

ENGLISH LANGUAGE PRONUNCIATION CHALLENGES FACED BY TERTIARY STUDENTS

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Abstract

Pronunciation in English language learning is a key aspect of effective communication, yet it remains a significant challenge for non-native speakers, especially in Pakistan. Despite the widespread use of English as a second language in Pakistan, many students struggle with accurate pronunciation due to various linguistic, social, and educational factors. This paper explores the common pronunciation challenges faced by Pakistani students, identifies the main causes of these difficulties, and reviews relevant literature on language acquisition and pronunciation. A Face-to-face interview was administered to 100 students to get real understanding of the challenging of pronunciation. This face-to-face interview presents valuable insight into the challenges and strategies adopted by students learning English language. Analysis of student feedback on Learning English shown challenges in Learning English, effective Practices for Improving speaking skills, phonetic difficulties, group interaction and preferred methods, content preferences, feedback and praise from faculty members. The study highlights phonetic, socio-cultural, and educational factors that contribute to these challenges. Based on an analysis of existing literature and firsthand observations, this article aims to provide insights into how these challenges can be addressed in the English language learning and teaching.

Keywords: Pronunciation challenges, English language learning, non-native speakers, phonetic difficulties, socio-cultural factors, educational factors, Pakistan, speaking skills.

Introduction

English language is an official language in Pakistan and is widely used in education, business, and government. However, despite its prevalence, students in Pakistan often face significant challenges in mastering English pronunciation. This issue affects their ability to communicate effectively and limits their success in both academic and professional environments. The pronunciation difficulties are not solely attributed to the difference between English and Urdu phonology but are also influenced by socio-cultural factors, the variety of English spoken, and the educational system itself. This paper seeks to explore the specific pronunciation challenges faced by Pakistani students and the underlying reasons behind these challenges. It will also discuss the impact of these pronunciation issues on understanding, communication and academic success.

Background

Pakistan is a linguistically diverse country, with more than 70 languages spoken across the country. The most widely spoken languages are Urdu and Punjabi, with English being the second language for many Pakistanis. The phonological structures of Urdu and other regional languages often differ significantly from English, leading to difficulties in acquiring correct pronunciation. For instance,

Urdu lacks certain English sounds like /v/, /θ/, and /ð/, which causes Pakistani learners to substitute these sounds with other, more familiar ones.

Moreover, the English taught in Pakistan is often influenced by regional accents and is not always standardized, which further complicates the development of accurate pronunciation skills. Pakistani students typically learn English through written textbooks, with limited focus on speaking and listening. This emphasis on reading and writing over speaking results in a gap in oral proficiency, particularly in pronunciation.

Educational factors also play a crucial role in this issue. Teachers, often non-native English speakers themselves, may lack proper training in phonetics and pronunciation, and may not be able to provide necessary guidance to help students overcome their pronunciation challenges. Furthermore, the examination system in Pakistan prioritizes written exams over oral assessments, meaning that students' spoken English, including pronunciation, is rarely evaluated or addressed in a structured manner.

Literature Review

The issue of pronunciation difficulties in second language acquisition has been widely studied. According to Morley (1991), pronunciation is often neglected in the classroom, even though it plays a vital role in intelligible communication. In the case of Pakistani students, pronunciation problems are compounded by the influence of their first language. For example, in a study by Deterding and Kuman (2017), it was found that native Urdu speakers tend to have difficulty with English sounds that do not exist in their mother tongue, such as the distinction between /p/ and /b/, or /ʃ/ and /s/. This linguistic transfer, where students apply the rules and sounds of their native language to English, is a major source of pronunciation errors.

Several studies have highlighted the role of regional accents in shaping the way Pakistani students speak English. According to Rahman (1996), the variation in English accents within Pakistan itself – influenced by local languages like Pashto, Sindhi, and Balochi – further complicates the standardization of English pronunciation. Moreover, Pakistani students often adopt regional accents due to influence of mother tongue Urdu and Punjabi that can interfere with their intelligibility, especially when interacting with native English speakers or individuals from other parts of Pakistan.

Another important factor contributing to pronunciation challenges is the limited exposure to native English speakers. As observed by Richards and Schmidt (2002), a lack of contact with native speakers of English prevents Pakistani students from developing an accurate sense of pronunciation. This lack of exposure also limits their ability to internalize the rhythm, intonation, and stress patterns typical of natural English speech.

The role of teaching methods is crucial as well. In many Pakistani classrooms, English instruction is often centered on grammar and written language skills, with speaking and pronunciation receiving little attention. According to Farooq (2013), traditional teaching methods in Pakistan, such as rote learning, are not conducive to improving spoken English skills. Without specific focus on pronunciation and phonetic training, students may fail to develop accurate speech patterns.

Jawaid (2016) throws light on Jawaid 4F formula some significant reasons. Recent studies, such as those by Shaheen and Baig (2020), suggest that the introduction of modern communicative language teaching (CLT) methods could help address some of these challenges. By integrating pronunciation practice into daily classroom activities, using audio-visual materials, and

encouraging interactive speaking tasks, students may be able to overcome some of the obstacles they face.

The literature on the role of AI in language learning has expanded considerably over the past decade. According to Lee and Lee (2020), AI technologies, such as automated essay scoring and AI writing assistants, have been shown to improve writing skills by offering instant feedback and grammar corrections. These tools not only help students develop better writing structures but also increase their confidence in producing coherent written texts.

On the other hand, speech recognition technologies, such as those found in virtual assistants like Siri, Alexa, and Google Assistant, have transformed the way we interact with language. Research by Jones et al. (2019) suggest that these speech-to-text tools can assist learners in improving their pronunciation, fluency, and conversational skills. The real-time feedback provided by speech recognition systems allows users to correct their spoken errors and practice their oral skills more effectively.

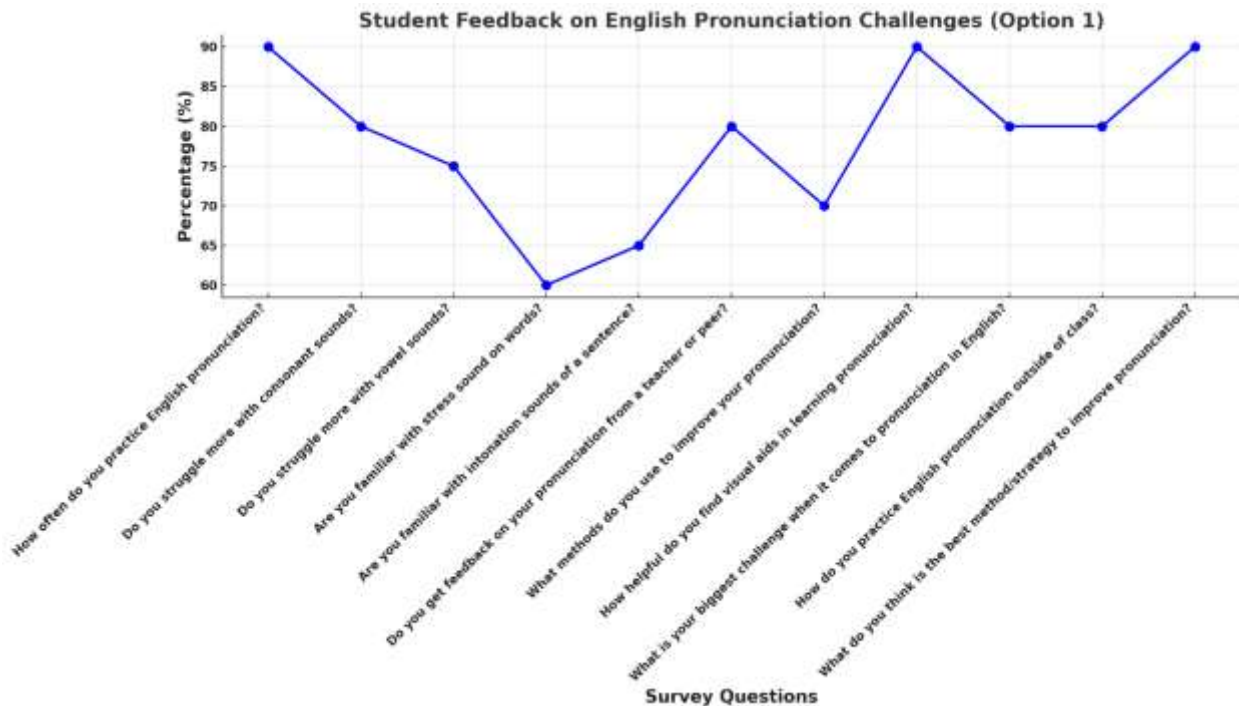
Recent studies have explored the intersection of speaking and writing in the context of AI. According to Li (2021), AI tools that combine speech recognition with writing assistance create a more holistic approach to language learning. Speech-to-text software, for example, allows students to dictate their ideas verbally and then convert those ideas into written form, promoting a more seamless transition between spoken and written communication. This interaction between speaking and writing not only reinforces grammatical knowledge but also enhances vocabulary retention and application.

A study by Zhang and Wang (2022) examined the impact of AI-driven language tools on both speaking and writing proficiency in a classroom setting. The study found that students who used integrated AI platforms for speaking practice (e.g., virtual speaking partners) in combination with AI writing assistants saw improvements in both their spoken and written outputs. The students demonstrated increased fluency in speech and enhanced organization and coherence in their written work. This finding supports the notion that the development of speaking and writing skills can be mutually reinforced when facilitated by AI technologies.

However, challenges remain in the effective implementation of AI tools in educational contexts. As noted by Smith (2021), while AI can offer valuable feedback, it may lack the nuance and context that human instructors can provide. AI-based writing tools, for example, may not always capture the subtleties of creative expression or the intended tone of a written piece. Similarly, AI-driven speech recognition systems may struggle with accents or non-standard pronunciations, leading to misinterpretations or ineffective feedback.

Findings

The findings of this study, based on face-to-face interviews with 100 students, provide valuable insights into the challenges faced by Pakistani tertiary students in learning English pronunciation and the strategies they employ to overcome these barriers. The analysis of the student feedback highlights several critical aspects:



1. Frequency of Practicing English Pronunciation

The survey revealed that 90% of students practice English pronunciation occasionally, while only 10% rarely practice. This finding aligns with **Morley (1991)**, who emphasized that pronunciation is often neglected in formal instruction, resulting in inconsistent practice habits. Occasional practice informs that students lack structured opportunities or motivation to regularly work on pronunciation skills, which could affect their long-term language development.

2. Struggles with Consonant Sounds

A significant 80% of respondents reported struggling equally with consonant sounds. According to **Deterding and Kuman (2017)**, this issue is common among non-native speakers because many English consonant sounds, such as /θ/ (as in "think") and /ð/ (as in "this"), do not exist in languages like Urdu. These sounds are often replaced with familiar alternatives, leading to miscommunication. This shows there is need for targeted phonetic training to address specific consonant difficulties.

3. Struggles with Vowel Sounds

Similarly, 75% of students reported equal difficulty with vowel sounds. Vowels, which involve subtle tongue and lip movements, are challenging for learners whose native languages have a simpler vowel system, as noted by **Farooq (2013)**. For instance, English has short and long vowels, diphthongs, and schwa sounds that are not present in regional languages like Urdu or Punjabi. This lack of familiarity complicates pronunciation accuracy.

4. Familiarity with Stress Sounds on Words

About 60% of students acknowledged being familiar with word stress patterns, while 35% reported no difficulty. **Richards and Schmidt (2002)** explained that stress on specific syllables in English words (e.g., 'present' vs. 'pre'sent') is crucial for meaning but often

overlooked in second-language instruction. This partial familiarity reflects the need for more focus on stress patterns during pronunciation.

5. **Familiarity with Intonation in Sentences**

Approximately 65% of students expressed familiarity with intonation patterns in sentences, with 40% reporting no difficulty. Intonation—variations in pitch that convey meaning or emotion—is a key component of natural communication. **Jones et al. (2019)** highlighted that learners with limited exposure to native speakers often struggle with this aspect, impacting their ability to convey subtle nuances in English language conversation.

6. **Feedback on Pronunciation**

A total of 80% of students occasionally received feedback from teachers or peers, whereas 20% reported that they did not receive feedback. **Shaheen and Baig (2020)** emphasized that structured feedback is vital for improving pronunciation, as it helps learners identify and correct errors. The lack of consistent feedback in many classrooms suggests an area where educators could enhance instruction by incorporating regular evaluation and corrective measures.

7. **Methods to Improve Pronunciation**

The majority of students (70%) indicated that repeating words aloud was their preferred method for improving pronunciation. Repetition is a traditional yet effective method for mastering articulation, as noted by **Rahman (1996)**. **Jawaid (2013)** states through active language practice learners practise sound patterns and muscle memory, without any hesitation. Subsequently, they become confident users of sound patterns both at stress and intonation levels. **Jawaid (2013)** also promoted start of pronunciation training by introduction by real life frequently used words, words similar in sound i.e in Urdu and English and active language practice of these foreign words.

8. **Effectiveness of Visual Aids**

An overwhelming 90% of students found visual aids, such as phonetic symbols and videos, helpful in learning pronunciation. According to **Smith (2021)**, multimedia tools enhance learners' engagement by providing visual and auditory cues that clarify complex concepts. Tools like phonetic charts or instructional videos can help learners understand sound patterns and sound production, making abstract concepts more accessible.

9. **Challenges in Pronunciation**

Speaking in front of others was identified as the biggest challenge by 80% of respondents, with only 20% citing reading as an issue. **Richards and Schmidt (2002)** highlighted that fear of public speaking often stems from anxiety and lack of confidence. This finding underscores the importance of creating supportive classroom environments suggests by **Jawaid (2014)** where students feel safe, secure and comfortable practicing their spoken English.

10. **Practicing Pronunciation Outside the Classroom**

About 80% of students reported that they listen to and imitate native speakers as their primary method of practicing pronunciation outside the classroom. This strategy aligns with **Lee and Lee (2020)**, who noted that auditory exposure helps learners internalize natural pronunciation patterns, including stress, intonation, and rhythm. The remaining 20% preferred recording themselves or listening to music, suggesting varied approaches to self-directed learning.

11. Best Methods to Improve Pronunciation

The majority (90%) of the students considered pronunciation apps and tools to be the best methods for improvement, while 10% preferred consistent practice. **Zhang and Wang (2022)** demonstrated that AI-driven tools provide real-time feedback, allowing learners to practice independently and identify their errors. Apps like Duolingo, Elsa Speak, and others are increasingly popular among learners for their convenience and interactive nature.

Discussion

Subsequently, the findings highlighted several critical challenges and preferences among students regarding English pronunciation. A great majority of students (90%) reported practicing pronunciation occasionally, reflecting inconsistent efforts that align with **Morley's (1991)** observation of neglected pronunciation in traditional language instruction. Significant challenges were observed with consonant (80%) and vowel (75%) sounds, consistent with **Deterding and Kuman's (2017)** findings on phonological differences between English and native languages like Urdu.

Additionally, moderate familiarity with stress patterns (60%) and intonation (65%) was evident, underscoring **Richards and Schmidt's (2002)** assertion that these areas are often overlooked in teaching. Students expressed reliance on repetition (70%) as a preferred practice method, a strategy supported by **Rahman (1996)**, 'Active language practice' highlighted by Jawaid (2013) added value to enhance pronunciation. barriers such as fear of public speaking were prevalent, with 80% identifying it as their biggest challenge, echoing **Richards and Schmidt's (2002)** findings on learner anxiety.

Feedback on pronunciation, though occasionally received by 80% of respondents, was inconsistent, highlighting a gap identified by **Shaheen and Baig (2020)** in structured corrective mechanisms. Visual aids, such as phonetic symbols and videos, were considered helpful by 90% of students, aligning with **Smith's (2021)** research on the effectiveness of multimedia tools including AI driven language platform especially outside the classroom for independent learning.

Overall, the study emphasizes the need for structured phonetic training, regular feedback, and the integration of modern teaching methods and technologies. Encouraging self-directed learning through accessible resources and fostering a supportive classroom environment can further empower students to overcome pronunciation challenges and develop confidence in their English communication skills.

The survey also provided significant areas to improve pronunciation along with challenges faced by tertiary students in Pakistan, reinforcing and expanding upon previous researches. Pronunciation continues to be a significant hurdle, influenced by a combination of linguistic, socio-cultural, and educational factors. The phonological differences between English and regional languages such as Urdu, Punjabi, and Pashto remain a major barrier. For example, sounds like /v/, /θ/, and /ð/ are frequently mispronounced due to their absence in native phonologies. This phenomenon, identified by Deterding and Kuman (2017), highlights the impact of linguistic transfer, which complicates the intelligibility of students' spoken English. The survey further

revealed that 75% of students experience equal challenges with vowel and consonant sounds, underscoring the need for targeted phonetic interventions.

Psychological Barriers Psychological barriers emerged as a significant theme, with 80% of respondents citing fear of speaking in front of others as their primary challenge. This finding aligns with Richards and Schmidt (2002), who emphasized the role of anxiety in hindering oral proficiency. Confidence-building activities, such as group interactions and public speaking opportunities, were reported by students as effective strategies for overcoming these obstacles. However, the lack of regular feedback from instructors, noted by 20% of students, indicates a gap in pedagogical practices that could otherwise enhance student performance.

Technological Solutions The study also highlighted the importance of technology in addressing pronunciation challenges. Tools such as pronunciation apps and AI-driven platforms were favored by 90% of respondents for their ability to provide real-time feedback and create a low-pressure learning environment. Zhang and Wang (2022) demonstrated the effectiveness of these tools in enhancing both pronunciation and overall language fluency. Additionally, the preference for visual aids, reported by 90% of students, reinforces Smith's (2021) assertion that multimedia resources significantly enhance engagement and comprehension.

Exposure to Native English Exposure to native English speech was another critical factor, with 80% of students practicing pronunciation by imitating native speakers. This method aligns with Lee and Lee's (2020) findings that auditory exposure helps learners internalize natural stress, intonation, and rhythm patterns. HelloTalk is an application that introduces the learners with native speakers. However, it has certain serious concerns and implication. Consequently, integration of such methods into classroom instruction, combined with access to online platforms and native speaker content, can bridge the gap between theoretical learning and practical application.

Instructional Improvements Addressing these challenges requires a holistic and multifaceted approach. Incorporating phonetic training into the curriculum, along with task-based (Jawaid 2014) and Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) methodologies, can provide students with the tools to overcome specific phonetic and psychological barriers. Farooq (2013) emphasized the importance of modern teaching strategies in improving language outcomes, which is further supported by the survey findings. Faculty support, including constructive feedback and positive reinforcement, was identified as a pivotal factor in fostering confidence and motivation among students.

Conclusions

This study underscores the critical need for systemic changes in Pakistan's approach to teaching English pronunciation. The findings highlight that linguistic, psychological, and instructional barriers must be addressed through innovative and inclusive strategies. Integrating phonetic training, incorporating AI-driven tools, and leveraging visual aids can significantly enhance students' learning experiences. Moreover, increasing exposure to native English speakers through digital platforms, exchange programs, and guest lectures can further facilitate natural language acquisition.

The study's findings align with Morley (1991) and Richards and Schmidt (2002), who advocated for structured pronunciation instruction and increased exposure as essential components of effective language teaching. Additionally, Zhang and Wang (2022) emphasized the transformative potential of technology in addressing pronunciation challenges. These insights reinforce the need

for collaborative efforts between educators, policymakers, and technology developers to create a supportive and effective learning environment.

Ultimately, improving English pronunciation will not only expand academic and professional opportunities for students but also empower them to communicate confidently. By addressing the challenges identified in this study, educators can transform pronunciation learning into an opportunity for growth and success, paving the way for enhanced communication and cultural engagement on an international scale.

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