

# Teaching English Phonetics and Pronunciation to ESL Students and Non-English Speaking Residents

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## Abstract

Pronunciation teaching is evolving as a result of an emerging trend in foreign language teaching to promote communicative and holistic approaches. Specifically, for the students coming from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds with a different life experience, pronunciation methodology and phonology have been recently adopted to improve the English pronunciation. This research study highlights the significance of English Pronunciation for English as a Second Language (ESL) students in India. This study also highlights the potential of teaching native English pronunciation and importance of English phonetics and phonology by finding out the factors that generally affects the pronunciation of ESL students with different mother tongues. In this research, a sample experiment has been conducted on school students. The student sample information is obtained via Selective Sampling Technique. From the resultant observations, this study suggests different communicative approaches, which are suitable for the ESL learners to enhance their English language pronunciation

**Keywords:** English phonetics, English pronunciation, English as a Second Language, Selective Sampling Technique.

## 1. Introduction

Learning a new language is a continuous and long-term process. It consumes more effort as well as time. Each language poses a unique set of characteristics, which learners have to be aware of when learning a new language [1]. The English language is widespread as a

primary international communicative language for global students [2]. Students study in countries where English is considered as the first language, while some students study in countries where English is considered as a foreign language. English as a Second Language (ESL) is defined by Horwitz [3] for learning English in English-speaking country. The term ESL has been primarily used to refer international non-English speaking students learning English language. Language experts also believe that ESL not only encompasses international students, but also the Non-English Speaking Residents.

In India, the most commonly adopted foreign/second language is English. The English language has grown in potentially in recent years, so there is an increasing need for effective language instruction. Since language plays an intertwined role in our day-to-day lives, the diverse and dominion feature of English language has become the foundation for the rapid development of English language learning and teaching in recent years [4]. Language learning is generally assessed based on the speaking ability as speaking satisfies the fundamental requirement of using a new language. On contrary, in India, while teaching English language, schools and other academia are more focused on teaching the writing skills rather than speaking skills. Even if the teachers attempt to teach the speaking skills, they are more focused on vocabulary and grammar [5]. There is always a negligence among teachers to train the ESL students on English pronunciation. This negligence occurs due to the unwillingness, lack-of-knowledge and less qualification of language teachers in terms of English pronunciation. Furthermore, this leads to less pedagogical focus on English phonetics and phonology in the course of study.

### **1.1 Influence of English in India**

India has more than 100 million English speaking people, within which most of them are considering English as a second language next to their mother tongue in schools. India also has a considerable population of Anglo-Indian people (> 2 lakh), who consider English as first language. On the other hand, Indians' English pronunciation vary according to their regional language and education medium (English/regional). This has led to a new English standard for Indians called "GIE – General Indian English". GIE defines the standard pronunciation patterns [6].

## **1.2 Significance of Phonetics based Communicative Approach**

An additional language like English is learnt by ESL students for communicative purpose. Moreover, the correct language pronunciation plays a crucial role in enabling a better communication with people. English language is composed of words from different foreign languages. Since there is no reliable and single sound for all the twenty-six English alphabets, there is no standard pronunciation pattern for English language, for e.g.: the letter ‘e’ has different pronunciation in the words ‘hen’ and ‘ate’. The pronunciation of a letter changes from word to word and in some cases, the same letter will have different sounds. As mentioned in the trailing example ‘ate’ the letter ‘e’ is not pronounced. A wrong pronunciation can also change the meaning of a word. These complexities make the pronunciation of English words difficult.

According to the Communicative Approach (CA), the primary objective to learn a second language is to improve the communication competence of ESL students. The term CA refers to the ability of a learner to learn not only the grammatical rule to frame a sentence but also to know the correct pronunciation and the use of right words. Even after training the ESL learners for several years, ESL and non-native English speakers face pronunciation difficulties in terms of intonation, tone, syllables and word stress. The primary objective of phonetics is fluency in speaking and pronunciation accuracy [7].

## **1.3 Factors that Influence English Pronunciation and Speaking Skills of ESL Students**

ESL students can speak English fluently if they can master the pace at which they speak/converse, the intensity which they speak, and the flow with which they speak. The three main factors that influence English language learning or becoming an excellent English speaker are stress, rhythm and intonation.

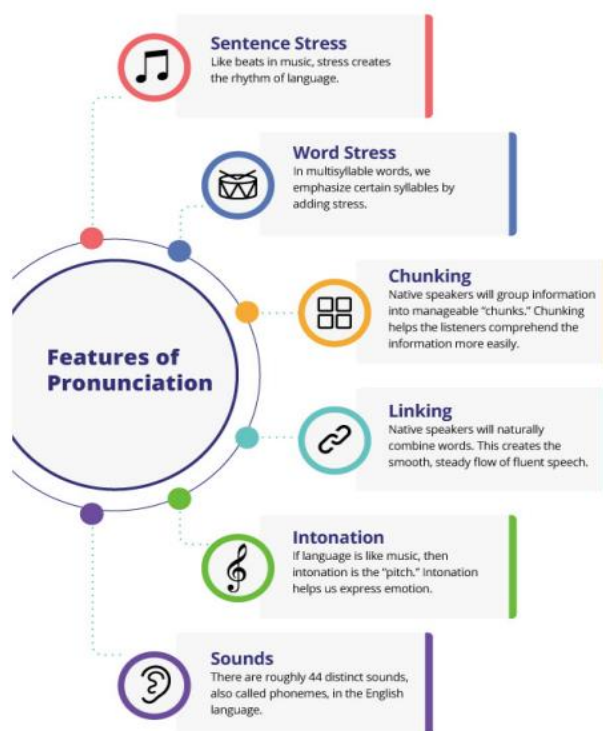
**Stress:** In phonology, stress means emphasizing specific syllables/words. In a sentence, the main words will be stressed for readers. For e.g.: In the word “Orange”, the first syllable is highly stressed. This will help in improving the pronunciation.

**Intonation:** Once the students have mastered reading a word, it is time to teach them how to actually say the word like what tone, loudness (intensity/pitch), and power of voice would most effectively convey the fundamental meaning of what is being said. Intonation

enhances communication and comprehension by allowing the listener to properly grasp what is essential to the speaker.

**Rhythm:** Rhythm is the rate at which one speaks - when one breathes, take rests, or introduces facial emotions or hand gestures. Rhythm consists of emphasizing certain syllables or different words, and introducing relay patterns in sentences that come together to produce a coherent idea. Each of these components depends on the other. Speaking rhythm distinguishes qualified English teachers from excellent English teachers in the ESL classroom.

According to Bridge Micro-credential course in Teaching English Pronunciation [20], the features mentioned in Figure 1 are mainly considered by Native-English speaking teachers.



**Figure 1.** Features of Pronunciation

## 2. Literature Review

In the perspective of Henry Sweet on English language [8], Phonetics serves as a basic foundation to all language related studies. Gaining the phonetics knowledge of phonetics is considered as the first essential step for foreign language learning, before learning the sounds, grammar and vocabulary should not be focused.

Recently, English language pronunciation is given the highest priority for ESL students. According to Baily and Hinofotis (1980) [9], based on certain standard, the area of weakness that most significantly hinders the communication of foreign and ESL students is pronunciation," instead of the use of vocabulary or grammar. A good pronunciation is usually determined by the categorization of 'raw sound' in speech. For the ESL students, it is highly difficult to adapt to the new speaking style of any foreign language with the domination of the speaking style of their mother tongue.

Recent research in teaching pronunciation has shown that effective phonetics teaching can help students master the speaking style. To discuss about the state-of-the-art research activity in the field of phonology, this literature study is limited to the articles published during the year 2019-2023.

**Table 1.** Related works

Year	Methodology	Experimental Group	Application	Outcome	Limitations
2019 [10]	Quasi-experimental design with 60 item word stress test	Iranian undergraduate English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students are divided as two groups: experimental group and control group	Iranian EFL students' pronunciation issues	The transcription of phonetics of EFL learners can highly help in the process of learning lexical stress.	A contrastive analysis of sentential stress has not been considered.
2022 [11]	Improvement of L2 oral proficiency through listening (A Different Modality)	Three-month experiment with ESL Students in Hong Kong	Introduced narrow listening concept	Students shown improvement in speaking fluency and pronunciation	Reading aloud and speaking a dialogue cannot be performed by students with different skillsets
2023[12]	Descriptive analysis by highlighting eight different factors	ESL undergraduate learners in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province	72 BS English students from three different colleges in Pakistan using a standardized phonetic dictionary and referring YouTube videos	Recommends to improve pronunciation of English words through listening	Developing a standardised English phonetic dictionary is highly difficult to solve word-related problems and practice
2023[13]	Explicit rime-based phonics method	EFL primary level children in Ethiopia	Twelve-week training-based initiative reading intervention	High magnitude of intervention effect	Small sample size and long intervention limits the effectiveness of the proposed

					method
2022[14]	Ultrasound imaging experiments	Indian ESL speakers (IS) and Korean EFL speakers (KS)	Apply L2 English phonological rules: place assimilation, palatalization, and coronal deletion	The resultant articulatory patterns imply that the phonological variation is common for ESL and EFL speakers	The effects of lexical frequency and other phonological contexts should be focused
2022[15]	A computer-assisted phonics-based intervention	Children in Grades 1-3 in English-medium government schools in India divided into intervention group and control group	Phonics based literacy instruction	The proposed method improved subskills of reading, specifically children's knowledge on phoneme	Literacy development is not continuously examined
2023[16]	Questionnaire based method to examine the instructors' attitude	Saudi female EFL student-teachers	Native-like English pronunciation to investigate their misconceptions about EFL.	Results indicate that both teachers and students have positive opinions toward native-like pronunciation	The study is restricted to Saudi female teachers, male teachers are not considered
2022[17]	L1 and L2 phonological awareness and decoding within Hindi and English	143 children in Grades 1 and 2	Cross-language transfer with Hindi PA even after controlling for English PA	This study emphasizes the role of both L1 and L2 PA in reading among Hindi-English bilinguals	Oral vocabulary is not explicitly assessed
2022[18]	Questionnaire and structured interview for teachers and students	First-year undergraduate non-native learners of English and teachers in Integral University, Lucknow	Focuses on teaching methodology, syllabus designing, and evaluation methods	The study categorizes the errors committed by students and suggests implementing a bridge course of English as a prerequisite	Lacks in addressing difficulties in pronouncing a word rather than letter sounds
2022[19]	Phonemic framework based analysis	English lecturers working at APWREIS	Evaluates all 44 English phonemes and tests word-stress patterns by collecting speech samples using voice recorder	To make teachers aware of their pronunciation errors and recommend specially tailored training programs	The small department-level sample size restricts the implementation

### 3. Proposed Research Experiment

#### 3.1 Speech Samples

The test material includes two different word lists: one to assess English phonemes and another to assess word-stress patterns. It also contains some sentences to assess the intonation patterns. Each test material is composed of ten words to phonetically read, a list of 5 words to stress-mark the syllables and at last few sentences to speak. The participants were provided with the test materials, as listed below.

Words such as birthday, nobility, floor, absentee, connoisseur, garage, spurious, earning, outfit, uncouth, slouching, scythe, and lounge are alternatively given.

Sentences with different intonation types such as falling intonation and rising intonation and with different word stress such as:

It's 'time to \go.

She 'sent him a \letter.

I'm 'going to 'visit my 'relatives on \Sunday.

'What did you \buy?

Do you 'visit them /often?

\Stop it! 'Sit \down.

#### 3.2 Sampling Technique

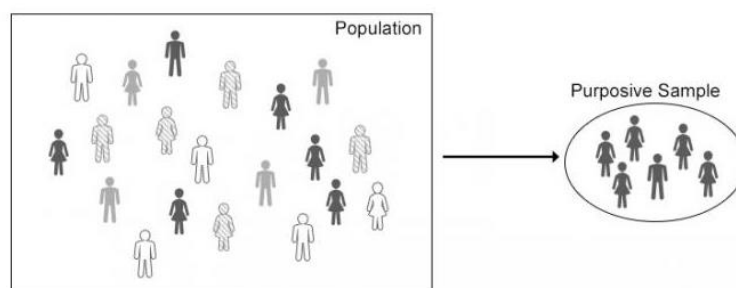
This research study uses selective sampling technique, which is a non-probability sampling approach.

Population Size:

An experimental group of Indian students has been selected. The population is then defined by selecting the students only in a particular geographical location; here, Ramanathan Chettiar Municipal Primary & Nursery School located in Karaikudi has been selected. The population is then clustered by selecting the students studying in Grade 3 to 5, who learn English as a Second Language.

### Selective/Purposive Sampling:

From the selected population size, the students who learn English as a Second Language with different mother tongue like Telugu, Malayalam, Kannada, Tamil, Gujarati, Hindi, Bengali are selected. The final sample size of this research study is,  $n=50$ .



**Figure 2.** Purposive (Selective) Sampling

### 3.3 Data Collection

The complete speech sample is recorded with a device known as a "Sony ICD-PX470 4GB Digital Voice Recorder". In order to minimize the delay and interruption in the recording process. Before recording the words and sentences, the student participants were given a formal instruction and overview on the prepared test material (worksheet).

### 3.4 Analysis of Speech Samples

Even though they study in English medium, these students struggle to fluently speak and pronounce English words. To deeply analyse the pronunciation issues and know about the particular factors that affect their English pronunciation, their voice was recorded using mobile phone recorder to track the speaker's word stress, intonation and rhythm.

### 3.5 Resultant Observation from the Analysis

**Table 2.** Resultant Observation

S. No	Influential Factors	Resultant Observation
1	Mother Tongue related Accent	Local languages have comparatively more alphabets wherein mostly no letters have silent sounds based on its usage, but in English, a few letters are not pronounced in a word. Many letters lose recognition while attempting a connected speech. This has a significant impact on their English pronunciation. However, their English letters and its sounds knowledge helps them to modify their pronunciation style provided some additional training.



2	Degree of Exposure	Students came from different states/districts of India. They all have different language and speaking style. Their level of exposure to the language they use may differ due to differences in local dialects, etc. However, almost everyone was exposed to the proper English language in school. As a result, there is an ease of speaking to / teaching the students about pronunciation.
3	Education	The children's earlier schooling let them understand the English sounds to some extent. Students were passionately interested in the learning process when the material was presented. Knowing the main aspect in rendering their English pronunciation via phonetics has highly assisted them in mastering few consonant sounds.
4	Age	In different situations, almost everyone was forced to speak English when they lack confidence. Due to word mispronunciation, the majority of them lack speaking fluency. This age was ideal to shift their perspective on different types of English sounds and use it in their daily interactions, as their determination to communicate in comprehensible English grows as they reach higher secondary school in few years.
5	Motivation	One of the primary reasons is to speak English, a language they have learned over years, fluently with comfort and proper pronunciation in order to improve their communication excellence.
6	Word Stress	While reading, children are not aware on which syllable to stress in a word or which word to stress in a sentence. Most of the languages other than English have some representations to increase or lower the sound but English only has word juncture.
7	Intonation	With the existing teaching pattern, children are so stressed on memorizing vocabulary while speaking the newly known language, which they will not speak at home. This has a significant effect on varying their English speaking style and sometimes it may lead to conveying a wrong meaning/emotion.
8	Speaking Rhythm	Some children are comfortable with reading a textbook based on punctuations and with proper intonation but when they are asked to speak, they lag the ability to split their sentences into manageable chunks to comprehend easily.

Based on these findings, the pronunciation of certain often mispronounced terms is analysed, and several strategies are offered to improve their pronunciation.

#### **4. Recommended Methods and Techniques for Teaching Pronunciation**

The strategies and activities mentioned below can be used when a teacher recognizes that pronunciation needs to be specifically focused.

There are generally two aspects to teach pronunciation. One is teaching skills that are receptive, while the other is teaching skills that are productive. When it comes to the listening to a pronunciation, students are urged to carefully listen to the changes and variances in the sounds and phonemes of words. The more the student listen to the language, the easier it is for the learner to convert information to productive abilities. Various activities and trainings are additionally required to improve the pronunciation skills.

## 4.1 Activities to introduce phonetics to students

**Connecting sounds and ideas:** Connecting distinct sounds with certain creatively linked ideas will help learners recall them effortlessly. For e.g.: For each vowel, use simple movements. This can help children link the vowels with the gestures and sounds they make.

**Sounds Drilling:** This is the main technique used to practice pronunciation in a classroom. It is also referred as an audio-lingual approach. In this method, teaching aids like pictures, toys can also be used to train the students. Sounds drilling is generally implemented in two ways: individual drilling and choral drilling. Individual drilling helps the teacher to analyse the teaching outcome of a particular student.

**Backward Chaining:** The instructor says the very last syllable, the student repeats, and then the teacher says it again, progressing backwards from the end of the word to the beginning. For e.g.: To teach the name 'penmanship' a teacher will pronounce the last syllable: -ship, and have the student repeat it. Then the teacher will repeat it with -man- attached before: -man-ship, after which all that remains is the first syllable: Pen-man-ship.

**Phonemic Chart:** It enables students to improve their pronunciation used while communicating with people outside the classroom. Teachers can first provide students with instructions to utilize the phonemic chart with 44 distinct sounds, for example. It is used while teaching new sounds as well as to correct previously learned sounds to students.

**Minimal Pairs training:** This training improves the pronunciation of students and helps them to detect changes in pronunciation of identical words. Teachers need to prepare various teaching aids and activities before providing instructions on minimal pairs to students. Activities such as identifying the proper sounds for the given words can also be presented. For instance, pat, put, pot, and pit.

**Voice Recording:** In order to closely monitor the progress of learners, their pronunciation and speaking should be recorded at a particular time interval. This will also help to correct the sound and letter stress of the students.

**Story Listening and Book Reading Activities:** Providing real-time listening and reading materials to learners to practice pronunciation will greatly assist them. Listening comprehension help students recognize words and different sounds in native accents and try to

mimic sounds. When it comes to reading exercises, children are encouraged to read aloud in order to correctly pronounce the words and get used to spellings and related sounds.

#### **4.2 Activities to Introduce Word Stress/Intonation/Rhythm to Students**

Activities for Pronouncing: Pronouncing and reading are two intertwined aspects. Homophones and homographs can help explain the connection between spelling and pronunciation.

Stretchable band based activity (Word Stress): A stretchable band will be given to the students, while speaking to practice the pronunciation patterns for the long and short syllables. This activity also enhances their human motor skills. For e.g.: While saying a stressed syllable the stretchable band should be stretched and the tension in the band will be gradually released and accordingly the syllables will be non-stressed.

Hear and feel activity (Intonation): For this activity, students must select an emotion that they intend to communicate. Give the students a few words to utter and urge them to talk as naturally as they can. The idea is for their peers to guess the sentiment they're attempting to convey. It should be remembered that in many circumstances, in English, word choice is not nearly as crucial as tone.

Writing activity (Pitch): To show sound lifts, pauses, coloured markers or chalk can be used while writing the sentence. This strategy aids in the creation of a visual indication for changes that may be difficult for the human ear to detect. In this activity, students will then be allowed to participate by assigning them a colour to use and allowing them to mark up the sentence. Like they can use different indicators such as dots for stressed syllables, curves for lengthy sounds, up arrow marking for pitch lift, and down arrow for pitch drop.

### **5. Conclusion**

Pronunciation teaching is a significantly challenging task. Pronunciation teaching has recently increased attention among teachers as a result of advances in teaching methods and new phonology approaches. ESL teachers have to concentrate more on the learner's needs and assess the learner's communicative skills before training them. This initial assessment will play a key role in designing a curriculum with suitable teaching approaches for improving English

pronunciation. This research study has extensively examined the factors that influence the English pronunciation in Indian students and suggested some teaching strategies and approaches to overcome the existing pronunciation issues and enhance the student competence in speaking English. This study has possibly attempted to address the existing challenges and recommended some possible teaching methodologies for Government schools. The learners can improve their English pronunciation with the proper application.

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