

## Factors that hinder the teaching of pronunciation within ELT

## Factores que dificultan la enseñanza de la pronunciación del inglés

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### Abstract:

Pronunciation plays a crucial role in effective communication skills. However, not only does it often receive inadequate attention in language teaching curricula but also among teachers. This, in turn, may cause a lack of motivation on students to learn a new language as teachers may not be able to model or teach pronunciation features effectively. This topic has been researched extensively because it can become a serious problem in ELT classrooms. If teachers lack fundamental knowledge to teach pronunciation, they will not be able to effectively guide students towards achieving correct pronunciation (Metruk, 2017). The purpose of this qualitative case study was to identify the factors that might prevent teachers from teaching pronunciation in their classrooms. The participants were two female part-time English teachers working in the Institute of Social Sciences and Humanities at Universidad Autónoma del Estado de Hidalgo. The research instrument for data collection was a semi-structured interview. The findings revealed that various factors hinder teachers from effectively imparting pronunciation instruction. Key obstacles included the fear of mispronouncing words, the absence of allocated time for pronunciation sessions, and the challenge posed by the disparity between spelling and pronunciation. Furthermore, one of the most prominent factors was the lack of professional development. The teachers reported not feeling well-prepared to teach pronunciation or even not knowing how to incorporate pronunciation into their classes. These factors contribute to the neglect of pronunciation instruction within language education environments.

### Keywords:

Teaching pronunciation, factors, professional development

### Resumen:

La pronunciación juega un papel crucial en las habilidades de comunicación efectiva. Sin embargo, no solo suele recibir poca atención en los planes de estudio de enseñanza de idiomas, sino también entre los docentes, lo que puede ocasionar una falta de motivación en los estudiantes para aprender una nueva lengua, ya que los profesores pueden no ser capaces de modelar o enseñar adecuadamente la pronunciación. Este tema ha sido investigado por muchos años porque se puede convertir en un problema serio en las aulas de ELT. Si los profesores carecen de conocimientos básicos sobre la pronunciación y su enseñanza, no podrán guiar eficazmente a los estudiantes para lograr una pronunciación correcta (Metruk, 2017). El propósito de este estudio de caso fue identificar los factores que podrían impedirle a los docentes de ELT enseñar pronunciación en sus aulas. Las participantes fueron dos profesoras de inglés de medio tiempo que trabajan en el Instituto de Ciencias Sociales y Humanidades en la Universidad Autónoma del Estado de Hidalgo. El instrumento de recolección de datos fue una entrevista semiestructurada. Los hallazgos revelaron que existen varios factores que dificultan la impartición efectiva de instrucción en pronunciación por parte de los docentes. Los principales obstáculos fueron el miedo a pronunciar mal, la falta de tiempo para sesiones de pronunciación y la diferencia entre ortografía y pronunciación. Además, un factor clave fue la falta de desarrollo profesional, ya que las docentes no se sentían preparadas para enseñar pronunciación ni sabían cómo incluirla en sus clases. Estos factores contribuyen a la marginación de la enseñanza de la pronunciación.

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Fecha de recepción: 02/04/2025, Fecha de aceptación: 12/08/2025, Fecha de publicación: 05/05/2025

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.29057/lc.v7i13.14866>



## **Palabras Clave:**

*Enseñanza de la pronunciación, factores y desarrollo profesional*

## **Introduction**

Pronunciation is a critical aspect of language acquisition and learning, contributing significantly to effective communication. However, teachers often encounter challenges in addressing students' pronunciation issues.

Previous studies have addressed this topic and have identified some specific factors that may prevent teachers from teaching pronunciation in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom. For example, Pourhosein and Sabouri (2016) found that "lack of pronunciation knowledge, lack of institutional resources, insufficiency of suitable pronunciation materials, fear of producing English words incorrectly, lack of training, insufficiency of time, and lack of motivation and confidence" (p.206) are some of the reasons why teachers do not like teaching pronunciation in their classrooms. MacDonald (2002) highlights that the curricula, assessment tools to monitor students' progress, lack of understanding of how to integrate pronunciation as well as a lack of suitable materials for teaching pronunciation are all factors that prevent teachers from teaching pronunciation in the classroom. Qader et al., (2024) also found that teacher training, resource availability, native language interference, class sizes, and individualized attention stop teachers from teaching pronunciation.

The methods employed by teachers to address students' pronunciation problems play a fundamental role in ELT classrooms. Traditional approaches often emphasize grammar and vocabulary at the expense of pronunciation, neglecting the fact that accurate pronunciation is integral to effective communication (Pourhosein & Sabouri, 2016). Additionally, inadequate teacher training and the need for such training in Phonetics and Phonology can lead to instructors not being able to address pronunciation problems effectively (MacDonald, 2002). Moreover, unplanned classes and time limits make it even harder to focus on pronunciation. In dynamic educational environments, educators are often faced with unexpected changes to lesson plans or limited time dedicated to language instruction, which can contribute to pronunciation being marginalized, and teachers struggle to cover the essential components of language within tight schedules (Pourhosein & Sabouri, 2016). This phenomenon has been observed in the particular context where the study takes place. This study, then, aims to identify the factors that prevent teachers from teaching pronunciation in the classroom in a specific Mexican higher education context.

This research report consists of four sections. The first discusses teachers' approaches to teaching pronunciation, challenges teachers face when teaching pronunciation, teachers' lack of knowledge in teaching pronunciation, and previous studies, according to

previous research. The second section describes the methodology behind this study, detailing the worldview, approach, design, participants, instruments, and data analysis. The third section presents the findings and their correlation with the research questions. The final section offers a discussion of the results.

## **Literature Review**

Because of the increasing influence of global English varieties and the widespread use of technology in language learning, students are now being exposed to diverse accents and pronunciation patterns, making it difficult to even describe a preferred standardized pronunciation. However, navigating these intricate factors is imperative for educators seeking to cultivate effective communicators in diverse and dynamic linguistic environments.

### **Factors that may prevent teachers from teaching pronunciation**

#### **Teachers' Approach to Pronunciation Teaching**

The way teachers teach pronunciation could affect learning immensely because, according to recent research, only rarely do teachers practice pronunciation, and, when they do so, it is done in a very limited way—for example, by correcting the mispronunciation of individual words. Nguyen and Newton (2020) also identified the issue that teachers' pronunciation teaching was typically unplanned and reactive, involving corrective feedback through recasting and/or prompts in response to learners' errors in the pronunciation of segmental features. The same researchers found a mismatch between what the teachers said about how they teach pronunciation and how they actually taught it (Nguyen & Newton, 2020).

Limited understanding of pronunciation can also affect the quality of feedback given to students. Constructive feedback is crucial to enable language learners to polish their pronunciation skills. However, teachers with insufficient knowledge in this area may have difficulties themselves in identifying and addressing specific pronunciation problems, resulting in generic or ineffective feedback that does not facilitate significant improvement. As Pourhosein and Sabouri (2016) state, "EFL teachers should explore new ways of indicating, practicing, and giving feedback on English pronunciation that are actually appropriate for learners to learn English pronunciation easily and effectively" (p.197).

#### **Teachers' Knowledge and Curriculum Constraints**

Plailek and Essien (2021) mentioned that another factor that prevents teachers from teaching pronunciation is that teachers own only basic knowledge of English

pronunciation, the quality of instruction of teachers, and the inconsistency of English pronunciation. If teachers themselves do not have basic knowledge about pronunciation, it is impossible for them to teach students to pronounce appropriately. Also, teachers need to be aware that pronunciation instruction cannot be overlooked and omitted from the curriculum (Metruk, 2017) because it is very important that students have a constant practice of pronunciation within their classes. Teachers are not only language teachers, but they are also language models for their students. When educators themselves lack a solid foundation in English pronunciation, the students may learn and internalize the same errors that their teachers display without realizing it, hindering their ability to communicate effectively in the language.

Time constraints also seem to influence the teaching of pronunciation in many language classrooms, where the curriculum is often packed with a range of linguistic components, leaving only limited room for pronunciation skills. Lack of time dedicated to teaching pronunciation can have several detrimental effects for language learners. Pourhosein and Sabouri (2016) identified time as a significant factor and suggested that to increase the quality of instruction, teachers should have abundant time. This includes time for preparing teaching materials and resources for instruction. Tlazalo and Basurto (2014) also highlighted that, in the context of their study, not enough time is dedicated to working on pronunciation, since teachers use that time to work on other textbook-based activities.

### Challenges in teaching Pronunciation

Teaching pronunciation presents significant challenges for teachers, particularly—as already mentioned above—due to gaps in their own knowledge of phonetics and phonology. Barrantes-Elizondo and Gordon (2024) noted that many teachers lack confidence in teaching pronunciation because they have minimal or no formal training in phonetics and phonology or are unsure about which pronunciation features to prioritize in instruction. This uncertainty can affect the effectiveness of their teaching strategies and limit their ability to provide clear guidance to students.

Another major challenge is the size of groups, which affects the level and amount of personalized feedback teachers can offer. Large class sizes make it difficult to address individual pronunciation issues as teachers have limited time to correct and support each student. Tiwari (2024) emphasized that to overcome these challenges, teachers must employ innovative teaching methods, offer personalized support, and adopt a patient approach. Implementing interactive pronunciation activities and integrating phonetic instruction can enhance student learning and build confidence in both educators and learners. Addressing these challenges is essential for improving pronunciation instruction and ensuring students develop clear and accurate speech.

These studies highlight some of the challenges English teachers face in terms of teaching pronunciation. However, little is known about the challenges that teachers face in an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) program in a specific higher education context in Central Mexico. Due to the importance of pronunciation in language teaching, this study aims to find how different factors prevent teachers from teaching pronunciation in their classrooms in this environment, and to compare these with those identified in earlier research.

### Methodology

This research project follows a constructivist paradigm, since in this model, priority is given to the treatment of knowledge as locally constructed and deeply embedded in social and cultural contexts. Participant meaning is constructed and interpreted within this context. Creswell (2013) describes the constructivist paradigm as “individuals develop subjective meanings of their experiences, meanings directed toward certain objects or things. These meanings are varied and multiple, leading the researcher to look for the complexity of views rather than narrowing meanings into a few categories or ideas” (p.24). Embracing a more subjective viewpoint, the constructivist paradigm allows researchers to gather information through diverse data collection methods such as interviews and observations. The constructivist paradigm encourages the exploration of the social context in which language learning occurs. Pronunciation is not simply a matter of individual skills but it is shaped by social interactions, language communities, and cultural influences. By adopting a constructivist perspective, it can be discovered how social dynamics impact pronunciation norms and influence learners' adaptation and negotiation of these norms.

The qualitative approach adopted in this study involves ongoing detailed analysis during data collection. Creswell, Hanson, Clark Plano, and Morales (2007) emphasize that the qualitative approach also “involves discussing the sample for the study and the overall data collection and recording procedures” (p.238) in order to have a wide range of important information. One of the main strengths of a qualitative approach lies in its ability to explore the subjective experiences of individuals. Pronunciation problems are not mere objective phenomena, but are deeply intertwined with individuals' perceptions, emotions, and cultural backgrounds. Through qualitative methods, such as in-depth interviews, it is possible to gain a deep understanding of how teachers interpret and navigate through their teaching pronunciation difficulties. Additionally, the qualitative approach facilitates the collection of rich and detailed descriptions that capture the complexities of pronunciation challenges. Participants can share their experiences, struggles, and strategies in their own words, providing a wealth of data beyond numerical measurements. This depth of knowledge is invaluable for generating comprehensive findings and developing specific interventions. As mentioned, the qualitative approach aligns with the constructivist

paradigm, making its implementation in this study significant.

Hence, a case study approach, which requires the researcher to become close to the participants and analyze their experiences and opinions, is also appropriate for this study. Sturman (as cited in Rebolj, 2013) states that “a case study is a general term for the exploration of an individual, group or phenomenon” (p. 31). A case study offers an in-depth examination of a specific context, allowing the exploration of the interplay of various factors influencing the teaching of pronunciation. Furthermore, the case study enables the exploration of contextual factors that could contribute to pronunciation problems. A case study is suitable for the investigation of the reasons why teachers do not emphasize pronunciation in their classes.

Since this study aims to identify the factors that hinder the teaching of pronunciation through interviews providing information on teachers' perspectives, a semi-structured interview was designed to collect the data. Ruslin et al. (2022) clarify that semi-structured interviews are considered as interviews with more potential than other types, since they permit the researchers to collect more extensive and complete information from the interviewees. Considering this, the tool was created for this study to shape the interview as a conversation, supported by some open-ended guided questions. Semi-structured interviews offer a dynamic and personalized approach to data collection, and would therefore enable me to delve deeply into participants' perspectives, experiences, and insights. Additionally, with this type of interview, the series of open-ended questions ensured that key topics were covered as intended, while also allowing some adaptability during the interview and the possibility of exploring unexpected avenues and clarifying answers, as appropriate. A final important aspect is the rapport that can be established between the interviewer and the participant in semi-structured interviews, fostering a comfortable and open dialogue. This interpersonal connection encourages participants to share personal anecdotes, reflections, and emotions related to their pronunciation struggles, contributing to a more comprehensive and authentic portrayal of their experiences, and was exactly what was needed for my study.

### Participants

The participants in this research project were two part-time English teachers who identify themselves as women, with a C1 level of English. These teachers were chosen due to their experience and expertise in teaching English as a second language, as well as their availability and willingness to participate in the study.

### Data collection

The main data collection tool was a semi-structured interview consisting of 20 open questions. Author 1 developed the questions to obtain detailed responses from the participants about their experiences, attitudes, and challenges related to teaching pronunciation. The

questions were designed to explore various aspects, such as teachers' perceptions of the importance of teaching pronunciation, their confidence and competence in teaching pronunciation, the strategies and resources they used, and the barriers they encountered.

### Data analysis

The interview transcripts were analyzed by means of thematic analysis. Braun and Clarke (as cited in Joffe, 2011) define thematic analysis as “a method for identifying and analyzing patterns of meaning in a dataset” (p. 209). The ultimate outcome of a thematic analysis should emphasize the most prominent patterns of meaning found within the dataset. For this study, Author 1 reviewed the transcripts and highlighted phrases relevant to the research question. From this process, three main categories emerged: spelling and pronunciation, lack of time, and professional development. With these categories, findings were organized to compare the perceptions of the two participants with previous research. The results revealed several factors inhibiting teachers from imparting pronunciation instruction effectively within their classrooms. The predominant focus on content delivery, lack of dedicated pronunciation sessions, time constraints, and the discrepancy between spelling and pronunciation all emerged as significant barriers in this context, too. These factors collectively contribute to the marginalization of pronunciation instruction in this, and other, language education settings.

## Findings

Results revealed that there are many factors which contribute to teachers' lack of self-confidence in teaching pronunciation in the classroom, such as lack of knowledge or the insufficient time to teach pronunciation.

### Spelling and pronunciation

Teaching pronunciation in ELT classrooms is essential to developing students' overall language proficiency and communication skills. While some may argue that the focus should be primarily on spoken communication, neglecting spelling and pronunciation instruction can hinder students' ability to communicate effectively in written and spoken contexts. Teachers have observed that students often pronounce English words using Spanish phonetic features, as it is the only system they are familiar with, as shown below,

*It's difficult to have a good conversation if you are pronouncing something that is not (Participant 1).*

*Ahh this is really important I think because they want to wh- when they say that they don't understand is because they want to listen to what they are reading (Participant 2).*

Correct spelling and pronunciation contribute to learners' confidence in using English. When learners can spell words correctly and pronounce them accurately, they feel

more confident expressing themselves orally. This confidence motivates learners to engage more actively in language learning activities. However, it is important to mention that some students may be able to pronounce words correctly but struggle with spelling, while others may know how to write words accurately but have difficulty pronouncing them. Priya and Kumar (2020) stated that “the pronunciation of a letter differs from word to word. Some letters have more than one sound. Sometimes in a word a letter is not pronounced at all” (p.669). This is evident in the case of vowel sounds. For instance, the letter “a” in *apple* represents a short vowel sound, whereas in *cake*, it takes on a long sound; such inconsistencies in pronunciation contribute to the complexity of English.

Teaching pronunciation not only improves learners' spoken communication but also enhances their listening skills. By learning pronunciation rules and patterns, learners can better understand spoken English, including accents and variations. This comprehension is vital for effective communication in real-life situations, such as conversations with native speakers or listening to lectures and presentations.

Therefore, teachers have tried to make students aware of pronunciation by implementing activities to help students improve their pronunciation, as illustrated below,

*I have done some shadowing with them..... they can listen to certain types of uhh...I don't know, like, it can be podcasts or anything they like and they have to- they have to pay attention to certain, certain phrases, certain words and they have to repeat them exactly as how they listen to them* (Participant 1).

*We use dictionaries. I show them like the symbols of the phonetic alphabet, so I try to explain that whenever they find this symbol it is because they have to pronounce it this way* (Participant 2).

Pronunciation activities not only focus on producing sounds accurately but also on understanding them when spoken by others. Likewise, Priya and Kumar (2020) mentioned that, “stress and intonation of the words and sentences also matter. A wrong pronunciation or a wrong word stress and tone can render the meaning of the thought to be communicated” (p 669). By practicing listening to and discriminating between different sounds and intonation patterns, students improve their listening comprehension skills, and by identifying stress and intonation patterns, students develop the ability to understand spoken English more effectively.

### Challenges in teaching pronunciation

One of the main reasons teachers do not teach pronunciation in the classroom is lack of time. In many schools, pronunciation is neglected, and it is not considered as important as content because teachers have short-length classes and it is difficult to cover the syllabus. As the participants in this study mentioned, they have faced many difficulties regarding time when teaching pronunciation, as shown below,

*There is no specific time because it depends on what are we checking and how are they talking to each other or how they are saying something* (Participant 1).

*Well, we have for those classes we have only fo- ee four hours a week, so that's never enough* (Participant 2).

As seen above, for these teachers, time has been an obstacle to teaching pronunciation because they only have four hours of classes per week, or they do not even know if they will teach pronunciation, because most of the time it depends on whether the topic is suitable for teaching pronunciation. In this regard, the results highlight a common issue, as also found by Pourhosein and Sabouri (2016) who reported that time is a significant factor for the effective teaching of pronunciation in the context of their study. Teachers need extra time for preparing teaching materials and resources in their instruction. However, given limited class hours and competing demands, teachers may feel comfortable spending more time on these basic skills, instead of focusing on pronunciation (Tlazalo & Basurto, 2014). Furthermore, teachers often face difficulties when teaching pronunciation because many students are reluctant to participate. This reluctance may be due to a lack of interest, shyness, or fear of being made fun of by their peers for mispronouncing words. As a result, these factors create a less engaging learning environment, making it difficult for teachers to effectively address pronunciation skills in the classroom.

*I have faced some problems with some students that are shy that they don't want to even say a word* (Participant 1).

*I think in general students don't care a lot about pronunciation or they don't get the importance of it, but there are some students, I think my class is like for forty students, if only one or two are interested* (Participant 2).

As Tlazalo and Basurto (2014) stated, “drills can help students to gain confidence because they practice pronunciation as a group and there is no opportunity for others to make fun of somebody if s/he mispronounces a word” (p.153). This suggests that implementing drills as the initial activity for teaching pronunciation can be beneficial; once students have gained confidence, teachers can then introduce tongue twisters, as students will feel more comfortable speaking, knowing their peers are less likely to make fun of them.

### Professional development

Pronunciation is often perceived as a challenging aspect of English language teaching, and many educators may feel unsure or inadequately prepared to teach it. Professional development in pronunciation helps build educators' confidence and competence in addressing pronunciation issues and providing effective instruction to their students. The teachers in the current study are no exception; they do not feel confident when they have to

teach pronunciation, since they have not taken courses recently or they simply do not know how to teach it.

*I think we don't know exactly how can we incorporate pronunciation in our English classes, so I would like to have a... a course that tell me like you have to... do this in order to help your students to pronounce better (Participant 1).*

*Well, I remember that since I studied ELT. I think we received training to teach pronunciation (Participant 2).*

As seen above, teachers seek concrete strategies to effectively incorporate pronunciation into English classes. While they may have received training in pronunciation during their ELT studies, they have not engaged in consistent professional development opportunities focused on pronunciation instruction, which could help bridge the gap between teacher education and classroom practice. Pourhosein and Sabouri (2016) pointed out that EFL teachers should improve the necessary skills for teaching pronunciation and indicate considerable enthusiasm for pronunciation instruction.

*Teaching pronunciation sometimes is, maybe I don't know, like, kind of a fear that maybe I can't pronounce a word in this way and it's not the way it has to be pronounced (Participant 1).*

In order to solve these critical difficulties, EFL teachers should be trained sufficiently to know how to pronounce the English sounds, words, and sentences intelligibly so that they can model and teach good pronunciation skills. In other words, professional development in pronunciation is essential for English language educators to enhance their teaching effectiveness, build confidence and competence, improve student learning outcomes, increase awareness of linguistic diversity, and engage in continual growth and lifelong learning.

## Conclusions

This study has uncovered a range of challenges faced by English teachers at the Institute of Social Sciences and Humanities from the Universidad Autónoma del Estado de Hidalgo when teaching pronunciation, such as: limited time, insufficient professional development opportunities, and difficulties with spelling and pronunciation. This research shows the importance of integrating pronunciation explicitly into the curriculum, providing teachers with resources and training, and creating dedicated time for pronunciation instruction. Additionally, raising awareness among educators and students concerning the importance of accurate pronunciation is recommended to create and maintain a classroom environment which is conducive to learning.

This study emphasizes the significance of addressing the identified barriers to enhance pronunciation teaching in language education settings and improve students' communication effectiveness. The hope is that this research will contribute to the raising of awareness among

teachers and administrators locally and beyond, prompting them to include specific class time for pronunciation instruction in the syllabus and clarify any notion that pronunciation is not an essential aspect of English teaching.

However, this study has two main limitations. The first one is the small sample size since only two English teachers were interviewed. While their insights are valuable, and the data they provided was rich and helpful, a larger and more diverse sample could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing pronunciation instruction. The second one is time constraint which limited the data collection and the depth of analysis. A more extensive research period could enable more detailed interviews as well as the use of observations, which could reveal additional factors that prevent teachers from teaching pronunciation and provide a richer understanding of the challenges teachers face. Finally, the scope of this study was limited to a single Mexican educational context. Replicating this research in different institutional settings could help determine whether the findings are generalizable to other contexts. Exploring how cultural and institutional differences impact on pronunciation teaching could provide valuable information for the development of general and tailored strategies to support teachers around the world.

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