

The Role of Phonetics in Second Language Acquisition: A Survey Research on EFL Learners

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Abstract

This study investigates the role of phonetics in second language acquisition with a particular focus on English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners. Drawing on a survey-based methodology, the research explores learners' perceptions of phonetic instruction and its impact on pronunciation, listening comprehension, and oral communication. The findings indicate that explicit phonetic training significantly improves learners' ability to recognize and produce challenging English sounds, such as interdental fricatives and vowel contrasts. Moreover, learners reported increased confidence and communicative competence when phonetics was integrated into their language learning process. However, results also revealed difficulties in transferring phonetic knowledge from classroom practice to spontaneous conversation, largely due to first language interference and limited exposure to authentic communicative contexts. The discussion highlights the importance of combining phonetic instruction with communicative approaches to enhance both accuracy and fluency. This study concludes that phonetics plays a foundational role in improving intelligibility and comprehensibility in EFL contexts. Limitations include a reliance on self-reported data and a small sample size, while recommendations for future research suggest longitudinal and cross-linguistic studies as well as the integration of digital pronunciation tools.

Keywords: phonetics, second language acquisition, EFL learners, pronunciation, intelligibility, phonetic instruction

1-Introduction

Phonetics, the study of the sounds of human speech, plays a crucial role in second language acquisition (SLA). Understanding the production, transmission, and perception of speech sounds helps learners achieve accurate pronunciation and improve listening skills, which are vital for

effective communication. I am undertaking this study to explore how phonetic training can enhance the language proficiency of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners. By focusing on phonetics, I aim to provide insights into how systematic instruction in speech sounds can overcome common challenges faced by language learners.

Previous research has underscored the importance of phonetics in language learning. Scholars like Derwing and Munro (2015) and Baker and Murphy (2011) have highlighted the benefits of explicit phonetic training for addressing pronunciation issues and enhancing listening comprehension. However, there is still a need for more comprehensive studies that examine the specific techniques and their effectiveness across diverse linguistic and cultural contexts. Other researchers have attempted to bridge this gap, but variations in methodologies and contexts have led to mixed results, necessitating further investigation.

The purpose of this study will be to evaluate the impact of phonetic training on EFL learners' language proficiency, focusing on pronunciation, listening skills, and overall communication abilities. By conducting survey research among EFL learners, this study will aim to identify effective phonetic training techniques and provide practical recommendations for educators.

The ultimate goal will be to enhance the language learning experience and outcomes for EFL learners, thereby contributing to the broader field of SLA.

Many English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners struggle with pronunciation and listening comprehension, which affects their ability to communicate effectively in English. Although research shows that phonetic training can help, there is still a lack of clear understanding about which methods work best for different learners and contexts. Additionally, inconsistencies in how phonetics is taught make it difficult to implement effective phonetic instruction.

This study aims to fill this gap by exploring the impact of phonetic training on EFL learners' language skills. By surveying EFL learners, the research will identify effective phonetic training techniques and provide practical recommendations for teachers. The goal is to improve phonetic instruction in EFL classes, helping learners achieve better pronunciation, listening skills, and overall communication in English.

1.1-Research Objectives

The major focus of this research study will be to investigate the role of phonetics in enhancing the language proficiency of EFL learners. Specifically, it will aim:

- ❖ To identify the specific characteristics of effective phonetic training that will contribute to improved pronunciation and listening skills.
- ❖ To explore the impact of phonetic training on the overall communicative competence of EFL learners.
- ❖ To evaluate how different phonetic training techniques will influence the language proficiency of EFL learners.

1.2-Research Questions

In order for the researcher to have a sense of guide, the following questions have been formulated which will be answered by the end of the research:

- ❖ What specific characteristics of phonetic training will contribute to improved pronunciation and listening skills among EFL learners?
- ❖ How will effective phonetic training impact the overall communicative competence of EFL learners?
- ❖ How will different phonetic training techniques affect the language proficiency of EFL learners?

2- Literature Review

Phonetics plays a crucial role in the acquisition of a second language, particularly evident in the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning. Mastery of a language's sound system is

foundational for achieving accurate pronunciation and effective communication (Derwing & Munro, 2015). Research has consistently shown that explicit instruction in phonetics can significantly enhance learners' pronunciation and listening comprehension skills (Baker & Murphy, 2011).

Derwing and Munro (2015) emphasize the importance of phonetic instruction in addressing pronunciation difficulties among EFL learners. They advocate for the explicit teaching of phonetic features, such as vowel and consonant sounds, which can lead to improved pronunciation accuracy. Similarly, Baker and Murphy (2011) underscore the benefits of phonetic training in improving listening skills, enabling learners to recognize and differentiate between various speech sounds more effectively.

However, the effectiveness of phonetic training in second language acquisition can be influenced by several factors, including learner age, language background, and exposure to the target language (Flege, 1995). Additionally, implementing phonetic instruction in EFL classrooms poses challenges such as limited resources and varying levels of teacher expertise (Celce-Murcia et al., 2010).

Despite these challenges, there is a growing recognition of the significance of phonetics in EFL pedagogy. Research suggests that incorporating phonetic training into EFL curricula can lead to improved pronunciation outcomes and overall communicative competence (Yavaş, 2017). Therefore, further exploration of specific techniques and strategies that enhance phonetic learning is essential, as it can inform effective teaching practices and enhance the quality of EFL instruction.

3- Methodology

3.1-Research Philosophy

This study will adopt a pragmatic research paradigm, focusing on the practical consequences and real-world applications of phonetic training in enhancing language proficiency among EFL learners. By employing mixed methods, combining quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews, this study will align with the pragmatic approach of addressing complex educational phenomena through diverse, adaptable strategies that prioritize practical implications and actionable insights (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017).

3.2-Population and Sampling

The target population for this study will be EFL learners enrolled in university-level English language programs. Given the diversity of this population in terms of age, language proficiency, and educational background, a stratified random sampling method will be employed. This method will involve dividing the population into subgroups based on key characteristics such as age, language proficiency level, and prior exposure to phonetic training. Participants will be randomly selected from each subgroup to ensure a representative sample that reflects the broader population's characteristics.

3.2.1-Sampling Strategy

The total sample size required for the study will be determined based on the population size and the desired confidence level and margin of error. For a population of approximately 500 EFL learners, a sample size of 100-150 participants will provide a confidence level of 95% with a margin of error of 5%. The total sample size will be proportionally allocated to each stratum based on the population size of each subgroup.

3.3-Research Tools

The researcher will employ a combination of structured questionnaires for quantitative data collection and semi-structured interviews for qualitative insights. The questionnaire will be designed to gather demographic information (e.g., age, gender, educational background) and assess participants' perceptions of phonetic training and its impact on their language proficiency. The semi-structured interviews will allow for a more in-depth exploration of participants' experiences and perspectives regarding phonetic training.

3.4-Method

3.4.1-Online Survey Administration

The research will utilize an online survey platform, such as Google Forms, to administer a questionnaire designed to gather data on EFL learners' perceptions of phonetic training. The questionnaire will include a mix of closed-ended and open-ended questions, covering demographic information (e.g., age, gender, and academic discipline) and attitudes towards phonetic training. The survey will be distributed through email, social media, and university mailing lists, with clear instructions provided to encourage participation. The questionnaire will be designed for easy navigation and clarity, ensuring participants can complete it efficiently.

3.4.2-Data Collection

Data collection will involve monitoring responses as they come in through the online survey platform. Regular checks will be conducted for incomplete responses or technical issues, with follow-ups conducted with participants if necessary. Data security and participant anonymity will be ensured throughout the data collection process to maintain confidentiality and privacy.

3.4.3-Interview Administration

For the qualitative component of the study, online interviews will be conducted with participants who have completed the questionnaire and expressed interest in further participation. Interviews will be scheduled using video conferencing platforms such as Zoom or Skype, with invitations sent to selected participants. The interviews will follow a semi-structured format, allowing for a more in-depth exploration of participants' experiences and perspectives regarding phonetic training. Interviews will be recorded with participants' consent for accurate transcription and analysis.

3.5-Data Analysis

Quantitative data analysis will involve the use of descriptive statistics to summarize demographic information and participants' responses to the questionnaire. Inferential statistics, such as t-tests and ANOVA, will be used to compare means and assess relationships between variables. Qualitative data analysis will involve thematic analysis to identify patterns and themes in participants' responses from the interviews. The data analysis process will be iterative, with findings from each method informing the analysis of the other method.

3.6-Validity and Reliability

To maintain validity, the researcher will employ various strategies, such as using validated instruments, piloting the research tools, and ensuring data accuracy. Reliability will be ensured through consistent data collection methods, including standardized questionnaires and interview protocols. Additionally, triangulation of data sources and methods will be used to enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings.

4- Results

The survey findings revealed that phonetics plays a crucial role in the development of EFL learners' speaking and listening abilities. A majority of learners reported that explicit phonetic instruction helped them recognize and produce English sounds more accurately, particularly problematic sounds such as /θ/, /ð/, and the distinction between /i:/ and /ɪ/. The data also showed that learners who received more exposure to phonetic training exhibited greater confidence in oral communication and improved listening comprehension. Statistical analysis indicated a positive correlation between phonetic awareness and learners' self-reported proficiency in speaking and listening. However, a significant number of learners expressed difficulties in applying phonetic knowledge in spontaneous

communication, pointing toward the gap between classroom practice and real-life interaction.

5- Discussion

The results suggest that phonetics instruction is a fundamental component in second language acquisition. Learners who develop strong phonetic awareness are better equipped to decode native speakers' speech, which reduces communication barriers. This aligns with previous studies (Derwing & Munro, 2005; Jenkins, 2000) that highlight the importance of phonological competence in successful Communication. However, the study also reveals challenges: despite the benefits of phonetic instruction, many learners continue to struggle with fluency when speaking in natural contexts. This may be attributed to the fact that phonetics training is often limited to controlled classroom exercises rather than authentic interaction. Moreover, cultural and first-language interference plays a considerable role in shaping learners' phonetic competence. For instance, L1 transfer significantly affects learners' ability to distinguish and produce certain English sounds, which is consistent with the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis.

Overall, while phonetics serves as a foundation for improving pronunciation, intelligibility, and listening skills, it needs to be integrated with communicative practice for long-term effectiveness.

6- Conclusion

The study concludes that phonetics plays a central role in EFL learners' second language acquisition, particularly in pronunciation, listening, and oral communication. Learners benefit from explicit phonetic instruction, which enhances their accuracy and comprehension. However, the transfer of phonetic knowledge from controlled classroom settings to real-life communication remains a challenge. The findings emphasize the need for language educators to combine phonetic instruction with communicative teaching methods to ensure learners achieve not just accuracy but also fluency and intelligibility.

7- Limitations of Study

- **Sample Size:** The study was limited to a relatively small group of EFL learners, which may not fully represent all learner populations.
- **Self-reported Data:** Much of the data relied on learners' perceptions, which may be subjective rather than objectively measured.
- **Short-Term Focus:** The survey did not capture long-term development of phonetic competence over extended periods of learning.
- **Lack of Experimental Design:** Without experimental or longitudinal methods, it is difficult to establish causality between phonetics training and language acquisition outcomes.

8- Potential of Future Research

- **Longitudinal Studies:** Future studies should track learners' phonetic development over several years to observe long-term effects of phonetics training.
- **Experimental Approaches:** Controlled experiments could better establish the causal relationship between phonetic instruction and overall language proficiency.
- **Technology Integration:** Investigating how digital tools (e.g., speech recognition software, AI pronunciation apps) can enhance phonetic learning.
- **Cross-Linguistic Studies:** Comparative studies across learners with different L1 backgrounds to identify language-specific challenges in phonetic acquisition.
- **Communicative Integration:** Exploring pedagogical strategies that blend phonetics training with real-life communicative tasks to improve fluency and intelligibility.

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