) is for "Students demonstrate an understanding of minimal pairs in pronunciation," while the lowest mean score (3.85) is for "Students correctly articulate consonants in various word positions." Students generally have good pronunciation skills, particularly in distinguishing minimal pairs, which is crucial for clear communication.

Table 3. Level of student pronunciation skills in English as perceived by teachers in terms of accuracy of use of stress and intonation patterns

Indicators	Mean	Interpretation
1. Students correctly apply stress in multisyllabic words.	4.00	Always
2. Students use intonation patterns effectively in sentences.	4.10	Always

3. Students can identify and produce rising and falling intonation.	4.05	Always
4. Students accurately place the stress in compound words.	4.20	Always
5. Students use stress for emphasis correctly in spoken English.	3.90	Always
6. Students correctly use intonation patterns in questions.	4.00	Always
7. Students demonstrate an understanding of stress in connected speech.	4.10	Always
8. Intonation is used effectively in expressing different emotions.	4.05	Always
9. Students accurately produce stress patterns in phrasal verbs.	4.00	Always
10. Students adjust intonation appropriately in different contexts.	4.15	Always
Overall Mean	4.06	Always

Table 3 indicates that teachers perceive students to use stress and intonation patterns accurately, with an overall mean of 4.06. The highest mean score (4.20) is for "Students accurately place the stress in compound words," while the lowest mean score (3.90) is for "Students use stress for emphasis correctly in spoken English." Students' effective use of stress and intonation patterns suggests that they can convey meaning accurately and expressively in spoken English.

Table 4. Level of student pronunciation skills in English as perceived by teachers in terms of clarity and intelligibility in spoken English

Indicators	Mean	Interpretation
1. Students speak clearly and are easily understood.	4.10	Always
2. Students' spoken English is intelligible in various contexts.	4.05	Always
3. Students can modify their speech for clarity when misunderstood.	4.20	Always
4. Pronunciation does not impede communication for students.	3.85	Always
5. Students maintain clarity of speech in more extended conversations.	4.00	Always

6. Students articulate words clearly in different speaking situations.	4.05	Always
7. Clarity of speech is maintained despite varying speech rates.	4.10	Always
8. Students use appropriate pausing and phrasing for clarity.	4.00	Always
9. Students' spoken English is comprehensible to native and non-native speakers.	4.10	Always
10. Students consistently demonstrate clarity in pronunciation.	4.15	Always
Overall Mean	4.06	Always

Table 4 presents that teachers perceive student clarity and intelligibility in spoken English to be high, with an overall mean of 4.06. The highest mean score (4.20) is for "Students can modify their speech for clarity when misunderstood," while the lowest mean score (3.85) is for "Pronunciation does not impede communication for students." High levels of clarity and intelligibility in student speech suggest that students are capable of effective oral communication in various contexts.

Table 5. Test of Difference in the Level of Student Pronunciation Skills as Perceived by Teachers When Grouped According to Teachers' Profile Variables

Teacher Profile Variable	Statistical Test Used	Decision on Ho	Interpretation
Age	One-Way ANOVA	Failed to Reject Ho	Not Significant
Sex	Independent Samples t-test	Failed to Reject Ho	Not Significant
Civil Status	Independent Samples t-test	Failed to Reject Ho	Not Significant
Teaching Position	One-Way ANOVA	Failed to Reject Ho	Not Significant
Years of Teaching Experience	One-Way ANOVA	Failed to Reject Ho	Not Significant
Highest Educational Attainment	One-Way ANOVA	Failed to Reject Ho	Not Significant

Level of significance: $\alpha = 0.05$

Table 5 presents the statistical treatment used to determine whether there is a significant difference in the level of student pronunciation skills as perceived by teachers when grouped according to their profile variables. Independent samples t-tests were applied for profile variables with two categories, while one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used for variables with three or more groups.

The results indicate that the null hypothesis was not rejected across all teacher profile variables. This implies that there is no statistically significant difference in teachers' perceptions of students' pronunciation skills when grouped according to age, sex, civil status, teaching position, years of teaching experience, and highest educational attainment.

The finding is consistent with the descriptive results shown in Tables 2, 3, and 4, where teachers—regardless of demographic and professional background—consistently rated students' pronunciation skills as high across all dimensions. This suggests that teachers share a common perception of students' pronunciation competence, independent of their individual characteristics.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study concludes that the majority of teacher respondents are middle-aged, predominantly female, married, and hold mid- to senior-level teaching positions with considerable experience and high educational attainment. Findings further reveal that students demonstrate strong pronunciation skills, particularly in vowel and consonant accuracy, stress and intonation patterns, and overall clarity and intelligibility, as evidenced by consistently high mean scores (4.20). These results indicate that learners are capable of producing clear and understandable speech and effectively applying pronunciation rules in communication.

In light of these findings, it is recommended that schools implement targeted instructional programs to further enhance students' pronunciation skills, especially in areas such as minimal pairs and compound word stress. Additionally, regular assessment of both teacher perceptions and student pronunciation performance should be conducted to monitor progress, identify areas for improvement, and ensure the continuous development of effective phonology teaching practices.

FURTHER STUDY

Future research is recommended to explore how the integration of Artificial Intelligence-based technology in pronunciation learning can more effectively enhance ESL learners' communication skills across various learning contexts.

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