

An Action Research Study on the Pronunciation Challenges Faced by Doteli Students

Nar Bahadur Bist¹  | Nirajan Bohara² 

¹M.Phil. Scholar
Kathmandu University
Email: narbist22@gmail.com

²Visiting Faculty at Kathmandu University

Corresponding Author

Nirajan Bohara

Email: lecturnirajan@gmail.com

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Abstract

This qualitative action research study focused on identifying the pronunciation difficulties experienced by Doteli-speaking students in grades 8-10 in Doti, as well as examining how collaborative multimodal instructional strategies can help improve their English pronunciation. We used purposive sampling methods for data collection, with primary data including classroom observations, student work samples, and reflections, while secondary data consisted of relevant literature concerning second language acquisition. The qualitative thematic analysis identified three barriers to improving English pronunciation for the participating students: First language interference, limited resources available within the classroom, and lack of motivation due to limited exposure to English outside of the classroom. After the implementation of collaborative activities such as pronunciation modelling techniques, vocabulary puzzles, and phonetic reinforcement, there was an increase in correct pronunciation, fluency, and confidence level. The results of this study indicate that collaborative multimodal strategies and supportive learning environments help reduce pronunciation errors among non-native speakers of English, thereby providing practical instructional approaches for educators working in low-resource contexts.

Keywords: Doteli students, ELT, pronunciation, challenges, confidence

1. Introduction

Language plays vital and significant role in human communication. It enables individual to express thoughts, ideas, and improve academic performance in language learning and teaching. Language is a critical means of communication that people use in their daily lives (Zhang & Yin, 2009). Most people do not think much about the importance of their speaking abilities as a central part of communication (Ellis, 1997). Many people wrongly assume that speaking and understanding languages evolve as naturally as breathing (Zhang & Yin, 2009). Rather than being a natural ability, learning to speak is a complex process that requires many

different areas to be developed, including vocabulary, grammar, reading, writing, and speaking (Ellis, 1997). As such, developing good pronunciation is critical for effective speaking (Ellis, 1997). Students need a good understanding of grammar and vocabulary, but they also need to pronounce them correctly (Ellis, 1997). Therefore, developing good pronunciation is one of the main goals of language learners.

The use of action research gives educators an effective, hands-on, and collaborative means to address real-world issues in educational contexts by identifying specific classroom problems, gathering data, testing various strategies, and reflecting on the results. The study by Bist and Bohara clearly illustrates this approach by implementing a study to address the pronunciation difficulties experienced by Dotoli-speaking students in grades 8-10. The researchers determined that three main obstacles contributed to the students' pronunciation difficulties: first-language interference, limited classroom resources, and low student motivation. To aid in overcoming these barriers, the researchers implemented multimodal instructional strategies, such as alternative pronunciation modelling, vocabulary puzzles, and phonetic reinforcement. Through this qualitative study, the researchers made the connection that a collaborative and supportive learning environment can significantly reduce pronunciation errors of non-native English-speaking students, thereby increasing the students' confidence and fluency. By continually identifying problems, developing and implementing evidence-based solutions, and refining one's overall strategies, educators can use action research as their new tool to achieve productive and meaningful changes in their classrooms.

1.1 Pronunciation and Communication

Both intonation and pronunciation play important roles in the effective use of spoken English; they affect your ability to communicate successfully in conversations. The field of instruction of pronunciation has changed over time with changes in methods for teaching languages. For example, the grammar-translation method placed very little emphasis on teaching pronunciation and little time was allocated to the instruction of pronunciation. In contrast, the audio-lingual method that became popular in the 1950's taught students how to listen and repeat sounds more than it did, teaching students how to produce sounds and was related to the grammar-translation method by teaching sound patterns through direct instruction (George, 1972). When teaching students how to produce the various sounds in a target language, the audio-lingual method used a systematic, progressive presentation of the sentences to be produced in order from least complicated to most complicated. The audio-lingual method believed that learning a language was primarily a mechanical process of forming habits through regular practice (George, 1972).

1.2 Challenges in Pronunciation Learning

Many challenges exist for students while learning English pronunciation. Sharma (2021) states pronunciation, listening, repetition activities, and it suggests teachers to pay attention in pronunciation instruction. One challenge is that there are phonemes used by English speakers; however, not all of these phonemes exist within the language(s) they have learned. The second challenge is that when an English-speaking person produces a final consonant at the end of a word, it is often produced differently than what learners have experienced in their native language(s), thereby making it difficult to produce an accurate pronunciation of final consonants in English. Learners can have phonetic errors that prevent them from pronouncing words correctly and can create an environment where learners lose confidence in their ability to speak English or listen to English spoken (Zhang & Yin, 2009).

1.3 Context and Motivation for Research

The ability to pronounce correctly can affect how well a student performs in an academic setting, whether it's in classwork or exam-taking. The education system in Nepal requires all students to study English from grades one through twelve. As a result, both teachers and students face many challenges with teaching and learning English in these classrooms.

Many parents who have educated their children are now enrolling them in private English schools because they feel the teaching quality is much better than in community schools and because they want their children to be taught to pronounce English correctly. In the Doti District, there are many children who can't pronounce many of the words, even if they have not learned all of the English language. The children in Doti have limited exposure to English, so they do not have the opportunity to learn to use all four skills or components of language development. The same issues that Doti students face in schools are also present in all of the other schools in Doti; and most likely, at my school. To become proficient in English, students must develop proficiency in all four linguistic skills and components of the language. Unfortunately, most community-based schools do not provide students with the appropriate instruction to develop these skills. We felt compelled to look at the issue of Doteli students' lack of English pronunciation ability.

1.4 Statement of the Problem

In Nepal's education system, English is a mandatory subject. But in Doti District, many students who speak Doteli struggle with their pronunciation. Pronunciation is a major part of clear communication and academic achievement. Students living in Doti struggle with their English pronunciation because they have had very little exposure to the English Language and did not have effective instruction. The English phonemes not present in Doteli, when combined with the manner in which Doteli speakers produce their final consonants, lead to a multitude of phonetic errors, thereby lowering students' confidence in their English language abilities. Many parents in Doti have enrolled their children into private English Medium Schools; however, because of a lack of resources and/or effective strategies, the community-based English language schools are not able to adequately provide assistance to students with their pronunciation difficulties, therefore preventing these students from achieving proficiency levels in all four language skills. This study explores the pronunciation difficulties experienced by students in grades 8-10, who are Doteli speakers, and provides evidence-based instructional interventions for classroom settings with limited resources.

1.5 Research Question

How can I develop reading and English pronunciation proficiency skills among Doteli-speaking students in ELT classrooms?

1.6 Objectives of the Study

- To improve the reading and pronunciation skills of Doteli-speaking students in English Language Teaching (ELT) documents.

1.7 Significance of the Study

This action research addresses gaps in pronunciation instruction for Doteli-speaking students in resource-limited settings. For students, it provides evidence-based strategies to improve confidence and accuracy in spoken English. For teachers, it offers practical, collaborative approaches effective in under-resourced environments. Dahal (2023) states that localised action research in language teaching contexts provides empirical evidence that informs sustainable pedagogical innovations adapted to specific learner populations. The study

also expands the limited research on pronunciation instruction for non-native speakers in South Asian indigenous language communities.

1.8 Delimitations of the Study

This study is limited to 34 students in grades 8–10 at a single school in Doti district, which restricts its generalizability to other schools and contexts. The rural, resource-limited setting may not reflect urban or better-resourced environments. Results apply only to Doteli-speaking students and may not transfer to other language groups. The single-year intervention period does not assess long-term retention. Qualitative data collection alone lacks quantitative measures of pronunciation. The researcher's dual role as teacher and investigator introduces potential bias. Multiple simultaneous intervention strategies prevent the isolation of individual effects. The absence of a control group limits causal attribution of outcomes.

2. Methodology

We have examined a qualitative research study that examined 34 students of the Doteli language at DTSS (Doti Technical Secondary School) from 8 through 10 grades through the use of semi-structured interviews with students, focus groups, and document study through students' written work and observations of teaching in the classroom setting. Phase one of the intervention used a diagnostic reading assessment of the students, followed by phase two (Intervention), which included the use of Group Collaboration activities, Modelling of Pronunciation, and Providing Vocabulary Cards and Phonetics to Assist in Word Recognition and Student Communication with Peers. We analysed data through thematic coding, categorisation, narrative analysis, and interpretive synthesis using triangulation and member checking as methods to enhance trustworthiness; however, due to researcher bias and context-specific conditions, the ability to generalise the findings is limited.

3. Literature Review

3.1 The Importance of Pronunciation

The importance of pronunciation in teaching English as a second language has been shown to be substantial; in fact, one of the most important attributes of any working professional, including teachers, is having good pronunciation (Mora & Mora-Plaza, 2023). If an individual has a high degree of vocabulary but is unable to pronounce those words properly, the sounds that are produced will lack meaning. Cook and others maintain that pronunciation consists of a collection of repetitive, habitual practices in the sound production process. Brown (2015) has stated that English teachers are fundamentally teachers of pronunciation. When an English teacher does not teach their students to pronounce correctly, the teacher has communicated to the student that they do not value this area of teaching.

The original emphasis was on teaching tools left behind in textbooks for teaching sound discrimination, and very few teachers and students continue to believe this is an essential characteristic of their teaching and learning (O'Connell, 2023). It is clear that there is a significant lack of research-based techniques and methods for teaching pronunciation in Doti classrooms today.

3.2 Young Learners and Their Characteristics

Children aged 5 to 7 are beginning to think logically about the physical world around them (Piaget, 2013). These children can express what they have accomplished, plan future events, explain the reasons for their actions, and articulate their thought processes (Vygotsky, 1978). The children also show great levels of creative expression, logical thought and variety of tonal quality of speech in their first language (Scott & Ytreberg, 1990). The children are highly receptive to direct instruction and are capable of doing both dependent and independent

work, as supported by theories of social constructivism and the importance of peer interaction and collaborative learning (Vygotsky, 1978). During this developmental stage, children can maintain concentration for extended periods of time, are able to follow multi-step directions and learn best through a variety of engaging methods that build upon their innate curiosity and desire for social interactions (Scott & Ytreberg 1990).

3.3 Factors Affecting Pronunciation Development

3.3.1 Native Language Influence

The learner's mother tongue significantly influences the pronunciation of the target language. When a learner's native language sound system differs substantially from English, English becomes considerably more difficult to pronounce.

3.3.2 Accent

Usually, an accent will affect how clearly other listeners can hear what you say and how well they can interpret the tone of speech you use. According to Crystal (2011, p. 3) "an accent is the total effect on the ear of the features of pronunciation of an individual as to where they are from - either geographically or socially." Most people who are not native speakers of English will still be able to speak with an accent that reveals that they are not native speakers.

Researchers have proposed that learners must acquire a language before the critical age of 7 years to achieve native-like pronunciation (Lenneberg, 1967). Nevertheless, other researchers believe that the learning environment and a person's level of motivation are stronger factors than age in the development of a person's ability to pronounce in a native-like manner (Marinova-Todd et al., 2000).

3.3.3 Motivation and Concern for Good Pronunciation

This factor concerns the learner's personality and attitude. For instance, some students care about making errors and would rather focus on communicating as effectively as possible; others prefer to have as accurate a pronunciation as possible and want to have the same connection with the target-language community as the community has with them. Pronunciation development is greatly influenced by motivation and age; therefore, students with frequent exposure to native speakers and strong motivation to be fluent are more likely to develop a more native-like pronunciation. According to research studies conducted by Bernaus et al. (2004), Marinova-Todd et al. (2000), and Masgoret and Gardner (2003), there is a relationship between the learner's personal/professional goals for learning English and their desire for native-like pronunciation. Moyer (2007) found that having a positive experience with and being oriented toward the target language plays an important role in developing native-like pronunciation. In a study of Spanish learners, Koike and Félix-Brasdefer (2020) found that age of first-language exposure, hours of formal instruction, and residence in a Spanish-speaking country all significantly correlated with the pronunciation accuracy of their second-language Spanish.

3.3.4 Age

The learners' age is key to using different ways to learn to say words correctly. Many people believe that children are more likely to say foreign-language words correctly, but research indicates this is not always the case (Lenneberg, 1967; Birdsong & Molis, 2001). Young children have an advantage where other-language speakers can learn at an early age compared to adults (Abrahamsson & Hyltenstam, 2009). Generally, younger children can learn how to say words at a faster pace compared to older children and adults (Flege et al., 1999). Additionally, children at a critical age respond positively when learning to pronounce words in other languages compared with older and adult children (Kuhl et al., 2008).

3.3.5 Instruction

Four major skills are covered in foreign language programs: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. At the beginning level, students are introduced to the target language's alphabet and sound system through instruction in pronunciation. However, little to no attention is given to developing students' pronunciation skills as they progress beyond initial instruction. This lack of emphasis on pronunciation may be due to the fact that researchers, teachers, and students involved in L2 acquisition generally do not place much emphasis on pronunciation as an important skill (Elliott, 1995).

3.3.6 Mother Tongue Influence

Recent studies have investigated how sound systems in a learner's first language influence their ability to produce sounds in a new language during acquisition, and it is clear that the pronunciation of non-native speakers will be affected by the sounds, rules, and patterns of their native language. Research into the production of rhythm (Gilakjani & Ahmadi, 2011; Wenk, 1985) has shown that the influence of the native language does have an influence on the production of stress alternation across phrases when producing English.

3.4 Data Collection Process

After getting permission for classroom visits, we asked students about their struggles with speaking. Many of them felt uncomfortable responding because they lacked sufficient knowledge. However, once we asked them questions in their own language (Nepali), they were much more willing to answer. We then created four questions that enabled us to gather data from all three grades through focus groups and interviews; these constitute genuine sources of data.

3.5 How did I collect data?

We wrote guideline questions for student interviews and ran them in the classrooms where they took place with the groups of students who participated. We used our research question set as a framework to conduct focus group sessions with students in grades 8 to 10. Similarly, we carried out all other procedures for the interviews planned for each research question.

3.6 Analysis

The analysis of the data provides a reasonably straightforward basis for establishing the need to develop and implement a multimodal collaborative intervention strategy that can systematically address the barriers to proper pronunciation for Doteli-speaking students through peer support and be implemented by teachers with limited resources for each of their students. The source of barriers to proper pronunciation among Doteli students is therefore systemic, resulting from a variety of factors including inadequate resources for student learning and the effects of students' first language; the environment (i.e. the classroom) in which the errors occur; and lack of autonomy experienced by students within the current structure of the educational system. The data indicate that pronunciation errors are not due to deficiencies in student ability but rather are caused by a number of educational factors affecting the ability of Doteli students to achieve acceptable pronunciation. The results provide empirical support for the need for both instructional innovation and systemic change to ensure that Doteli-speaking students have access to learning environments that support student autonomy and consistently provide the resources necessary to achieve student learning outcomes.

4. Discussions and Findings

4.1 Discussions

Theme 1: Difficulty with English

Question: Is English a difficult subject for you? If so, what makes it that way?

Grade 9 Student – Ram: "

English is the hardest subject. I can't say right, and have serious problems with pronunciation. I get many spelling mistakes. My writing is not correct."

Student – Bikash Bist: "English is very hard for me. I have problems saying English words because I have a hard time understanding the meaning of harder words."

Student – Ambika K.C: "English is the hardest because the sounds are different from the sounds of Nepali and I can't read or say English correctly when trying to say some words that are hard."

Student – Bijaya B.K: "Sometimes it is hard to say the words in English because we do not have a dictionary in our school, and I cannot copy the sound that my teacher says to me."

Theme 2: Challenges in Learning English in a Classroom Setting

Question: What kinds of difficulties do you have when learning about English in an ELT classroom?

Student — Ram Joshi: "I have difficulty reading long English passages and pronouncing words properly. This difficulty arises because the other subject teachers rarely help. Only my English teacher helps me."

Student — Bikash Bist: "Learning English is challenging for me since I have to read my other subjects in Nepali only, with the exception of learning English."

Student — Ambika K.C.: "English is hard for me to understand at times due to the many new words I encounter and do not know the meaning of."

Student — Bijaya B.K.: "I have difficulty learning English because I do not want to read in English."

Theme 3: Understanding Teaching Techniques

Question: Are you aware of the way your English teacher communicates lessons?

Student—Ram: "Yes, I know how to say what my teacher taught me. My school does not allow me to pronounce a word without my teacher; sometimes I need help reading the word correctly."

Student—Bikash Bist: "I do not understand anything about English."

Student—Ambika K.C: "I didn't understand [response incomplete in original]."

Student—Bijaya B.K: "I understand it very well."

4.1.1 Primary Problematic Issues Identified

Some of the main problems with students are: their level of English pronunciation causes difficulties for them to communicate clearly and participate orally in the classroom; frequent spelling mistakes will reduce the accuracy and quality of their work and make it difficult to articulate their ideas; their first language has a strong influence over their use of English words which results in mispronunciation, incorrect use of words, and structural differences. These issues all need to be addressed through specific strategies to improve their pronunciation, address spelling errors, and reduce interference from their first language in their learning of English.

4.1.2 Intervention strategies and outcomes

The strategies used to help with students' pronunciation development. We noticed from our analysis of students' responses that almost all of them had the same issues. These were issues with the proper pronunciation and spelling of words. Based on my observations, when students attempted to pronounce a single word, they also wouldn't join the class in speaking. The handwriting samples from five students clearly indicated a lack of basic writing skills. Spelling errors and problems with sentence arrangement frequently occurred in the kids' written work. All Doti students face the same problem.

4.1.3 Barriers in the System Affecting Learning

As we have seen, the only instructor of English offered to the students has been their ELT; and therefore, the only source of exposure to English has been this teacher (Krashen, 1982). The learning experience of students here in Doti has been limited to one school; their learning depends solely on one teacher and one textbook (Harmer, 2015). There are also no bookstores found within the Doti area. Students are forced to travel to get to school and this journey takes approximately one hour. These obstacles to learning and the time delay in delivering 'English' textbooks are major factors inhibiting the academic success of these students (UNESCO, 2020). We are now playing a greater role in ensuring that these students have an academic future.

4.1.4 Collaborative Work Model

To motivate students to be actively involved in the English Language aspect of their curriculum, we utilised cooperative group activity with motivational strategies to support valuable student participation in English Language activities. Cooperative group activity enables oral fluency practice and peer communication skills in larger class sizes. We worked with students on chart paper to assist them with the pronunciation of challenging words. Additionally, we provided students with vocabulary cards that had puzzle parts, forcing them to determine the correct pronunciation of the word. After that, we provided students with a phonetic spelling of the words in conjunction with a picture, with the purpose of having the students reinforce what they had learned.

All students made significant advancements in their ability to pronounce English words with improved familiarity through regular classwork and effort outside of class; however, while completing this program, the students developed pronounced confidence in their ability to pronounce and materially changed their sheer ability to speak English from the point of view of both skill level and willingness to ask questions based upon this intervention.

4.1.5 Post-Intervention Administration

The progress of the students and the progression we noted over the duration of the program could be summarized as follows when we asked our students about their present awareness with regard to the English Language: "English is now much easier for us." Although we could never have sounded out or spoken a simple word correctly in the past, we seem be able to sound or say words of considerable length very well as in the past.

4.1.6 The Challenges of Motivation and Attitude

We observed that some of my students faced barriers to learning English, including hesitation, an impression that English is hard, and a lack of motivation to learn English. After several supportive interventions, a change was observed: my students were aware of the necessity of learning English and of the ways they could effectively learn it at school and at home. While my students primarily identify as Doteli, we are able to facilitate their learning through my motivation, support, and exposure to the language in the classroom and in daily

situations outside the classroom. We used a 2-phase process to support my students' learning: Phase 1 was used to identify their pronunciation issues, and Phase 2 focused on helping them correct the issues identified throughout my teaching.

4.1.7 Findings

The doteli-speaking students aged 8-10 included in the action research were noted to have issues with producing accurate pronunciations of words in English due to three interrelated challenges. Native language interference limited resources in the classroom and led to a lack of motivation to learn. More specifically, the majority of the students were unable to identify the differences between the phonics systems of doteli and English, were unable to spell words correctly, and were not willing to speak out loud in the classroom. However, the group of students demonstrated significant improvements in terms of improved rates of accurate pronunciation and confidence in participating in oral activities due to the use of a number of collaborative and multimodal intervention strategies such as pronunciation printing on chart paper, vocabulary puzzle sets, and use of phonetic signs along with pictures. According to data collected from focus groups, student interviews and observational data collected in the classroom, the students who received the structured intervention experienced large increases in their ability to accurately produce pronunciations of words in English, and to participate in oral classroom activities.

5. Conclusion

As researchers, we collaborated with teachers and students to develop effective, multimodal instructional methods to help Doteli-speaking students overcome pronunciation difficulties despite limited resources. These findings indicate that significant improvements were observed in students' pronunciation accuracy, confidence in speaking, and classroom engagement when participants were supported through peer-to-peer interaction and collaborative learning environments, compared with traditional teacher-led instruction. Through creative use of available resources, this research demonstrates that high-quality pronunciation instruction can occur even in under-resourced locations. Given the significance of these results for rural English language teaching in Nepal and similar circumstances worldwide, educators should consider implementing student-centered approaches that include support from peers as well as using multiple modes of engagement. Further study should explore how these evidence-based practices can be scaled in community-based schools and applied to other linguistic groups who experience challenges with learning English as a foreign language.

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