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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Challenges in Teaching English Pronunciation in Indian Classrooms: Between Sounds and Silence

Afroz Begum

Assistant Professor, Keshav Memorial institute of commerce and sciences, Narayanguda, Hyderabad, Telangana. Affiliated to Osmania University, India;

afrozbegumaffu@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

English pronunciation continues to pose challenges in Indian classrooms, creating a gap between communicative intent and intelligibility. This study examines these challenges through the lens of "sounds" (segmental features such as vowel length and consonant contrasts) and "silence" (suprasegmental features such as stress and intonation). Focusing on undergraduate learners in an urban aided college with intermediate proficiency but little sound awareness, the research draws on classroom recordings, reading tasks, and teaching observations, supported by existing literature. Findings reveal errors shaped by mother tongue influence and limited phonetic training, including vowel length confusion, consonant substitutions, syllable-timed rhythm, and flat intonation. The paper also reflects on teachers' difficulties in integrating pronunciation into instruction in resource-limited contexts. It concludes that targeted, context-sensitive strategies can bridge the gap between accurate articulation and expressive prosody, thereby improving oral proficiency in multilingual environments.

Keywords: Pronunciation; Segmental features; Suprasegmental features; Indian English; Mother tongue influence; Oral proficiency

FULL PAPER

Introduction

In India, English often serves as both a link language and a bridge language for communication between individuals from diverse linguistic backgrounds. Though the country officially recognizes 22 scheduled languages and has a designated national language, there is still a strong need for a common medium to connect speakers from different states. In some regions, resistance to learning any language other than the local mother tongue adds to this complexity. As a result, English frequently becomes the practical choice for inter-state communication in education, workplaces, and travel. However, while many Indians attend English-medium schools and speak English to some degree, differences in pronunciation — shaped by each speaker's mother tongue — can lead to misunderstandings, hesitation, or loss of confidence in conversation. This makes intelligible pronunciation not just a linguistic skill, but a key to effective participation in India's multilingual society.

While vocabulary and grammar are given preference in classrooms right from the beginning, pronunciation often remains neglected. This neglect is usually perceived only in terms of "sounding right," and at times, learners even end up producing unnecessary sounds in their attempt to speak correctly. Moreover, not every English teacher is well-trained in phonetics or sound systems, which contributes to the gap. As a result, pronunciation continues to lag and gets overlooked, passing down as a neglected aspect from one generation of learners to the next. This gap is reflected clearly in the metaphor of "sounds" and "silence": "sounds" referring to the segmental features such as vowels and consonants, and "silence" referring not only to suprasegmental features like stress, rhythm, and intonation, but also to the pauses and hesitations learners experience when uncertain about how to pronounce. Research on Indian English has primarily focused on either segmental features or accent imitation. However, the reality of pronunciation teaching at the undergraduate level is different. UG students are neither complete beginners nor advanced speakers; instead, they remain somewhere in between. This in-between stage is often shaped by the limited context of many colleges, where students may acquire vocabulary and grammar but still hesitate to communicate with confidence.

In light of these concerns, the present study has the following objectives:

1. To identify the most frequent pronunciation errors among undergraduate learners in terms of "sounds" (segmentals) and "silence" (suprasegmentals).

2. To analyse how mother tongue influence (MTI) contributes to these errors.

3. To explore context-sensitive, low-resource strategies for improving pronunciation teaching at the undergraduate level.

Methodology

This study focuses on understanding the pronunciation challenges faced by UG students in urban aided colleges. Around 30 students with intermediate English proficiency were taken. The aim was to capture the errors and difficulties encountered at the intermediate stage. Data collection was done through simple classroom tasks, where students were asked to read a passage aloud, which helped identify errors in vowels, consonants, and other segmental features. Minimal pairs, though confusing and often ignored, were used to check students' ability to hear and pronounce contrasting sounds. Additionally, classroom observations were conducted to examine hesitation, self-corrections, stress, and intonation patterns in speech. Though the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) clearly shows pronunciation differences among sounds and silence, suprasegmental features were observed, and students struggled. The influence of their mother tongue affected their pronunciation significantly.

Segmental Features (Sounds) Vowel length was one of the most frequent issues observed among students. Words such as *"sheep"* and *"ship"* (contrast between /iː/ and /ɪ/) and *"pool"* and *"pull"* (contrast between /uː/ and /ʊ/) were often confused. For instance, many students pronounced *"ship"* with a long /iː/ sound, making it closer to *"sheep,"* while *"pull"* was extended towards /uː/, sounding like *"pool."* These errors indicate that students were unable to clearly distinguish vowel length, a feature not marked in many Indian languages. Such mispronunciations not only affected intelligibility but also reduced the confidence of learners, especially during minimal pair tasks, where they were sometimes able to recognize the differences while listening but failed to reproduce them accurately.

Consonant Substitutions Another common challenge was the substitution of consonant sounds. Many students perceived /v/ and /w/ as the same sound and questioned the need to differentiate between them. For example, *"very"* was often pronounced as *"wery."* Similarly, other substitutions such as /θ/ → /t/ (*"thing"* pronounced as *"ting"*) and /z/ → /ʒ/ were also observed. These substitutions largely stemmed from the absence of certain consonant sounds in the students' mother tongues, making it difficult for them to produce and hear the distinctions. Such errors not only impacted pronunciation accuracy but also affected learners' confidence when speaking, especially in tasks requiring careful articulation of minimal pairs.

Confusion with /k/ Sound Students often struggled with the /k/ sound, particularly in deciding when to use *c* or *k*. Since both letters represent the same sound, learners found it confusing, and this distinction was never clearly explained to them in earlier stages of learning. The lack of systematic teaching of spelling–sound correspondence contributed to uncertainty, which occasionally led to spelling errors and hesitation in pronunciation.

Mother Tongue Influence

The influence of mother tongue plays a significant role because many Indian languages have different consonant and vowel sounds compared to English. This gradually affects students' pronunciation, and even after learning English, they fail to avoid the mother tongue effect. This happens because they do not adjust their articulation properly, which makes them feel different from fluent speakers. Many students also fail to pronounce the final consonants in clusters. For example, the word "asked" is often pronounced as /ɑːs/ instead of /ɑːskt/, and "help" as /hel/ instead of /help/. Sometimes, this omission changes the meaning or grammatical accuracy, especially when the dropped sound shows past tense or plural forms. Producing consonant clusters like /-st/, /-ld/, or /-pt/ needs both phonetic awareness and physical control of mouth movements — a skill that is rarely taught explicitly in classrooms.

Between Silence (Suprasegmental Features)

Students also struggled with suprasegmental features, such as stress, rhythm, and intonation, which are equally important for clear communication. Because of mother tongue influence, many Indian languages either have fixed stress or give equal importance to every syllable, unlike English, where some syllables are naturally stronger than others. As a result, learners often pronounce every syllable with equal force, which makes their speech flat and difficult to follow. For example, the word *banana* is spoken as /bə.nɑː.nə/ with equal stress, instead of the natural English pattern /bəˈnɑː.nə/. Similarly, a *computer* is said as /kəm.pjuː.tə/ instead of /kəmˈpjuː.tə/. This breaks the natural rhythm of English and makes speech sound mechanical. Intonation makes an even bigger difference. A single sentence can work as a statement, a question, or even sarcasm, depending on the tone. However, many learners focus only on grammar and vocabulary, and pay little attention to how their voice rises or falls. This creates confusion because intonation carries meaning as much as words do. For example, *'You are coming with a falling tone' is a statement, but with a rising tone,* it becomes a question. Students often overlook this distinction, which can lead to misunderstandings in communication.

Another common difficulty was with weak forms. Function words like *and*, *of*, and *to* are usually reduced in English and pronounced in shorter forms such as *and* → /ən/ or /n/, *of* → /əv/, and *to* → /tə/. However, many students pronounce them fully as /ænd/, /ɒv/, and /tuː/, no matter the context. This careful over-pronunciation makes speech less fluent and breaks its natural flow. For listeners, it feels heavier to process and unnatural compared to fluent English rhythm.

Teacher Challenges: Though pronunciation has been neglected over generations, we still have simple, no-cost ways to learn and improve. Teachers do not always need advanced labs or tools; with creativity, patience, and consistent practice, effective results can be achieved.

Low-resource techniques: Stress and rhythm can be taught through simple activities, such as tapping or counting syllables. For instance, when saying *banana*, the teacher and students can clap on the stressed syllable to feel the natural rhythm. Similarly, the blackboard can be used to draw mouth positions. Demonstrating lip movements for sounds like /v/ and /w/ and asking students to repeat them with observation encourages interaction and provides an opportunity for correction.

Reading and speaking: Pronunciation improves through reading aloud. When students read paragraphs, teachers can pause to highlight vowel length and correct mistakes. In short conversations, students can practise stress and intonation within dialogues.

Technology for self-practice: Students can use their mobile phones to record and listen to their own speech. Comparing it with the teacher's model or authentic clips helps them notice differences and attempt self-correction.

Games and activities: Learning becomes more natural through fun. Games like minimal pair bingo (*e.g., ship vs. sheep), intonation guessing (statement or question?), or role-plays* with dialogues reduce hesitation and create a relaxed atmosphere. Exposure to short news clips, film dialogues, or poetry recitation further familiarises learners with natural stress and intonation patterns.

By using these small but practical strategies, teachers can bridge the gap between "sounds" and "silence." Pronunciation can then move from being ignored to being practised meaningfully in the classroom.

Conclusion:

English communication depends not only on the correct pronunciation of individual sounds but also on stress, rhythm, and intonation, which bring life to speech and break the "silence." When students produce certain segmental features

but lack natural rhythm or intonation, their speech sounds flat and becomes difficult for listeners to process. Similarly, mispronunciation can hinder understanding. Therefore, both "sounds" and "silence" play a significant role in achieving clear and fluent communication. Integrating pronunciation practice into daily lessons is crucial. Instead of treating it as an isolated skill, teachers can embed pronunciation within reading, speaking, and vocabulary activities. Simple strategies—such as tapping for stress, clapping syllables, reading aloud, minimal pair exercises, and role plays—allow students to internalize patterns naturally. Low-cost tools, including mobile recordings, authentic audio clips, or blackboard demonstrations of mouth positions, can further enhance learning without requiring expensive resources. For meaningful improvement, teachers should receive adequate training in phonetics and pronunciation. Many struggle to teach pronunciation because it was neglected in their own education, or they lack confidence in correcting students. By addressing pronunciation systematically—through teacher training, curriculum inclusion, and everyday classroom practice—Indian college students can bridge the gap between "sounds" and "silence," ultimately achieving more intelligible, confident, and natural English communication.

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