

Difficulties in English Pronunciation within Nepali Secondary Schools

Prakash Khadka
Sukuna Secondary School
Sundarharaincha, Morang, Nepal
prksh.khdka@gmail.com

Abstract

This study inspects the significance of pronunciation for Nepali secondary-level learners of English by recognizing major linguistic and pedagogical components that affect their spoken accessibility and communicative competence. Meanwhile, pronunciation plays a central role in effective oral communication, and research focusing specifically on secondary school learners in Nepal, which emphasizes classroom environments, teacher expertise, and suprasegmental features, remains limited. Acquiring a qualitative research design, the study focuses on discovering both language-related and classroom-based barriers that delay the development of accurate pronunciation. Data were collected through structured questionnaires and in-depth inquiry to secondary level students, where the analysis was guided by self-determination theory. The findings specify that learners' pronunciation difficulties stem from a combination of strong first language influence, insufficient exposure to authentic spoken English, unpredictable instructional practices, and unacceptable classroom conditions. Moreover, inadequacy in teachers' training further hinders learners' ability to develop clear and confident speech. This study concludes that improving pronunciation results in Nepali secondary requires directed professional development for mentors, improved connection to spoken English input, and classroom practices that promote frequent, low fear speaking opportunities. Focusing on these fields can contribute to improving pronunciation, enhancing learner confidence, and making English language learning more effective overall.

Key words: classroom challenges, exposure to spoken English, linguistic and pedagogical factors, mother-tongue influence, students' pronunciation

Introduction

Despite English is being regularly practiced in secondary schools, learners still present weak pronunciation skills, which consequently affect their oral

communication, classroom activities, confidence, and overall communicative competence. Mainly, the classroom is engaged only in grammar and written skills, leaving pronunciation instruction underemphasized. Moreover, limited access to authentic spoken English, a lack of well-trained expertise in pronunciation pedagogy, and unsuitable classroom conditions further compound the problem. These challenges expand further with linguistic difficulties and relate to learners' psychological well-being, including anxiety, fear of making errors, and negative self-evaluation (Zhang & Rahimi, 2025). Given the seriousness of the issue, there is a lack of specific research examining pronunciation challenges at the secondary level in Nepal, particularly from both linguistic and classroom perspectives.

Objectives

In response to these challenges, this study aims to:

- Identify the major linguistic factors affecting English pronunciation among Nepali secondary-level students.
- Examine classroom-related and pedagogical factors that influence students' pronunciation development.
- Explore the psychological barriers that hinder learners' willingness and confidence to practice pronunciation.
- Provide insights to improve pronunciation teaching practices and teacher training at the secondary level in Nepal.

Research questions

Guided by these objectives, the study seeks to answer the following research questions:

- What linguistic factors contribute to pronunciation difficulties among Nepali secondary-level students?
- How do classroom practices, teacher expertise, and learning environments affect students' pronunciation development?
- What psychological factors influence students' confidence and participation in pronunciation activities?
- How can pronunciation instruction be improved to enhance students' oral intelligibility and communicative competence?

Finally, some of the major influencing factors are a strong mother tongue, low authentic exposure, lack of everyday classroom practice, and psychological barriers. To improve, some strict action must be taken; for instance, explicit instruction, expert teachers, developed access to authentic spoken English, motivated classroom activities that connect meaningful oral interaction, and confidence development.

Methods

Research Design

This research uses a qualitative research method following action research aims to investigate pronunciation challenges faced by students and the resource constraints for interventions related to improving pronunciation outcomes. The deep understanding of learners can be attained by the qualitative inquiry, which it was selected due to experiences, activities in the classroom, and the influence of social and linguistic context on pronunciation learning (Adhikari, 2021). Allowing the researchers to systematically plan, utilize, observe, and replicate focused instructional intervention in a dependable setting (Burns & Claire, 2018). The collaboration of both qualitative inquiry and action research allowed for the identification of pronunciation difficulties, creating active practice tasks, and developing teaching practices through a repeated and reflective process.

Research Context and Participants

The research was conducted in a multilingual educational setting where English function as the second language, with their first mother tongue Nepali, and based on the many other languages spoken in that community. A multilingual location has been selected knowingly to find out how linguistic, contextual, and socio-economic factors affect English pronunciation learning. Grade 9 and Grade 10 students are most useful for purposive sampling. It is because students face developed communicative suffering difficulties in the curriculum. The sample consists of varying levels of exposure to English, with a high level of exposure and low levels, with a lack of opportunities for English practice outside the classroom. The mentor's problem in the research also had diverse levels of training and experience in pronunciation pedagogy (Paudel & Kappar, 2024).

Data Collection

Different qualitative data collection processes were applied to confirm facts and contextualized data.

Classroom Observation

The first method was classroom observation, where the researcher also studied non-participant classroom observation to find out how pronunciation was utilized and practiced at the time of learning the English language. Some of the focus points were on strategies, stress, rhythm, and intonation. After knowing the challenges, correction methods such as errors correction technique, encouragement on students' participation and regular engagement, improvement on classroom environment that is a constant number of students 40, interactive class activities. Moreover, a record of each field observation, the notes taken about action taken in the teaching and learning class, and reflective comments, are essential components of qualitative documentation (Creswell & Creswell, 2023).

Survey

Self-reported data was managed to gather information about pronunciation difficulties, confidence, expertise, manpower with authentic exposure, involvement outside the classroom, utilization of digital resources that is online application or materials. Furthermore, the research objective questions were related to triangulate observation data. Learners' understanding and activities were identified with the help of survey provided additional views into classroom behaviors and reading challenges (Dornyei & Taguchi, 2018).

Action Research Intervention

From the survey, some detailed gaps were recognized between students. These gaps help to find out action research interventions that consist of pair exercise, pronunciation errors, recorded listening tasks, model-based repetition, and guided practice with feedback and self-correction opportunities. The practice of intervention action was applied to many classroom sessions, supporting research cycle: planning, acting, observing, and reflecting.

Documentation and Reflection

From the intervention phase, field notes were documented. The records filed: improve on self-confidence with behavior changes, guidance followed by students in everyday activities to develop sounds in English. Informal interactions and reflective discussions with mentors also supported the data. After each report, the researcher reflected on the consequences, discovered positive ideas and concepts, and utilized instructional principles in needed places.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis has been used to examine data from observations, surveys, and field notes. Recurring patterns related to pronunciation obstacles, instructional practices, and learner involvement were identified and distributed. This analysis balanced the inter critics of how linguistic background justified pronunciation learning and the process of classroom-based interventions aimed at improvement.

Ethical Considerations

The study was guided by ethical principles. Students participated, and the agreement was followed by both teachers and students. Confidentiality was safeguarded by using valid and practical information from data.

Results

Although English language learning with its pronunciation has been regulated in secondary level instruction in Nepal, the action research cycle disclosed that a substantial proportion of students continue to experience constant difficulties in pronunciation. These obstacles were significantly related to first language influence, limited exposure, and lack of regular practice classes, which have a negative impact on spoken intelligibility.

Participation and Data Overview

Out of 80 students during the survey, 40 were from class 9, and 40 students from class 10 were involved. Information collected from classroom observation, objective pronunciation question test, and student survey. Table 1 presents the frequency of pronunciation errors across four categories. These findings show that vowel pronunciation posed the highest difficulty, followed by word stress, consonant articulation, and connected speech features.

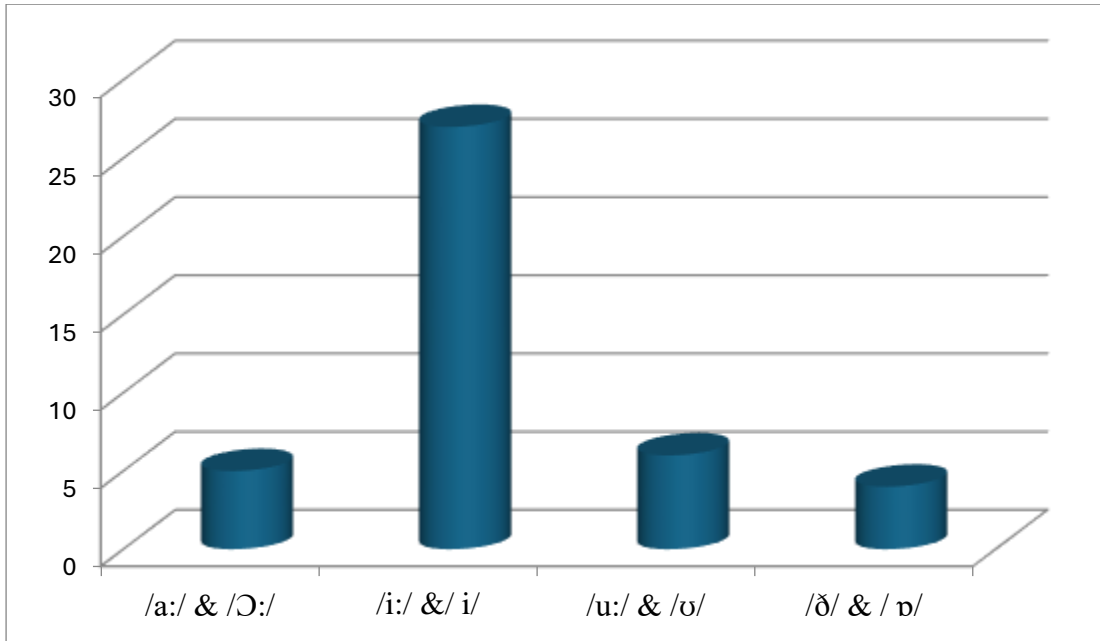
Vowel Confusion

One of the most problematic areas, vowel pronunciation, where sixty-two out of 80 students, that is 78%, presented difficulty in finding the difference between long and short vowel contrast, during the objective listening test questions administered to 40 Grade 10 students. Where 31 students selected the same answer for minimal pairs such as "ship" and "sheep", indicating specific differentiation /I/ and /i:/. Similar confusion was found between /æ/ and /ə/ sounds. During classroom dialogue activities, these vowel errors frequently led to misunderstanding, requiring teachers to request repetition or clarification. Observation data confirmed that students relied

heavily on the Nepali vowel system, which contains fewer vowel distinctions than English. Figure 1 illustrates that the /i:/ vs /ɪ/ contrast was reported as the most confusing vowel pair among students.

Figure1

Which vowel contrast caused the most confusion for students?

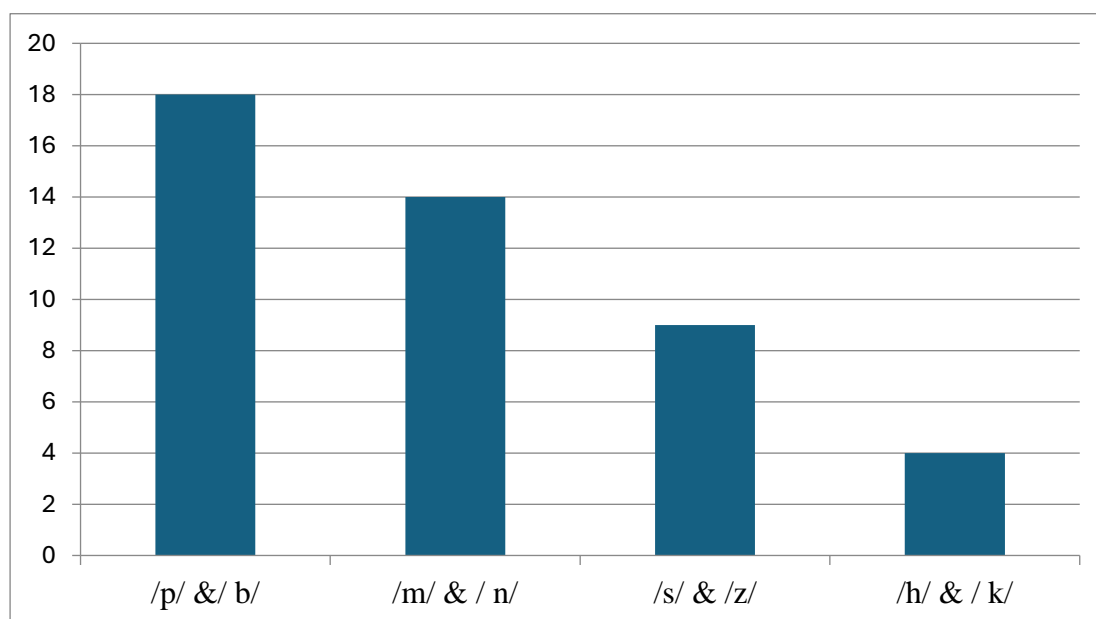


Consonant Substitutions

Out of 80 students, 52 students found errors in consonant pronunciation, that is, English labiodental fricatives with Nepali bilabial stops. On the other hand, the test of multiple-choice objective questions with a total of 40 from Grade 9 students, where 28 students identified pronouncing 'fan' as 'pan' and 26 students identified 'van' as 'ban'. Likewise, classroom observation proved that students pronounced /f/ and /v/ using /p/ and /b/, reflecting the absence of labiodental fricatives in Nepali phonology. Similarly, a substitution pattern was observed for /s/ and /ʃ/ as well as /m/ and /ŋ/. Figure 2 shows that the /p/ and /b/ contrast was the most challenging consonant pair for students.

Figure 2

Which consonant pair is often challenging because of similar pronunciation?

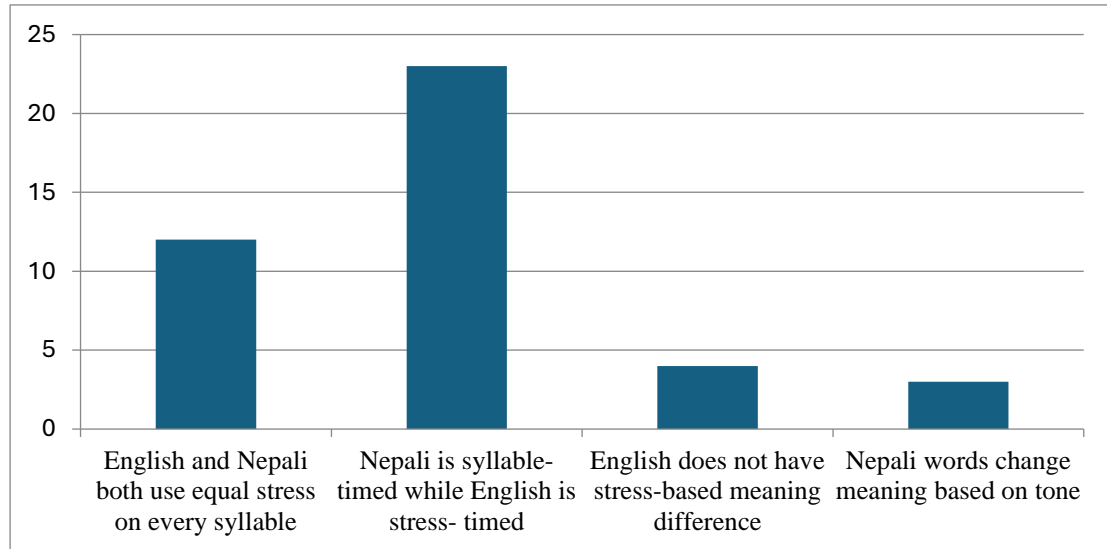


Word Stress Difficulties

Out of 80 students, that is 71%, where 57 students were recorded as having incorrect word stress placement. At the time of reading practice with a loud voice from the English textbook, which is dialogue reading practice, where students consistently misplaced stress in words such as record, develop, and photography. For example, out of 40 students from Grade 10, 22 students placed primary stress incorrectly on the final syllable of photography. These mistakes were connected to differences between Nepali and English rhythm patterns because Nepali is largely syllable timed; on the other hand, English is stress timed, requiring variable stress for meaning and original in its form. Figure 3 depicts that 46 students correctly distinguish syllable timing difference as the first reason for stress misplacement. At the time of the survey, data showed that mentors rarely modeled stress patterns consistently during instruction.

Figure 3

Which of the following best explains why many Nepali students misplace stress in English words like "record," "develop," and "photography"?

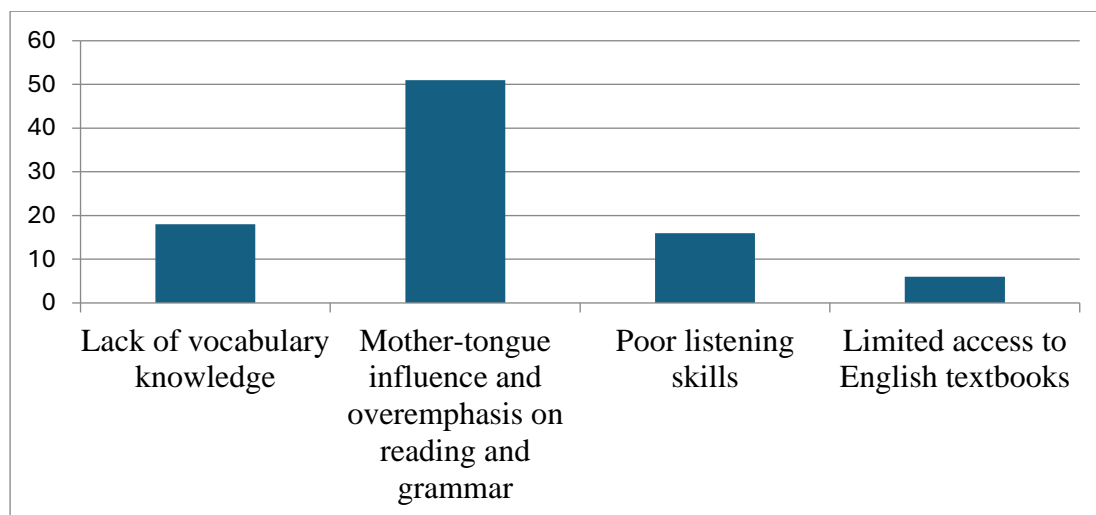


Connected Speech Limitations

Out of 80 students, that is 54% were observed having difficulties with connected speech features. Some of the problems are linking, elision, and weak forms. At the time of speaking tasks, students usually uttered words separately, for example, "I-want-to-eat", instead of saying "I want to eat". The consequences of the survey proved that 49 students focused on mother-tongue influence and overemphasis on reading and grammar as the main reasons for their difficulty with connected speech. Figure 4 with classroom observation further revealed that students from linguistically diverse backgrounds, e.g., Limbu, Rai, Tamang, Sherpa, and Tharu communities retrained intonation patterns from their native mother tongue while speaking the English language as a part of communication. This came out with consequences of mixed rhythmic patterns and reduced fluency during oral tasks.

Figure 4

Which factor mainly contributed to students' difficulty with connected speech in English?



Discussions

The findings indicate that pronunciation challenges among Nepali secondary-level students result from the interplay of linguistic, pedagogical, and environmental factors (Giri & Awasthi, 2021; Paudel, 2024). The most significant factor is being recognized as the mother-tongue influence for learners as they replace unfamiliar English sounds with those from Nepali sounds or ethnic languages (Swan & Smith, 2001; Arias et al., 2024). The finding exposed a crisis of trained expertise, limited access to modern technological resources, and instructional limitations, further hindering pronunciation development (Tiwari, 2024; Lee & Kim, 2024). In the village area, the limited access to multimedia services restricts students' exposure to authentic pronunciation models (Forsyth, 2014). Some other factors appeared as an obstacle, like psychological terms with fear of public speaking and low confidence that decreases participation in speaking activities (Shak et al., 2016; Zhang & Rahimi, 2018).

There are some more problems revealed during the survey, not only students but also Nepalese teachers face difficulties and challenges in this area. In comparison to native teachers, non-native teachers' fluency is quite different in terms of sounds and often influences the quality. The findings suggest that instead of following

grammar and reading tasks, only awareness of phonetic sounds and daily practical habits would increase the level of interaction and communication. Sufficient training in phonetics and pronunciation pedagogy can improve stress, rhythm, and intonation (Umar & Aspany, 2024).

Additionally, the force to complete the syllabus for testing purposes often makes teachers avoid oral practice. A lack of confidence among teachers themselves causes inconsistent error correction or giving up speaking activities, further decreasing the chances for student practice (Vireak & Bunrosy, 2025). Class size is another constraint. In the context of Nepal, the size of the class and number of students are almost larger, making it impossible to reach each and every student to practice with personalized feedback. Similarly, students are afraid of speaking in front of the class when presenting a speech, as a result, their embarrassment, mispronunciation, or fear of being laughed at, which further stops students from participating and limits the practice needed for pronunciation progress (Zhang & Rahimi, 2018). Likewise, speaking or pronunciation classes are mostly conducted at the time of the exam only by using a textbook, due to which the gap between native and non-native speakers is increasing day by day. Every day with meaningful practice is required for accuracy in English sounds instead of depending on the curriculum only. The research also focuses on inequalities between rural and urban institutions. Urban students are facilitated with trained teachers, full of needed resources and materials, which have a direct impact on students' motivation and confidence. Exposure to natural English sounds helps faster improvement when adopted with appropriate guidance in pronunciation (Zhang & Smith, 2001). Having addressed all challenges, the research identifies several promising solutions. The proper knowledge and expertise about the concerned field, that is, minimal pairs, phonetic sounds that they relate to authentic models, students develop remarkable progress (Zubaydova & Toyirova, 2024). Some other helpful techniques or strategies include daily drilling, recording, and repetitive practice, and simple phonetic skills to develop awareness of problematic sounds. Physically verbal related programs support learners by decreasing embarrassment and improving confidence.

However, the research also emphasized a dedicated, promising solution. Some of the vital findings are that interventions using minimal pairs, regular drilling practices, classes, and phonetically sensible activities proved remarkable

improvement in learner confidence and intelligibility (Toyirova & Zubaydova, 2024; Brigui & Bougataia, 2025). The discussion above indicates that strategic instructional support, increased exposure, and stronger teacher preparation can significantly enhance pronunciation outcomes in Nepalese secondary schools.

Conclusions

Similarly, the most common errors, such as English labiodental fricatives /f/ and /v/ with bilabial stops /p/ and /b/, were frequent among many students. These methods reflect phoneme absence in Nepali phonology, reinforcing the act of cross-linguistic interference in pronunciation learning (Derwing & Munro, 2015). The continuity of these errors across objective tests and classroom speech practice strengthens the validity of this conclusion. From the survey, we find out that word stress misplacement affects over two-thirds of participants, mainly due to the gap between Nepali-syllable-timed rhythm and English stress-timed rhythm. Beginners' incorrect stress placement in multisyllabic words, for instance, phonography presents how rhythmic transfer from the first language distracts intelligibility in second language speech, a process widely documented in second language phonology research (Celce-Murcia et al., 2010). Moreover, obstacles with connected speech features, including linking, elision, and weak forms, focused students' tendency to develop English as isolated words rather than as fluent speakers. Some of the suggestions that this limitation is reinforced by instructional focus on reading and grammar over spoken activities, rather than by elements not evidenced in the data. Having a different background was identified as retaining native patterns, resulting in mixed rhythmic output and reduced spoken fluency, consistent with findings in a multilingual EFL context (Foote et al., 2016).

After completing the survey, the research confirmed that English pronunciation remains a significant challenge for secondary-level students in Nepal, despite its formal inclusion in the curriculum. Some evidence is classroom observation, pronunciation objective tests, listening tests, and research consistently proves that linguistic background (L1) influence, lack of expertise, communicative exposure, and insufficient resources in everyday practice classes are the core factors affecting students' speaking or communicative habits. The finding indicates that vowel production represents the most difficult area because 78% of students are not able to distinguish between long and short vowel contrast, such as /I/ and /i:/. This

aligns with established phonological research showing that beginners focus on finding out unfamiliar second language sounds on their first language vowel resources when the target language contains more contrast than the native language (Flege, 1995; Avery & Ehrlich, 2012). Observation data finalized that reliance on the Nepali vowel system, which has fewer distinction than English, directly contributes these perceptual and production mistakes.

Finally, the output drawn from the data shows that pronunciation difficulties among Nepali secondary students are systematic patterns rather than incidental, where the word formation and spoken method are old traditional in linguistic transfer and pedagogical practice. The consequences obtained from research validate the importance of explicit and consistent pronunciation development progress that will happen simultaneously. The derived conclusion from the survey connects with the data presented above and does not extend to claims beyond the documented evidence.

References

- Adhikari, P. (2021). Instructional leadership practices in Nepali secondary schools. *Journal of Education and Research*, 11(2), 45–58.
- Arias, J., Alexander, K., Herrera, T., & Vinicio, M. (2024). *English pronunciation errors of the sounds /θ/ and /ð/ made by second level EFL students at the Technical University of Cotopaxi* (Doctoral dissertation, Universidad Técnica de Cotopaxi). <https://repositorio.utc.edu.ec/items/3283a289-d442-4135-b9e1-6210ae2adf5d>
- Avery, P., & Ehrlich, S. (2012). *Teaching American English pronunciation*. Oxford University Press.
<https://global.oup.com/academic/product/teaching-american-english-pronunciation-9780194328159>
- Brigui, H., & Bougataia, E. (2025). Exploring EFL learners' attitudes towards the effectiveness of recasts vs. explicit corrective feedback on pronunciation. *Journal of Natural Language and Linguistics*, 3(1), 19–27.
<https://doi.org/10.54536/jnll.v3i1.4162>
- Burns, A., & Claire, S. (2018). *Pronunciation in learning and teaching*. Cambridge University Press.

- Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. (2023). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approach (6th ed.)*. SAGE Publications.
- Celce-Murcia, M., Brinton, D. M., & Goodwin, J. M. (2010). *Teaching pronunciation: A course book and reference guide (2nd ed.)*. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511781342>
- Derwing, T. M., & Munro, M. J. (2025). Exploring EFL learners' attitudes towards the effectiveness of recast vs. explicit corrective feedback on pronunciation. *Journal of Natural Language and Linguistics (JNLL)*.
<https://journals.e-palli.com/home/index.php/jnll/article/view/4162?articlesBySimilarity>
- Dornyei, Z., & Taguchi, T. (2018). *Questionnaires in second language research: Construction, administration, and processing (2nd ed.)*. Routledge.
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203864737>
- Flege, J. E. (1995). Second language speech learning: Theory, findings, and problems. In W. Strange (Ed.), *Speech perception and linguistic experience: Theoretical and methodological issues* (pp. 233–277). York Press.
- Foote, J. A., Holtby, A. K., & Derwing, T. M. (2016). Survey of pronunciation teaching in adult ESL programs in Canada. *TESL Canada Journal*, 33(1), 1–22. <https://teslcanadajournal.ca/index.php/tesl/article/view/1086>
- Forsyth, H. (2014). The influence of L2 transfer on L3 English written production in a bilingual German/Italian population: A study of syntactic errors. *Open Journal of Modern Linguistics*, 4(3), 429–456.
<https://www.scirp.org/journal/paperinformation.aspx?paperid=48121>
- Giri, R. A., & Awasthi, L. D. (2021). English pronunciation in South Asia: Problems and pedagogical implications. *Asian Englishes*, 23(3), 225–272.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13488678.2020.1770928>
- Lee, J., & Kim, H. (2024). Mobile apps for pronunciation learning: Learner engagement and outcomes. *Computer Assisted Language Learning*, 37(1), 112–129. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09588221.2022.2047603>
- Paudel, B. (2024). Pronunciation difficulties among Nepali EFL learners: A segmental and suprasegmental analysis. *Journal of NELTA*, 29(1), 14–29.
<https://doi.org/10.3126/nelta.v29i1>

- Paudel, R., & Kappur, S. (2024). Pronunciation and communicative competence in secondary-level English classrooms. *International Journal of EFL Studies, 12*(1), 75–90.
- Shak, P., Siew Lee, C., & Stephen, J. (2016). Pronunciation problems: A case study of English pronunciation errors of low-proficiency students. *International Journal of Language Education and Applied Linguistics, 4*, 25–35.
<https://doi.org/10.15282/ijleal.v4.475>
- Swan, M., & Smith, B. (2001). *Learner English: A teacher's guide to interference and other problems* (2nd ed.). Cambridge University Press.
- Tiwari, D. (2024). Challenges in pronunciation teaching in Nepali EFL classrooms. *Journal of English Pedagogy, 12*(1), 24–38.
- Toyirova, O. B. Q., & Zubaydova, N. N. (2024). The importance of pronunciation in English. *Problems and Solutions of Science and Innovative Research, 1*(5), 1–6.
- Umar, R. L. U., & Aspany, N. F. (2024). Students' pronunciation skills in suprasegmental and segmental aspects of English pronunciation. *NUSRA: Jurnal Penelitian dan Ilmu Pendidikan, 5*(1), 314–319.
<https://doi.org/10.55681/nusra.v5i1.2196>
- Vireak, K., & Bunrosy, L. (2025). Evolution of English language teaching (ELT) methodologies and contemporary trends: A critical analysis of the Cambodia context. *European Journal of English Language Teaching, 9*(6).
<https://doi.org/10.46827/ejel.v9i6.5723>
- Zhang, L., & Rahimi, M. (2018). The impact of pronunciation practice on English learners' pronunciation accuracy and fluency. *TESL Canada Journal, 35*(1), 1–17. <https://teslcanadajournal.ca/index.php/tesl/article/view/1344>
- Zubaydova, & Toyirova. (2024). The importance of pronunciation in English. *Problems and Solutions of Scientific and Innovative Research*.
<https://universalconference.us/universalconference/index.php/pssir/article/view/2814>