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Teachers' Perceptions of Pronunciation Difficulties among Young EFL Learners: First-Language Influence and Instructional Implications in Sudanese Basic Schools

By

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Abstract

Pronunciation is an essential component of oral communicative competence, yet it remains a challenging aspect of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning, particularly in educational contexts where exposure to spoken English is limited. This study investigates teachers' perceptions of pronunciation difficulties experienced by pupils in Sudanese basic schools, with particular reference to Ghabeesh Locality, West Kordofan. It examines perceived first-language phonological influence, identifies problematic English sound contrasts, and explores instructional implications for pronunciation teaching. The study employed a descriptive analytical research design. Data were collected through a structured questionnaire administered to English language teachers. The methodology reports a sample of 50 teachers selected through simple random sampling from a population of 200. Questionnaire responses were analysed using SPSS version 16, primarily through frequencies and percentages. The findings indicate that pronunciation difficulties are widely perceived among the surveyed teachers. Approximately 98% agreed that pupils experience difficulties pronouncing English words, while 74% identified difficulties involving /ʃ/ and /tʃ/. Furthermore, 70% agreed that first-language interference negatively affects pronunciation, and 58% reported that English words are difficult for pupils to pronounce. The findings also identify concerns relating to the /p/ and /b/ contrast, silent letters, English sound-spelling relationships, and teachers' preparation for pronunciation instruction. The study argues that pronunciation teaching should receive systematic attention through phonological awareness, sound discrimination, articulatory explanation, guided production, and communicative practice. It proposes a practical, learner-centred framework for pronunciation instruction that can be adapted to different EFL environments. The study contributes to pronunciation pedagogy by presenting context-specific evidence from Sudanese basic education and highlighting implications for teacher education, curriculum development, and further empirical research.

Keywords: English pronunciation, EFL learners, first-language transfer, phonological awareness, basic education, Sudan, pronunciation pedagogy, intelligibility.

1. Introduction

Pronunciation is a fundamental dimension of spoken language competence. It enables speakers to communicate their intended messages and assists listeners in interpreting spoken language accurately. In English language education, pronunciation extends beyond the articulation of individual sounds to include stress, rhythm, intonation, timing, and the coordination of speech features

within meaningful communication. For learners of English as a Foreign Language, pronunciation may present considerable challenges because the phonological system of English differs from that of their first language. Such differences can influence how learners perceive, classify, and produce unfamiliar sounds. These challenges may become more pronounced when learners have limited opportunities to hear and use English outside the



classroom. In Sudanese basic schools, English is learned in multilingual educational environments in which Arabic and other local languages may influence learners' linguistic experiences. Learners may consequently draw on familiar sound patterns when attempting to produce English words. This process, commonly discussed as first-language transfer, may affect the production and perception of consonants, vowels, and unfamiliar sound combinations. The original study conducted in Ghabeesh Locality, West Kordofan, identified recurring concerns regarding pupils' pronunciation of English words. These concerns included difficulties with selected consonant sounds, first-language influence, and the relationship between English spelling and pronunciation. Although pronunciation is widely recognized as an important aspect of language learning, it may receive limited attention in classrooms where instructional priorities concentrate mainly on grammar, reading, writing, and vocabulary. This creates a need to examine reported pronunciation difficulties and identify instructional approaches that can support learners' oral development.

The present article revisits the original investigation from an applied linguistics perspective. It examines teachers' reported experiences, discusses their implications for pronunciation pedagogy, and proposes a practical instructional framework for basic school EFL classrooms.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Despite the importance of pronunciation for oral communication, systematic pronunciation instruction may be insufficient in some EFL classrooms. Pupils may encounter difficulties producing unfamiliar English sounds, distinguishing similar phonemes, and interpreting the relationship between written forms and spoken forms. The original study identified concerns involving English consonants, first-language influence, silent letters, and pronunciation instruction. These challenges may affect learners' intelligibility, classroom participation, and confidence in spoken English. The central problem addressed in this study is the reported persistence of pronunciation difficulties among basic school pupils and the need for systematic instructional approaches that respond to these difficulties.

1.2 Research Questions

The study addresses the following questions:

1. What pronunciation difficulties are reported among basic school pupils learning English?
2. To what extent do teachers perceive first-language phonological transfer as a factor affecting pupils' pronunciation?
3. What instructional techniques may facilitate pronunciation teaching and learning?
4. What implications do the findings have for teacher preparation and pronunciation curriculum development?

1.3 Objectives of the Study

The study aims to:

1. Identify pronunciation difficulties reported among basic school pupils.

2. Examine teachers' perceptions of first-language phonological influence.
3. Explore instructional techniques that may facilitate pronunciation learning.
4. Highlight the importance of phonetics and phonology in English teacher preparation.

1.4 Significance of the Study

The study has potential significance for learners, teachers, teacher educators, curriculum developers, and researchers. It highlights the importance of sound discrimination, articulation, listening, and speaking practice. For learners, For teacher educators, it underlines the relevance of practical phonetics and phonology in preparing teachers to identify and address pronunciation difficulties. It provides a context-specific basis for considering systematic pronunciation activities in basic education. It identifies areas requiring further investigation through direct assessment of learners' pronunciation and classroom-based intervention studies for researchers.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Nature of English Pronunciation

Pronunciation refers to the production and organization of speech sounds through which spoken language conveys meaning. Morley (1994) emphasizes that pronunciation involves both individual sounds and broader features of spoken language, including stress, rhythm, and intonation.

Pronunciation can be examined through two complementary dimensions:

- **Segmental features:** Individual consonants and vowels.
- **Suprasegmental features:** Stress, rhythm, intonation, and timing.

Both dimensions contribute to intelligibility. Consequently, pronunciation instruction should not be restricted to isolated repetition of sounds. It should connect sound production with words, phrases, sentences, and meaningful communication. Levis (2005) discusses the movement in pronunciation pedagogy away from an exclusive emphasis on native-like accuracy toward intelligibility and communicative effectiveness. This perspective is relevant to EFL contexts in which learners may have limited access to native-speaker models but still require clear and comprehensible spoken English.

2.2 First-Language Phonological Transfer

First-language transfer refers to the influence of previously acquired linguistic patterns on the learning and use of another language. Bhela (1999) discusses the influence of native-language structures on second-language production and learning. In pronunciation, transfer may occur when learners interpret unfamiliar sounds through categories already established in their first language. The original study identifies differences between Arabic and English phonological systems as a possible source of pronunciation difficulties among Sudanese pupils. One illustrative example is the English contrast between /p/ and /b/. English distinguishes these sounds phonemically, whereas /p/ is absent as a

separate phoneme in many Arabic varieties. Learners whose first-language sound categories do not include /p/ may therefore require additional perceptual and articulatory practice.

Examples of the contrast include:

/p/	/b/
pin	bin
park	bark
pat	bat
cap	cab

These examples illustrate a possible instructional focus. They should not be interpreted as evidence that every Sudanese learner experiences the same difficulty. The educational objective is not to eliminate learners' linguistic identities or accents. Rather, pronunciation instruction should help learners recognize and produce sound distinctions that contribute to intelligible communication.

2.3 English Consonant Difficulties

The original research identifies /ʃ/ and /tʃ/ among the sounds perceived by teachers as difficult for pupils.

These sounds involve different articulatory processes:

- /ʃ/ is a voiceless postalveolar fricative, as in *ship*.
- /tʃ/ is a voiceless postalveolar affricate, as in *chair*.

The distinction involves the manner in which airflow is produced. In /ʃ/, air passes continuously through a narrow constriction, whereas /tʃ/ begins with a closure followed by a fricative release.

Other English sounds that may warrant attention in particular EFL contexts include:

- /θ/ as in *think*.
- /ð/ as in *this*.
- /ŋ/ as in *sing*.
- /v/ as in *very*.
- /p/ and /b/ as in *pen* and *Ben*.

These examples may inform diagnostic activities, but the actual target sounds should be selected according to learners' demonstrated needs.

Roach (2009) provides articulatory descriptions that can guide teachers in explaining place and manner of articulation. For example, /θ/ and /ð/ are dental fricatives involving a tongue position near or between the teeth. Explicit demonstration may help learners become aware of an unfamiliar articulatory movement.

2.4 English Orthography and Pronunciation

The relationship between English spelling and pronunciation is not consistently represented through one-to-one letter-sound correspondences. This feature can challenge learners who expect written letters to correspond regularly to spoken sounds.

Examples include:

Word	Pronunciation feature
know	Initial silent letter k
debt	Silent letter b
phone	ph represents /f/
ship	sh represents /ʃ/
church	ch represents /tʃ/
city	c represents /s/

Learners therefore need opportunities to develop phonological awareness alongside written language knowledge. An effective instructional sequence may begin with listening to a word, identifying its sounds, practising its pronunciation, and subsequently connecting the spoken form with its written representation. This approach is consistent with the integration of listening and speaking in Nation and Newton (2009).

2.5 Age, Exposure, and Motivation

Pronunciation development may be influenced by age, language exposure, motivation, and opportunities for practice. Lenneberg (1967) proposed the critical period hypothesis, suggesting that biological factors influence language acquisition across the lifespan. However, age should not be interpreted as an absolute barrier to pronunciation improvement. Birdsong (1999) presents research examining the relationship between age and second-language acquisition, demonstrating the need for a more nuanced understanding of age-related outcomes. Learners at different ages can benefit from explicit instruction, regular practice, and meaningful opportunities to use English. Motivation and confidence may also influence participation in pronunciation activities. Dörnyei (2005) emphasizes the dynamic nature of language-learning motivation and the role of educational experiences in supporting it. A supportive classroom environment is therefore important. Learners should be encouraged to experiment with unfamiliar sounds without fear of ridicule or embarrassment.

2.6 The Role of the Teacher in Pronunciation Development

Teachers play a central role in developing learners' pronunciation awareness. Their responsibilities include:

1. Modelling target sounds clearly.
2. Helping learners distinguish similar sounds.
3. Explaining articulatory movements.
4. Providing constructive corrective feedback.
5. Integrating listening and speaking activities.
6. Monitoring learners' progress through formative assessment.

Pronunciation instruction should prioritize intelligibility and communicative effectiveness rather than requiring every learner to imitate a particular native-speaker accent. Underhill (1994) emphasizes learner awareness and practical pronunciation learning.

Similarly, Harmer (2001) highlights the importance of meaningful language use in classroom instruction. These perspectives suggest that pronunciation teaching should combine explicit attention to sounds with communicative opportunities.

2.7 Research Gap

The literature establishes the importance of pronunciation, first-language influence, and instructional support in EFL learning. However, the original study provides a context-specific account of teachers' perceptions in Ghabeesh Locality, West Kordofan. Its contribution lies in documenting reported pronunciation concerns within a Sudanese basic education setting and relating them to practical instructional implications. At the same time, the reliance on teacher questionnaire responses identifies a need for further research involving direct pupil pronunciation assessment, classroom observation, and intervention-based evaluation.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The study employed a descriptive analytical research design to investigate teachers' perceptions of pronunciation difficulties and associated instructional factors. This design was appropriate for collecting and summarizing respondents' views through a structured questionnaire. It was not designed to establish causal relationships between first-language transfer, instructional practices, and pupils' actual pronunciation performance.

3.2 Study Context

The study was conducted in Ghabeesh Locality, West Kordofan, Sudan, during the period identified in the original research as 2021-2022.

3.3 Population and Sample

The methodology reports a population of 200 English language teachers and a sample of 50 teachers selected through simple random sampling. The sample represents 25% of the stated population.

3.4 Data Collection Instrument

Data were collected through a structured questionnaire consisting of 15 items. Responses were organized into three categories:

- Agree
- Disagree
- Not sure

The questionnaire addressed pronunciation difficulties, first-language influence, instructional techniques, teacher preparation, and the relationship between pronunciation and communication.

3.5 Validity and Reliability

The original study reports that three specialists in English language reviewed the questionnaire.

It also reports a reliability coefficient of 0.85 and a validity value of 0.92. These values should be retained in the final submission only after verification of the original calculations, procedures, and supporting documentation. The manuscript should identify the

specific reliability procedure used and explain how validity was established.

3.6 Data Analysis

The study reports the use of SPSS version 16 for data analysis. Frequencies and percentages were used to summarize questionnaire responses. Chi-square statistics were also mentioned in the original abstract. Because the full inferential test specifications and raw data require verification, the present article emphasizes the descriptive findings that can be traced to the reported questionnaire tables.

4. Results

4.1 Teachers' Perceptions of Pronunciation Difficulties

The questionnaire results indicate that pronunciation difficulties were widely perceived among the surveyed teachers.

Table 1. Teachers' perceptions of pupils' pronunciation difficulties

Questionnaire statement	Agree	Disagree	Not sure
Pupils experience difficulties pronouncing English words	98%	0%	2%
Pupils experience difficulties with /f/ and /tʃ/	74%	22%	4%
First-language interference negatively affects pronunciation	70%	20%	10%
Pupils find English words difficult to pronounce	58%	40%	2%

Source: Original study, questionnaire findings.

The highest reported agreement, 98%, concerned the general existence of pronunciation difficulties among pupils.

Furthermore, 74% of respondents identified difficulties involving /f/ and /tʃ/. This finding suggests that these sounds deserve attention in pronunciation teaching within the investigated context.

The reported agreement of 70% concerning first-language interference indicates that teachers perceive cross-linguistic influence as an important consideration in pronunciation instruction.

4.2 Perceived Influence of First-Language Transfer

The finding that 70% of respondents agreed that first-language interference negatively affects pronunciation suggests that teachers recognize a possible relationship between learners' existing phonological systems and their production of English sounds.

This perception is consistent with the theoretical discussion of phonological transfer.

However, the questionnaire did not directly measure pupils' speech production. Therefore, the result should be interpreted as evidence of teachers' perceptions rather than direct experimental confirmation of phonological transfer.

4.3 Pronunciation and Communicative Effectiveness

The study identifies pronunciation as an important element of English communication.

The reported difficulties suggest the need to support learners in recognizing and producing relevant sound distinctions and using them in spoken interaction. Pronunciation instruction should therefore be integrated with listening comprehension, vocabulary development, and oral communication rather than isolated from the broader language curriculum.

4.4 Instructional Techniques and Teacher Preparation

The original study identifies several areas requiring instructional attention:

- Engaging pronunciation activities.
- Teacher training in consonant production.
- Greater attention to listening and speaking.
- Peer interaction and guided practice.
- Regular checking of the pronunciation of newly introduced words.

These findings highlight the importance of both teacher knowledge and structured classroom practice.

5. Discussion

The findings provide several implications for English language teaching in basic education. First, the high proportion of teachers reporting pronunciation difficulties indicates that oral language development requires systematic attention. Pronunciation should be incorporated into routine classroom instruction rather than treated as an occasional supplementary activity. Second, the reported difficulties involving /f/ and /tʃ/ highlight the value of connecting phonetic explanations with practical articulation exercises. Learners need opportunities to hear the distinction, identify the articulatory differences, and practise the sounds in meaningful words and sentences. Third, the perceived influence of first-language interference supports the potential value of contrastive pronunciation activities. Teachers may help learners notice differences between familiar and unfamiliar sound patterns through minimal pairs, listening discrimination, and guided production. Nevertheless, the present findings do not establish that first-language transfer is the sole or direct cause of the reported difficulties. Other factors, including limited exposure, instructional practices, and the irregular relationship between English spelling and pronunciation, may also be relevant. Fourth, the reported concerns involving English spelling and pronunciation suggest that phonological awareness should be developed alongside literacy. Learners should understand that written forms do not always provide sufficient information for accurate pronunciation. Finally, the findings emphasize the importance of teacher preparation. Effective pronunciation instruction requires practical knowledge of articulation, voicing, place of articulation, manner of articulation, and formative assessment. The implications extend beyond the immediate research setting. The instructional principles discussed here may be adapted to other EFL environments, provided that

teachers identify the actual linguistic and educational needs of their learners.

6. Proposed Learner-Centred Pronunciation Instructional Framework

Based on the findings and relevant pronunciation pedagogy, this article proposes a five-stage framework for pronunciation instruction. The framework is a pedagogical proposal, not an intervention whose effectiveness has been established by the present study.

Stage 1: Listening and Sound Recognition

The teacher introduces a target sound through familiar words, teacher modelling, or audio recordings. Learners listen and determine whether two words contain the same or different sounds.

Examples:

- pin / bin
- ship / chip
- fan / van

The purpose is to develop awareness of sound contrasts before expecting accurate production.

Stage 2: Articulatory Awareness

The teacher demonstrates the position and movement of the lips, tongue, teeth, and vocal folds.

For /p/, learners observe lip closure followed by the release of air.

For /b/, learners observe a similar lip closure accompanied by vocal-fold vibration.

Simple demonstrations, diagrams, and mirrors may help learners become aware of the relevant articulatory movements.

Stage 3: Controlled Production

Learners practise target sounds through repetition, minimal pairs, short phrases, and guided reading.

Example:

The boy has a blue pen.

The teacher provides immediate, constructive feedback while maintaining a supportive classroom environment.

Stage 4: Communicative Practice

Learners use target sounds in meaningful activities, including:

- Pair conversations.
- Information-gap tasks.
- Picture descriptions.
- Short dialogues.
- Classroom pronunciation games.

This stage connects sound accuracy with communication and encourages learners to use pronunciation skills beyond isolated words.

Stage 5: Assessment and Reflection

Teachers monitor progress through short oral tasks and individual feedback.

Assessment may focus on:

1. Recognition of target sound contrasts.
2. Clarity of sound production.
3. Intelligibility in words and sentences.
4. Participation in spoken interaction.
5. Improvement over time.

Suggested Six-Week Classroom Sequence

Week	Focus	Suggested activity
1	/p/ and /b/	Minimal-pair listening and production
2	/f/ and /tʃ/	Sound identification and articulation
3	/θ/ and /ð/	Guided pronunciation practice
4	Silent letters	Listening and spelling comparison
5	Word stress	Syllable clapping and repetition
6	Connected speech	Short dialogues and peer feedback

The sequence should be adjusted according to learners' ages, proficiency levels, curriculum requirements, and demonstrated pronunciation needs.

7 Recommendations

7.1 Recommendations for English Language Teachers

1. Integrate pronunciation practice into regular English lessons.
2. Give sufficient attention to listening and speaking from the early stages of learning.
3. Use minimal pairs to develop awareness of relevant sound contrasts.
4. Explain articulation through simple demonstrations.
5. Encourage pair and small-group pronunciation practice.
6. Provide constructive feedback that supports learner confidence.
7. Teach pronunciation alongside vocabulary and communicative activities.
8. Monitor individual progress rather than assuming that all pupils experience identical difficulties.

7.2 Recommendations for Educational Administrators

1. Organize professional development workshops in practical phonetics and phonology.
2. Provide pronunciation teaching resources and audio materials.
3. Support formative assessment of oral communication.
4. Encourage the development of locally relevant pronunciation materials.
5. Provide opportunities for teachers to share effective classroom practices.

7.3 Recommendations for Future Researchers

Future research should:

1. Record and analyse pupils' actual pronunciation performance.
2. Compare pre-instruction and post-instruction results.
3. Investigate the effectiveness of minimal-pair training.
4. Examine pronunciation development across different school levels.
5. Explore learners' attitudes and confidence in speaking English.
6. Use larger samples and multiple research instruments.
7. Compare teacher perceptions with direct learner assessment.
8. Investigate the relationship between instructional practices and measurable pronunciation outcomes.

8. Limitations of the Study

The findings should be interpreted in light of several limitations. First, the study was conducted in one locality, which limits the extent to which its findings can be generalized to other educational settings. Second, the main research instrument was a teacher questionnaire. Consequently, the results represent teachers' perceptions rather than direct measurements of pupils' pronunciation. Third, the study did not report an experimental intervention demonstrating that a particular teaching technique caused improvement. Fourth, inconsistencies in the original sample description and some statistical reporting require verification before journal submission. Fifth, the available findings do not provide sufficient evidence to determine the relative contribution of first-language transfer, instructional practices, exposure, and other possible factors. These limitations identify opportunities for more comprehensive research and do not remove the value of documenting the reported educational concerns.

9. Conclusion

This study investigated teachers' perceptions of pronunciation difficulties among basic school pupils learning English in Ghabeesh Locality, West Kordofan, Sudan. The findings indicate that teachers perceive substantial pronunciation challenges, particularly in the pronunciation of English words and selected consonant sounds. First-language phonological influence, English spelling-pronunciation relationships, and teacher preparation emerge as important areas for instructional attention. The study emphasizes that pronunciation should be treated as an integral component of communicative language teaching. Effective instruction requires opportunities to hear, identify, produce, and use sounds in meaningful contexts. The proposed learner-centred framework offers a practical foundation for developing pronunciation activities that can be adapted to diverse EFL classrooms. Its effectiveness should be examined through future classroom-based research involving direct assessment of learners' pronunciation. Ultimately, pronunciation education should not be directed toward eliminating learners' accents. Its central purpose should be to help learners communicate clearly, confidently, and effectively.

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