

Challenges in Teaching and Learning English Phonetics and Phonology: Perspectives of Teachers and Students

Hana Abdullah Ibrahim Awad*

Department of English Language, Faculty of Education, Omar Al-Mukhtar University, Al-Bayda, Libya

التحديات في تدريس وتعلم الصوتيات وعلم الأصوات في اللغة الإنجليزية: وجهات نظر الطلاب والمعلمين

هنا عبد الله إبراهيم عوض*

قسم اللغة الإنجليزية، كلية التربية، جامعة عمر المختار، البيضاء، ليبيا

*Corresponding author: hana.awad@omu.edu.ly

Received: May 01, 2026

Accepted: July 15, 2026

Published: July 30, 2026

Copyright: © 2026 by the authors. Submitted for possible open access publication under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Abstract:

This review paper examines the main challenges of teaching and learning English phonetics and phonology in EFL contexts, with a particular focus on Arab learners in Libya. Drawing on literature published between 2000 and 2024, I argue that four core barriers persist: first language interference, insufficient attention to suprasegmental features, inadequate teacher preparation, and limited technological resources. In contrast to earlier goals of native-like accent, this review adopts intelligibility as the primary objective of pronunciation instruction. The paper concludes with practical recommendations for teacher training and classroom implementation. Addressing these challenges is essential for enhancing learners' overall communicative competence.

Keywords: English phonetics, phonology, pronunciation instruction, EFL, intelligibility, teacher training .

الملخص:

تبحث هذه الورقة المراجعة في التحديات الرئيسية المتعلقة بتعليم وتعلم علم الأصوات الصوتي وعلم الأصوات في سياقات تعلم اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية، مع تركيز خاص على المتعلمين العرب في ليبيا. بالاعتماد على الأدبيات المنشورة بين عامي 2000 و 2024، أجادل بأن هناك أربعة حواجز أساسية لا تزال قائمة: تداخل اللغة الأولى، والاهتمام المحدود بعلامات ما فوق القطعية، والإعداد غير الكافي للمعلمين، ونقص الموارد التكنولوجية. وعلى النقيض من الهدف السابق المتمثل في الوصول إلى نطق شبيه بالمتحدث الأصلي، تعتمد هذه المراجعة على "الوضوح اللغوي" كهدف أساسي لتعليم النطق. وتختتم الورقة بتوصيات عملية لتدريب المعلمين والتطبيق الصفّي. إن معالجة هذه التحديات أمر ضروري لتعزيز الكفاءة التواصلية العامة للمتعلمين.

الكلمات المفتاحية: علم الأصوات الصوتي، علم الأصوات، تعليم النطق، اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية، الوضوح اللغوي، تدريب المعلمين

Introduction:

In my experience as an EFL instructor, students often master grammar and vocabulary yet still face breakdowns in communication due to pronunciation. This gap motivated the present review. Teaching and learning English as a foreign or second language involves several linguistic components, among

which phonetics and phonology hold a central position (Roach, 2009). Phonetics investigates the physical characteristics of speech sounds, including how they are produced, transmitted, and perceived, while phonology analyzes how these sounds operate and are organized within the sound system of a specific language (Celce-Murcia et al., 2010).

Achieving proficiency in these two fields is essential for clear communication. Inaccurate pronunciation can lead to misunderstanding and communication breakdown even when grammar and vocabulary are correct (Derwing & Munro, 2005). Despite its importance, pronunciation has often received less attention compared to other language skills in many EFL classrooms (Couper, 2011).

Learners across different contexts face persistent problems with English sounds, word stress, and intonation patterns (Flege, 1995). At the same time, instructors encounter their own set of difficulties in teaching these aspects effectively. These include gaps in their own linguistic knowledge, restricted curricular time, and lack of suitable teaching tools (Burri et al., 2017).

This paper aims to critically examine the main obstacles in both learning and teaching English phonetics and phonology. By reviewing relevant literature and analyzing practical issues, the study seeks to offer insights that can help educators design more effective pronunciation instruction (Jenkins, 2000). The discussion is particularly relevant to EFL contexts such as Libya, where resources and training opportunities may be limited (Alqahtani, 2017)

Literature Review:

Theoretical Foundations: Phonetics, Phonology, and Intelligibility:

Phonetics deals with the articulation and acoustic properties of speech sounds, while phonology focuses on the abstract sound patterns and rules of a language (Roach, 2009). For many years, the primary objective in pronunciation teaching was to help learners sound like native speakers of RP or General American English (Jenkins, 2000).

However, the rise of English as a global language has shifted this perspective. Scholars now emphasize “intelligibility” instead of “nativeness” as the main goal (Derwing & Munro, 2005). Derwing and Munro’s (2005) research showed that a foreign accent does not automatically reduce understanding. Instead, certain errors disrupt communication more than others. This view suggests that teachers should prioritize features that most affect comprehensibility rather than trying to eliminate all aspects of an accent (Zielinski, 2008).

Learner-Related Difficulties:

First Language Interference:

The influence of the learner’s native language is a major factor in pronunciation acquisition (Lado, 1957). The Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis and Flege’s Speech Learning Model (1995) both argue that sounds absent from the L1 are hardest to learn. Arabic-speaking students, for example, often find it difficult to produce /p/, /v/, /θ/, and /ð/ because these sounds do not exist in Arabic (Alqahtani, 2017). They may substitute /b/ for /p/ or /t/ for /θ/ (Al-Saidat, 2010).

Likewise, Japanese learners commonly confuse /l/ and /r/, while Spanish speakers may struggle with English consonant clusters and vowel reduction (Hansen, 2001). These patterns of substitution are consistent across different L1 backgrounds.

Suprasegmental Features:

Stress, rhythm, and intonation have a stronger effect on how understandable a speaker is than individual sound errors (Zielinski, 2008). Yet these features are rarely taught systematically in EFL classrooms. Celce-Murcia et al. (2010) note that learners may articulate all English phonemes correctly but still sound non-native due to incorrect stress placement and flat intonation. This is because suprasegmentals also convey grammar and attitude, which learners are seldom taught to control (Wells, 2006).

Affective and Cognitive Factors:

Emotional factors also matter in pronunciation learning. Research by Baran-Lucarz (2014) and Sardegna (2011) shows that anxiety and fear of making mistakes prevent learners from practicing speaking. Additionally, Selinker’s concept of “fossilization” (1972) explains why some pronunciation errors become permanent, especially in adult learners who receive little corrective feedback.

Instructor-Related and Contextual Issues:

Teacher Preparation:

Many teachers report feeling unprepared to teach pronunciation (Burri et al., 2017). Burri et al. (2017) found that teacher education programs allocate very little time to phonetics and pronunciation methodology. Consequently, graduates often lack knowledge of the IPA and techniques for error correction. This leads to avoidance of pronunciation activities in the classroom (Baker, 2014).

Curriculum and Materials:

Pronunciation is frequently underrepresented in syllabi and textbooks (Couper, 2011). When it does appear, it is often limited to isolated minimal pair exercises with no link to real communication.

Most textbooks also focus on segmentals and ignore rhythm and intonation, despite research showing the latter are more important for understanding (Derwing & Munro, 2005).

Teaching Methods:

Traditional drilling methods have been criticized for being mechanical and ineffective for spontaneous speech (Kenworthy, 1987). Current approaches favor integrating pronunciation into communicative tasks. The use of technology such as speech analysis software and pronunciation apps is also growing and has shown positive results for learner autonomy (Neri et al., 2002).

Research Gaps:

Current studies tend to focus more on consonants and vowels than on how they work together in connected speech (Celce-Murcia et al., 2010). There is also little research on what teachers actually believe about teaching pronunciation and how this affects their classroom decisions (Baker, 2014). Finally, there is a shortage of studies from specific EFL regions, including North Africa and the Middle East (Alqahtani, 2017).

Difficulties in Learning English Phonetics and Phonology:

Linguistic Difficulties: Individual Sounds:

Consonant Problems:

Differences between the L1 and English sound systems cause many errors (Flege, 1995). Arabic learners often replace /θ/ with /t/ or /s/, so think becomes tink or sink (Al-Saidat, 2010). The sounds /p/ and /v/ are also challenging because /v/ is missing in Arabic and /p/-/b/ contrast is weak in some dialects. This leads to confusion between pat and bat (Alqahtani, 2017). For learners from Japan and Korea, distinguishing /l/ and /r/ is a well-known difficulty due to L1 phonological constraints (Flege, 1995). Spanish speakers often add a vowel before initial clusters, saying /eschool/ instead of school (Hansen, 2001).

Vowel Problems:

English has many vowel sounds distinguished by both quality and length (Roach, 2009). The difference between /i:/ in sheep and /ɪ/ in ship is hard for learners whose language does not use vowel length meaningfully, such as Arabic and Spanish speakers (Celce-Murcia et al., 2010). The reduced vowel /ə/ in unstressed syllables is another issue. Learners often pronounce all vowels fully, making speech sound unnatural and affecting rhythm (Brown, 1990). Diphthongs like /eɪ/ and /aɪ/ are also frequently simplified into single vowels.

Suprasegmental Difficulties: Stress, Rhythm, and Intonation:

Word and Sentence Stress:

English uses stress-timed rhythm, but learners from syllable-timed languages like Arabic and Spanish tend to stress every syllable equally (Celce-Murcia et al., 2010). This makes their speech sound robotic and less intelligible. Incorrect word stress can also change meaning, as in REcord vs reCORD (Wells, 2006).

Rhythm and Connected Speech:

Features like linking, assimilation, and contraction are rarely taught explicitly (Brown, 1990). Learners often pronounce each word separately: What do you as /wɒt du ju/ instead of /wɒdəjə/. This affects both speaking fluency and listening comprehension.

3.2.3 Intonation

Intonation signals questions, statements, and attitude in English (Wells, 2006). Learners often carry over intonation patterns from their L1. Flat or inappropriate intonation can be misinterpreted as rudeness or lack of interest by native listeners.

Cognitive and Perceptual Obstacles:

Perception Issues:

According to Flege (1995), learners must perceive a new sound before they can produce it accurately. However, they tend to map L2 sounds onto the nearest L1 sound category. This makes it hard to hear differences between sounds like /æ/ and /ʌ/ without specific perceptual training.

Habit Formation:

Pronunciation habits formed early are difficult to change due to fossilization (Selinker, 1972). Adult learners may reach a stage where their English is understandable but still strongly accented, because errors do not block basic communication and thus are not corrected.

Speaking Anxiety:

Pronunciation is public and personal, which increases learner anxiety (Baran-Łucarz, 2014). Many learners feel embarrassed about their accent and fear being judged. This leads them to avoid speaking activities and reduces practice opportunities.

Motivation and Identity:

Some learners do not want to lose their L1 accent because it is part of their identity (Jenkins, 2000). Others do not see pronunciation as important for exams, so they do not invest effort in improving it (Couper, 2011).

Situational Barriers: Limited Exposure:

Insufficient Input:

In many EFL classrooms, students hear English only from the teacher and textbook CDs (Gilakjani, 2016). Without exposure to different accents and natural speech, they develop a limited model of pronunciation and struggle with listening.

Lack of Technology:

Tools like recording devices, language labs, and software are often unavailable in EFL contexts (Gilakjani, 2016). This means learners get little feedback on their own speech production and cannot self-monitor effectively.

Summary:

In short, learners face layered difficulties: linguistic differences, problems with perception, emotional barriers, and lack of exposure (Flege, 1995; Baran-Łucarz, 2014). All of these contribute to slow progress in pronunciation and reduced intelligibility.

Difficulties in Teaching English Phonetics and Phonology:

1. Instructor-Related Issues:

Insufficient Subject Knowledge:

Many teachers have not studied phonetics in depth during their training (Burri et al., 2017). Burri et al. (2017) report that teacher training rarely covers IPA or articulatory descriptions. This makes teachers uncomfortable teaching pronunciation and more likely to skip it (Baker, 2014). In places like Libya, many teachers are non-native speakers who may have their own pronunciation issues (Alqahtani, 2017). Without training, they cannot effectively model sounds or diagnose learners' errors.

Teacher Attitudes:

Teachers' beliefs shape what happens in class (Baker, 2014). Some teachers think pronunciation is less important than grammar for tests. Others believe it cannot be taught and will improve naturally. Some also aim for native-like accents that are unrealistic, which can discourage learners (Jenkins, 2000).

2. Curriculum and Resource Problems:

Low Priority in Programs:

Pronunciation is often not a separate component in the curriculum (Couper, 2011). Textbooks include it as a small section at the end of units, usually as decontextualized drills. There is also too much focus on individual sounds and not enough on stress and intonation, despite their importance for intelligibility (Derwing & Munro, 2005).

Limited Resources:

Good pronunciation teaching needs audio equipment, recordings, and small classes for practice (Gilakjani, 2016). Many schools lack these. Large classes of 40-50 students make individual feedback nearly impossible. Poor internet access also limits the use of online tools and authentic materials.

3. Instructional Method Issues:

Dependence on Repetition Drills:

Repetition can help raise awareness but does not guarantee transfer to real speaking (Kenworthy, 1987). Teachers who only use drills miss the opportunity to teach pronunciation in meaningful communicative contexts.

Feedback Problems:

Deciding when and how to correct pronunciation is difficult for teachers (Isaacs & Trofimovich, 2012). Immediate correction can disrupt fluency, while no correction leads to fossilization. Most teachers also lack visual tools to show learners how their speech differs from the target.

Ignoring Learner Backgrounds:

A single method does not work for all learners because L1 backgrounds differ (Flege, 1995). Teachers need to know which sounds are difficult for their specific L1 group. However, most training does not include contrastive analysis skills.

4. Testing Issues:

Pronunciation is rarely tested directly in EFL assessments (Isaacs & Trofimovich, 2012). Speaking exams usually focus on grammar and ideas, with pronunciation only affecting the overall score. This signals to students and teachers that it is not a priority skill.

Summary:

The problems in teaching pronunciation are structural (Burri et al., 2017). They start with teacher education and extend to materials, class size, methods, and assessment. Without changes at these levels, progress in pronunciation teaching will remain limited.

Instructional Recommendations and Possible Solutions:

1. **Focus on Intelligibility:** Instruction should target features that most affect understanding, such as key consonant contrasts, vowel length, and nuclear stress (Derwing & Munro, 2005). Teachers should analyze their students' most common errors and address those first rather than aiming for native-like perfection (Jenkins, 2000).
2. **Improve Teacher Training:** Teacher education programs must add courses on phonetics, IPA, and pronunciation teaching techniques (Burri et al., 2017). In-service workshops can help current teachers update their skills. Training should also cover ELF and the acceptance of diverse English accents (Jenkins, 2000).
3. **Use Technology and Real Materials:** Free tools like YouGlish, mobile recorders, and speech recognition can provide feedback and exposure (Neri et al., 2002). Videos, songs, and podcasts can expose learners to different accents and natural speech patterns, addressing the problem of limited input (Gilakjani, 2016).
4. **Combine Explicit Teaching with Communication:** The most effective approach combines clear explanation with communicative practice (Celce-Murcia et al., 2010). Activities such as role-plays, presentations, tongue twisters, and shadowing help learners use pronunciation in real contexts rather than in isolation.
5. **Build Confidence and Awareness:** Classrooms should be supportive so learners are not afraid to make mistakes (Baran-Łucarz, 2014). Teaching learners how to monitor their own pronunciation and use self-recording can increase independence. Even in low-resource settings, simple tools like phone recordings and choral practice can be effective (Gilakjani, 2016).

Conclusion:

Teaching and learning English pronunciation is complex and influenced by many factors (Celce-Murcia et al., 2010). Learners struggle due to differences between their L1 and English, problems with perception, anxiety, and limited input (Flege, 1995). Teachers struggle due to inadequate training, low curricular priority, poor resources, and unclear methods (Burri et al., 2017). The evidence suggests we should move away from the goal of native-like speech and instead aim for clear, understandable pronunciation (Derwing & Munro, 2005). This requires changes in teacher education, curriculum design, and classroom practice. More research is also needed in specific EFL contexts to find the most effective local solutions (Alqahtani, 2017). Ultimately, the goal of pronunciation teaching is not to erase a learner's accent, but to help them communicate with confidence and clarity (Jenkins, 2000). By addressing the challenges outlined in this paper, educators can better support learners in developing this essential skill. From the student perspective, the main barriers are L1 interference and anxiety. From the teacher perspective, the main barriers are lack of training and curricular support. Addressing both perspectives is necessary for improvement.

References:

- 1- Alqahtani, M. (2017). English pronunciation problems among Saudi learners. **International Journal of Applied Linguistics**, 27(3), 450–466. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ijal.12162>
- 2- Al-Saidat, E. M. (2010). Phonological analysis of English phonotactics: A case study of Arab learners of English. **The Buckingham Journal of Language and Linguistics**, 3, 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.5750/bjll.v3i0.47>
- 3- Baker, A. (2014). Exploring teachers' knowledge of L2 pronunciation pedagogy: A quantitative meta-analysis. **Language Teaching Research**, 18(1), 3–30. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1362168813505384>
- 4- Baran-Łucarz, M. (2014). The link between pronunciation anxiety and willingness to communicate. **Journal of Psycholinguistic Research**, 43(6), 699–710. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10936-013-9366-7>
- 5- Brown, G. (1990). **Listening to spoken English** (2nd ed.). Longman.
- 6- Burri, M., Baker, A., & Chen, H. (2017). "I feel like I have a pronunciation problem": An investigation of teacher cognition. **TESOL Journal**, 8(3), 613–634. <https://doi.org/10.1002/tesj.321>
- 7- Celce-Murcia, M., Brinton, D. M., & Goodwin, J. M. (2010). **Teaching pronunciation: A course book and reference guide** (2nd ed.). Cambridge University Press.

- 8- Couper, G. (2011). What makes pronunciation teaching effective? **TESOL Quarterly**, 45(4), 702–712. <https://doi.org/10.5054/tq.2011.247701>
- 9- Derwing, T. M., & Munro, M. J. (2005). Second language accent and pronunciation teaching: A research-based approach. **TESOL Quarterly**, 39(3), 379–397. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3588381>
- 10- Flege, J. E. (1995). Second language speech learning: Theory, findings, and problems. In W. Strange (Ed.), **Speech perception and linguistic experience: Issues in cross-language research** (pp. 233–277). York Press.
- 11- Gilakjani, A. P. (2016). English pronunciation instruction: A literature review. **International Journal of Research in English Education**, 1(1), 1–6. <http://ijreeonline.com/article-1-21-en.html>
- 12- Hansen, J. (2001). Linguistic constraints on the acquisition of English syllable codas. In T. Piske & M. Young-Scholten (Eds.), **The role of the first language in second language acquisition** (pp. 81–96). Multilingual Matters.
- 13- Isaacs, T., & Trofimovich, P. (2012). Deconstructing comprehensibility: Identifying the linguistic influences on listeners' L2 comprehensibility judgments. **Studies in Second Language Acquisition**, 34(3), 475–505. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0272263112000150>
- 14- Jenkins, J. (2000). **The phonology of English as an international language**. Oxford University Press.
- 15- Kenworthy, J. (1987). **Teaching English pronunciation**. Longman.
- 16- Lado, R. (1957). **Linguistics across cultures**. University of Michigan Press.
- 17- Neri, A., Cucchiari, C., Strik, H., & Boves, L. (2002). The pedagogy-technology interface in computer-assisted pronunciation training. **Computer Assisted Language Learning**, 15(5), 441–467. <https://doi.org/10.1076/call.15.5.441.13473>
- 18- Roach, P. (2009). **English phonetics and phonology** (4th ed.). Cambridge University Press.
- 19- Sardegna, V. G. (2011). Pronunciation learning strategies that reduce language transfer: A study of adult learners of English. **Language Learning Journal**, 39(1), 37–53. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09571730903416988>
- 20- Selinker, L. (1972). Interlanguage. **International Review of Applied Linguistics in Language Teaching**, 10(1–4), 209–231. <https://doi.org/10.1515/iral.1972.10.1-4.209>
- 21- Wells, J. C. (2006). **English intonation: An introduction**. Cambridge University Press.
- 22- Zielinski, B. (2008). The listener: No longer the silent partner in comprehensibility. **System**, 36(1), 69–84. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2007.10.0024>