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Research Article

Dive into English Phonology: Foundational concepts and teaching strategies for novice EFL learners

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ABSTRACT

Mastering English phonology is essential for second language acquisition, as it influences pronunciation accuracy, listening comprehension, and communicative competence. However, beginner English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners often encounter difficulties due to the complexity of phonological theories and irregular spelling-to-sound correspondences. This study presents a systematic literature review, guided by the PRISMA framework, to examine key challenges and effective teaching strategies in English phonology instruction for beginners. A comprehensive search of Google Scholar and CrossRef databases identified 1,037 records published between 2019 and 2024. After screening and quality appraisal, 25 high-quality studies were included in the synthesis. Findings indicate that articulatory phonology, though theoretically robust, is impractical for classroom application due to its dependence on computational models and language-specific data. Additionally, inconsistencies between English spelling and pronunciation frequently lead to learner errors and reduced confidence. While students improve in recognizing phonetic symbols, current instructional methods often lack interactive, practice-based approaches. The review highlights the need to simplify complex phonological concepts and adopt learner-centered, communicative pedagogies. These insights offer valuable guidance for enhancing phonological competence and communicative effectiveness among novice EFL learners, addressing an important gap in current phonology instruction literature.

Keywords: *Articulatory Phonology; Communicative Competence; English Phonology; Learner-Centered Pedagogy; Systematic Literature Review.*

1. Introduction

Understanding English phonology is a cornerstone of language learning, particularly for those acquiring English as a foreign language (EFL). Phonology, the study of the sound systems of languages, is vital for mastering pronunciation, enhancing listening comprehension, and achieving effective communication. However, the intricacies of English phonology present substantial challenges to both learners and educators, especially due to inconsistencies between spelling and pronunciation (Yi, 2023), as well as limited phonological awareness that hinders comprehension (Lu, 2023).

Prior studies reveal that EFL learners often struggle with speech perception and phoneme recognition, both foundational skills for intelligible pronunciation and fluent reading (Wahib & Tamer, 2021). Moreover, neglecting pronunciation limits communicative competence, resulting in reduced learner confidence and oral performance (Bdaiwi & Sayer, 2023). This study aims to explore significant insights from thematic analyses of English phonology, highlighting key challenges faced by EFL learners and pedagogical strategies to address them. The implications of this analysis

provide valuable guidance for curriculum development and instructional practices aimed at improving phonological competence across diverse educational settings.

One of the most debated theoretical frameworks in phonology is articulatory phonology. Kadhim and Mohammed (2022) critique this theory for its complexity and limited practicality, noting that its reliance on language-specific data and computational models often reduces its effectiveness in comprehensively explaining phonological phenomena. This critique underscores a broader issue within phonological education: the need for accessible, practical theoretical models applicable in teaching contexts. Supporting this concern, Ramoo et al. (2021) highlight that despite its theoretical robustness, articulatory phonology struggles in practical application due to the disconnect between phonological representation and articulatory planning. Further studies in diverse linguistic contexts, such as Serbian tonal variation and Brazilian Portuguese phonological development, emphasize the importance of coordinating gestural and phonetic realization, revealing challenges in operationalizing articulatory models across learner populations (Karlin, 2020; Vassoler & Berti, 2018). The complexity of articulatory phonology, combined with inherent inconsistencies in English pronunciation, presents significant obstacles for EFL learners.

English pronunciation is notoriously inconsistent, causing frequent difficulties for learners attempting to map letters to corresponding sounds accurately. Arafiq et al. (2023) and Putra (2023) highlight that English lacks a one-to-one relationship between letters and sounds, leading to frequent pronunciation errors. This irregularity contrasts sharply with more phonetic languages, where spelling closely matches pronunciation, necessitating targeted instructional strategies to help learners navigate these challenges effectively.

Understanding students' preferences in learning English phonology is equally important. Research shows that while students improve in recognizing phonetic symbols and distinguishing English sounds, there is a strong demand for more interactive, practice-oriented teaching methods (Espinoza et al., 2021). This aligns with a broader pedagogical trend toward active learning strategies that deeply engage students (Shaojie et al., 2022). Alzahrani and Algethami (2023) further argue that despite phonology's critical role, many students remain unaware of its significance, leading to lower interest and engagement. This highlights the need for educators to emphasize phonological knowledge's importance and incorporate engaging teaching methods.

Pronunciation is critical for effective communication. Poor pronunciation often makes EFL learners reluctant to speak English, fearing misunderstandings caused by errors. Pronunciation errors typically involve sound substitutions between words, suggesting that systematic practice and targeted instructional strategies are essential to improving accuracy (Jahara & Abdelrady, 2021). Burri (2023) emphasizes that pronunciation should not be an end, but a means of negotiating meaning within sociocultural and interpersonal contexts, underscoring the importance of integrating pronunciation practice into broader communicative activities reflecting real-life language use.

Additionally, data highlights the systematic nature of pronunciation errors among learners from different linguistic backgrounds. The greater the phonetic differences between a learner's native language and English, the more challenges they face in achieving accurate pronunciation. These errors are systematic rather than random, indicating the need for targeted instruction addressing specific phonological gaps between languages (Tupamahu & Gaspersz, 2024). Such targeted approaches help learners overcome difficulties and improve overall phonological competence.

The novelty of this systematic literature review lies in its comprehensive, step-by-step approach designed to bridge the gap for beginners in understanding English phonology's complexities. Unlike reviews focusing mainly on phonology's definition or sound classification, this study integrates foundational aspects with practical, interactive teaching methodologies tailored for novice learners. By emphasizing the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) and providing clear, relatable examples of English vowels and consonants, this review elucidates phonology's theoretical underpinnings while directly addressing beginners' pedagogical needs. This approach enhances pronunciation accuracy, improves spoken English comprehension, and ultimately bolsters communication skills. Moreover, it synthesizes recent findings on learner preferences and effective teaching strategies, offering a nuanced, learner-centered perspective compared to existing literature, making it a valuable resource for educators and learners alike.

2. Methods

This study adopts a systematic literature review approach, following the principles of the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) framework, to comprehensively evaluate the impact and relevance of academic publications on English phonology learning for beginners. The review process began with an extensive identification phase, where academic publications were searched using two prominent databases: Google Scholar and CrossRef. These databases were selected for their broad coverage and their relevance to educational and linguistic research. The search was conducted using the keywords "English," "Phonology," "Learning," and "Beginner," and was limited to publications published between 2019 and 2024 to ensure the review reflects the most current trends and findings.

Following the initial search, all retrieved records were screened to remove duplicates. The remaining articles were then subjected to a rigorous title and abstract screening to ensure their relevance to the research focus. At this stage, studies that were not directly related to English phonology learning for EFL beginners, or that did not address educational or pedagogical aspects, were excluded.

Subsequently, full-text articles of potentially eligible studies were retrieved for a more in-depth eligibility assessment. The inclusion criteria required that studies be empirical or theoretical in nature, focus on English phonology learning among beginner EFL learners, be published in peer-reviewed journals, and be written in English. Studies that focused exclusively on advanced learners lacked pedagogical insights, or were editorials or opinion pieces were excluded from further consideration.

To ensure the quality and credibility of the included studies, a quality appraisal was conducted. Each article was evaluated based on its methodological rigor, clarity of research questions, depth of analysis, and the relevance and applicability of its findings to the context of phonology instruction for novice learners. Only studies that met high-quality standards were included in the final synthesis.

By employing this structured and transparent review process, the study aims to provide a robust and evidence-based foundation for understanding the current challenges and effective pedagogical strategies in teaching English phonology to beginners in EFL contexts. The detailed selection and review process followed in this study is illustrated in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1. PRISMA-based flowchart of the literature selection process.
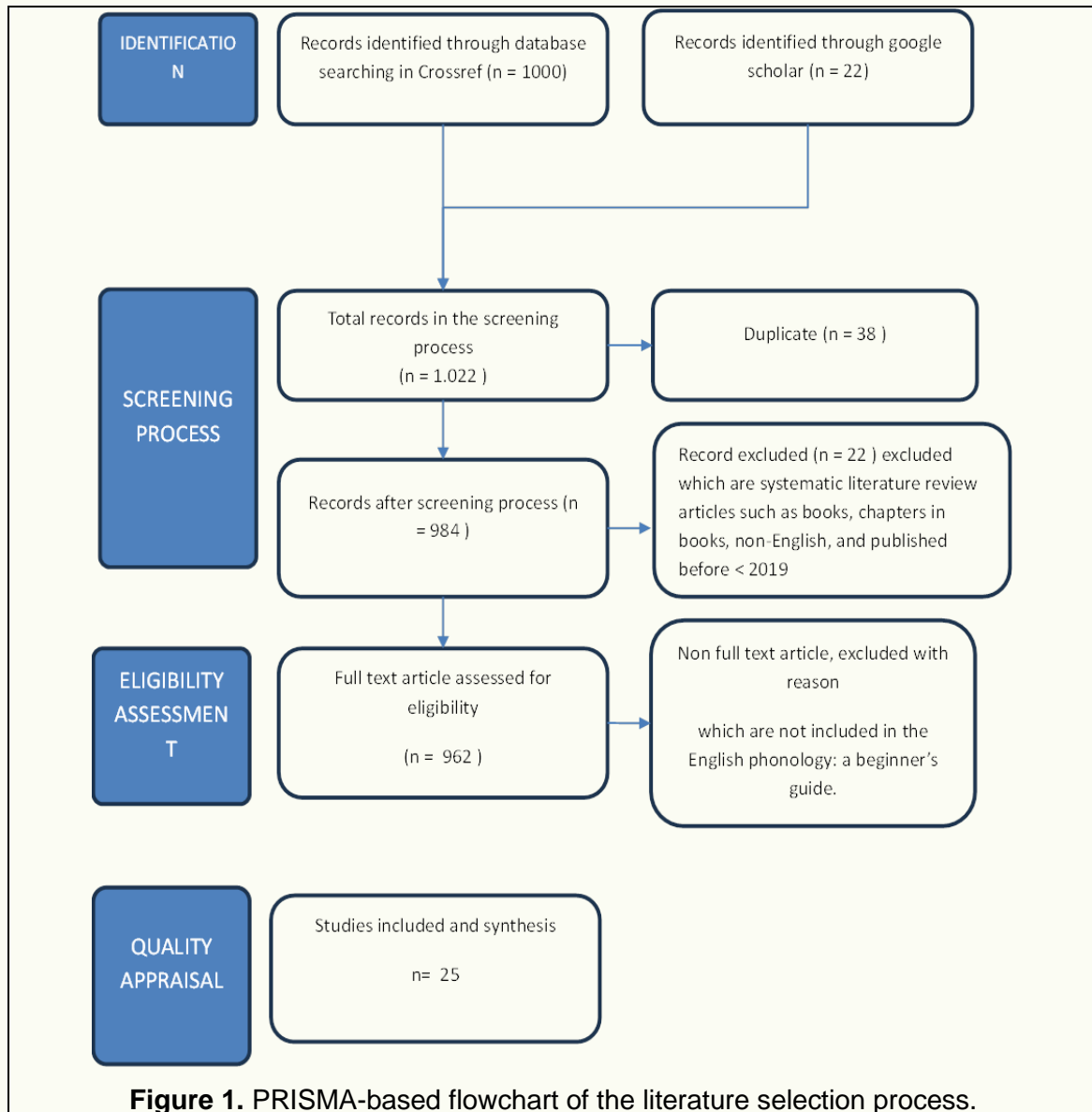
3. Results

The systematic review process, as depicted in Figure 1, initially identified a total of 1,037 records through comprehensive database searches in CrossRef (n = 999) and Google Scholar (n = 38). After removing 263 duplicate records, a total of 774 records were screened based on their titles and abstracts. Of these, 739 records were excluded for reasons such as lack of relevance to English phonology learning, focus on advanced learners, or not meeting the language or publication criteria. This left 35 full-text articles that were assessed for eligibility. Following further evaluation, 25 articles met the inclusion and quality criteria and were incorporated into the final synthesis.

The thematic data from these selected studies reveal several critical insights into the challenges and pedagogical strategies associated with teaching and learning English phonology. Articulatory phonology, as critiqued by Kadhim and Mohammed, is noted for its complexity and lack of practicality. The theory's reliance on language-specific data and computational models makes it less effective in explaining phonological phenomena

comprehensively (Kadhim & Mohammed, 2022). This complexity is further compounded by the inconsistency in English pronunciation, which poses significant challenges for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners. Hung (2024) highlight that English does not maintain a one-to-one relationship between letters and sounds, leading to frequent errors in pronunciation.

3.1 Articulatory phonology

Articulatory phonology, while a theoretically robust framework, often falls short in practical application, particularly in educational settings. Kadhim and Mohammed's (2022) critique centers on the theory's heavy reliance on computational models and language-specific data, which do not translate easily into classroom teaching. This highlights a critical gap in the theoretical underpinnings of phonology and their practical implementation (Mücke et al., 2020; Tandazo et al., 2024). For EFL learners, this complexity is compounded by the inherent inconsistencies in English pronunciation. Unlike more phonetic languages where a direct correlation exists between spelling and pronunciation, English poses a unique challenge due to its irregular spelling patterns and pronunciation rules. Prabhu et al. (2023) highlights that this lack of one-to-one correspondence between letters and sounds often leads to frequent errors among learners, further complicating their acquisition of correct pronunciation. Moreover, the importance of understanding students' preferences in learning English phonology is emphasized. Studies indicate that recognizing phonetic symbols and distinguishing English sounds are areas where students show improvement, yet they express a need for more interactive and practice-oriented teaching methods (Musta'in & Asyhar, 2021) This aligns with the findings of Utami and Lintangsari (2021), who argue that despite the critical role of phonology in language learning, many students remain unaware of its significance, which affects their interest and engagement in the subject.

3.2 Understanding students' learning preferences is crucial for effective pedagogy

Nowacka (2022) and Febian et al. (2022) reveal that while students generally improve in recognizing phonetic symbols and distinguishing English sounds, they express a clear preference for more interactive and practice-oriented teaching methods. This suggests that traditional, lecture-based approaches may not be sufficient for teaching phonology effectively. The findings of Burri (2023) support this notion, indicating that many students are unaware of the significance of phonology in language learning, which negatively impacts their engagement and interest in the subject. These insights underline the necessity for educators to adopt more dynamic and student-centered teaching strategies to enhance learning outcomes.

3.4 Importance of pronunciation in effective communication

The data also underscores the importance of pronunciation in effective communication. Poor pronunciation is a major factor that makes EFL learners reluctant to speak English. Pronunciation errors often involve switching sounds between words, suggesting that pronunciation must be prepared in batches prior to speaking (Mayadah et al., 2024). This is further supported by Belaidouni et al. (2024), who emphasize that pronunciation should not be seen as an end but as a means of negotiating meaning in discourse, embedded in sociocultural and interpersonal contexts.

3.5 Effective communication

Pronunciation is a critical component of effective communication, particularly for EFL learners. This is further supported by Seidlhofer (2015), who emphasizes that pronunciation should not be seen as an end but as a means of negotiating meaning in discourse, embedded in sociocultural and interpersonal contexts. This reluctance is often due to the fear of making errors, which can be socially and academically stigmatizing.

Kenworthy (1987) expands on this by stressing that pronunciation should not be viewed as an isolated skill but rather as an integral part of meaningful communication. It is not merely about producing correct sounds but about using those sounds to negotiate meaning within various sociocultural and interpersonal contexts. This perspective necessitates a shift in teaching practices, where pronunciation is integrated into broader communicative activities rather than treated as a separate, technical skill. Additionally, the data highlights the systematic nature of pronunciation errors made by learners from different language backgrounds. The more differences there are between the sound characteristics of a learner's native language and English, the more difficulties they will encounter in pronouncing English correctly. These errors are systematic and not accidental, indicating the need for targeted pronunciation instruction (Ali et al., 2023).

3.6 Influence of the learners' native languages

The systematic nature of pronunciation errors among EFL learners underscores the influence of the learners' native languages. Marelita and Iftanti (2024) point out that these errors are not random but systematic, reflecting the phonological rules and patterns of the learners' first languages. The greater the differences between the sound systems of the learners' native languages and English, the more challenging it becomes for them to acquire accurate English pronunciation. This highlights the necessity for targeted pronunciation instruction that addresses the specific difficulties encountered by learners from diverse linguistic backgrounds (Saito, 2021). Such instruction should be tailored to help learners overcome the specific phonetic and phonological challenges posed by the differences between their native languages and English.

Furthermore, the data suggests that many of the challenges faced by EFL learners in acquiring accurate English pronunciation stem from a lack of effective pedagogical strategies. Traditional teaching methods often fail to address the complexities and inconsistencies inherent in English phonology (Low, 2021). There is a need for more innovative and interactive teaching methods that can engage learners and help them develop a better understanding of phonological concepts. This includes the use of multimedia tools, interactive software, and practical exercises that can make the learning process more engaging and effective. In addition, promoting learner autonomy through strategy training can further enhance engagement and pronunciation outcomes (Yang, 2022).

3.7 The role of the teacher in facilitating phonological learning.

In addition to the pedagogical strategies, it is also important to consider the role of the teacher in facilitating phonological learning. Teachers need to be adequately trained and equipped with the necessary skills and knowledge to teach phonology effectively (Cadime et al., 2024; Haile & Mendisu, 2023). This includes a deep understanding of phonological theories and the ability to apply them in practical teaching scenarios. Continuous professional development and training can help teachers stay updated with the latest research and methodologies in phonological education, enabling them to provide better instruction and support to their students (Yüksel, Soruç, & McKinley, 2021). Moreover, it is essential to create a supportive and conducive learning environment that encourages students to practice and improve their pronunciation. This includes providing ample opportunities for speaking and listening practice, as well as constructive feedback and guidance (Nwokedi, 2023). Creating a positive and non-threatening atmosphere where students feel comfortable making mistakes and learning from them can significantly enhance their phonological learning experience.

4. Discussion

Based on the results of this systematic literature review, the consistency in findings across multiple studies provides a robust understanding of the challenges and pedagogical strategies associated with teaching and learning English phonology. One of the most consistent themes is the complexity of articulatory phonology. As noted by Kadhim and Mohammed (2022), the heavy reliance on computational models and language-specific data within this theoretical framework creates significant barriers to practical application in classroom settings. This issue is compounded by the irregularities and inconsistencies in English pronunciation, as highlighted by Ambalegin and Arianto (2019). These inconsistencies, stemming from the lack of a one-to-one relationship between letters and sounds in English, result in frequent pronunciation errors among EFL learners. The findings across these studies converge on the conclusion that the abstract nature of articulatory phonology, combined with the irregularities of English pronunciation, poses substantial challenges for learners.

A notable consistency in the literature is the emphasis on understanding students' learning preferences to enhance pedagogical effectiveness. Nowacka (2022) and Burri (2023) both underline the importance of recognizing students' preferences for interactive and practice-oriented teaching methods. These studies collectively suggest that traditional lecture-based approaches may not suffice for teaching phonology effectively. Instead, there is a clear need for dynamic and student-centered strategies that can better engage learners and improve their understanding of phonological concepts. This theme consistently appears in various studies, highlighting a widespread recognition of the need to adapt teaching methods to better suit the learning styles and preferences of students.

Another consistent theme is the critical role of pronunciation in effective communication. The data indicate that poor pronunciation significantly impacts EFL learners' willingness to speak English, with errors often leading to reluctance and reduced communicative competence. Nguyen and Hung (2021) and Lei and Trung (2024) both emphasize that pronunciation should not be treated as an isolated skill but as an integral part of communicative competence, embedded within sociocultural and interpersonal contexts. This perspective necessitates a pedagogical shift where pronunciation is integrated into broader communicative activities rather than being taught as a standalone technical skill. The consistency of these findings across studies underscores the importance of pronunciation in fostering effective communication and the need for holistic teaching approaches.

However, while there is a consensus on many themes, some contradictions and gaps also emerge in literature. For example, while Ali et al. (2023) highlights the systematic nature of pronunciation errors among learners from different linguistic backgrounds, indicating a need for targeted instruction, there is less agreement on the most effective methods for providing such instruction. Some studies advocate the use of multimedia tools and interactive software, while others emphasize the importance of traditional methods such as repetitive practice and phonetic drills. This discrepancy suggests a need for further research to identify the most effective instructional strategies for different learner populations and contexts.

Additionally, the role of the teacher in facilitating phonological learning is another area where findings vary. While some studies stress the importance of teacher training and professional development to enhance teaching effectiveness, others focus more on the pedagogical tools and methods themselves rather than the teacher's role. This inconsistency points to a potential gap in literature regarding the interplay between teacher effectiveness, teaching methods, and student outcomes in phonological learning. Further research is needed to explore how teacher training and professional development can be optimized to support the adoption of innovative and effective phonological teaching strategies.

In summary, the consistency in the literature regarding the challenges posed by the complexity of articulatory phonology and the irregularity of English pronunciation underscores the need for more practical and accessible theoretical frameworks. Additionally, the emphasis on understanding students' learning preferences and the critical role of pronunciation in communication highlights the importance of adopting interactive and student-centered teaching methods. However, contradictions regarding the most effective instructional strategies and the role of the teacher suggest areas for further research. Addressing these gaps can lead to more effective phonological instruction and better learning outcomes for EFL students.

5. Conclusion

Based on the results of this systematic literature review, future studies should focus on developing and validating more practical and accessible theoretical frameworks for articulatory phonology that can be readily implemented in educational settings. Given the challenges posed by the complexity and abstract nature of current phonological theories, research should aim to bridge the gap between theory and practice. This can be achieved by creating models that are not only linguistically comprehensive but also pedagogically sound, ensuring they are adaptable to the diverse needs of EFL learners. Additionally, there should be an emphasis on empirical studies that test the effectiveness of these new frameworks in real classroom environments, providing concrete data on their impact on learner outcomes.

Furthermore, future research should prioritize investigating the most effective instructional strategies for teaching English phonology to learners from different linguistic backgrounds. Given the inconsistency in the literature regarding the use of multimedia tools, interactive software, and traditional methods like phonetic drills, comparative studies are needed to evaluate the efficacy of these approaches. Researchers should also explore the role of teacher training and professional development in enhancing phonological instruction. By examining how well-prepared teachers are to implement innovative teaching methods, future studies can provide insights into optimizing teacher education programs. Additionally, it would be beneficial to investigate the integration of pronunciation training within broader communicative activities, ensuring that pronunciation is taught not as an isolated skill but as a crucial component of effective communication. This holistic approach can help identify the best practices that foster better engagement, retention, and application of phonological knowledge among EFL learners.

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