

PERCEPTIONS OF LEARNING PHONETICS AND PHONOLOGY AMONG UNDERGRADUATES: INSIGHTS FROM ENGLISH COMMUNICATION MAJORS

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Abstract. The study of phonetics and phonology plays a crucial role in shaping students' linguistic competence, particularly in pronunciation and awareness of the English sound system. However, despite its significance, students often perceive phonetics and phonology as challenging due to the theoretical complexity and the technical nature of phonetic terminology. This study investigates undergraduate students' perceptions of learning phonetics and phonology within the Bachelor of English with Communication program. Using a quantitative survey design, data were collected from 111 students through a structured questionnaire, analyzed using descriptive statistics and mean interpretation. Findings reveal that students highly recognize the importance of phonetics (Mean=4.27) and find it interesting (Mean=4.24), yet they also perceive it as a challenging subject (Mean=4.20) due to theoretical density (Mean=3.46) and extensive terminology (Mean=3.82). Despite these challenges, students strongly agree that learning phonetics has enhanced their pronunciation (Mean=4.33) and increased their awareness of the English sound system (Mean=4.54). The study highlights the need for more interactive and practice-oriented pedagogical approaches to balance theory with application, ensuring effective phonetics instruction that aligns with students' learning needs. The findings provide valuable insights for linguistics educators, suggesting that a structured and engaging curriculum, integrating both theoretical knowledge and applied phonetic exercises, can enhance student engagement and learning outcomes.

Keywords: *perception, phonetics, phonology, place of articulation, manner of articulation*

Introduction

Improving pupils' language competency in both productive and receptive domains is the main objective of learning English. Enhancing their English-language speaking, writing, listening, and reading skills is part of this. Students can improve their general language competency and confidence by concentrating on both sets of abilities, which will help them communicate more effectively in a variety of settings. Effective communication of information in written and spoken formats is a component of productive talents. The ability to understand and process information obtained through spoken and written language, including reading and listening, is referred to as receptive abilities, on the other hand. Speaking and writing are frequently seen as more difficult than listening and reading because they demand students to actively communicate their ideas in both written and spoken forms. This is clear from numerous studies focused on improving students' proficiency in speaking and writing. Speaking is a functional skill that requires great work from students since it entails understanding many linguistic components to ensure that their ideas and information are clearly transmitted to their audience. The components are pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension. English students are required to pronounce words correctly, which necessitates a knowledge of the English sound system and the ability to articulate

sounds appropriately. However, acquiring native-like pronunciation can be difficult due to a variety of circumstances, including the influence of one's original language, physiological limits associated with speech organs, and situational constraints that limit opportunities to practice spoken English. As a result, scholars highlight that the major goal of English pronunciation is intelligibility-ensuring that learners can pronounce words in a way that native speakers can comprehend, even if their pronunciation does not exactly match Received Pronunciation.

English pronunciation involves articulating sounds as well as accurately pronouncing words, phrases, and sentences while considering spelling, stress, and intonation. Phonetics and phonology courses introduce students to phonetic transcription, which aids in the recognition and differentiation of English sounds while also teaching accurate pronunciation. Phonetic transcription helps students comprehend English sounds and their pronunciation inside words, as well as how mispronunciations can change meanings. As a result, studying English phonetics and phonology serves as essential for English Department students because it helps them strengthen their speaking skills significantly. A thorough understanding of phonetic and phonological ideas improves their ability to master spoken English. As a result, instructional materials in phonetics and phonology courses should be adapted to students' learning needs to properly assist their English-speaking abilities. A thorough understanding of phonetic and phonological ideas improves their ability to master spoken English. As a result, instructional materials in phonetics and phonology courses should be adapted to students' learning needs in order to properly assist their English-speaking abilities. The purpose of this study is to gather information about students' perceptions of the English phonetics and phonology course's learning process, as well as the impact it has on their English pronunciation. This study also looks into students' expectations for the learning process of English phonetics and phonology. Bani Ahmad (2018) carried out an earlier study on this topic titled "Student Perceptions on English Pronunciation After Taking Course Phonetics and Phonology". According to this study, phonetics and phonology classes assist English learners improve their pronunciation, reduce their number of errors, learn to grasp phonetic transcription in dictionaries, and feel more at ease speaking English in and out of the classroom.

Based on the description of the importance of learning English Phonetics and Phonology for students in helping them enhance their speaking skills, particularly their pronunciation, this research is necessary. Furthermore, difficulties were discovered during the pre-observation stage, such as the kids' limited English pronunciation abilities. As a result, the adoption of this research can help to bridge the gap between learners and lecturers in English phonetics and phonology courses that are truly aligned with students' perceptions and expectations. It is intended that the findings of this study will give instructors and students the knowledge they need to enhance the standard of English phonetics and phonology training in the English Department so that the tutorial materials and learning process in this course will truly meet the needs of the students.

Significance of learning phonetics and phonology

Proficiency in phonetics and phonology enhances learners' pronunciation and oral reading skills. A study by Ali et al. (2023) demonstrated that targeted phonological and phonetic interventions significantly improved English pronunciation and reading fluency among teacher trainees. This finding underscores the practical benefits of incorporating phonetic training in language education. Moreover, understanding

phonetics and phonology is crucial for effective communication. As noted by Moats and Brady (2000), phonetics involves the study of the physical production and perception of speech sounds, which is essential for deciphering the English language. This knowledge enables learners to grasp the nuances of spoken language, facilitating better comprehension and communication.

Challenges in learning phonetics and phonology

Despite their importance, phonetics and phonology present several learning challenges. A qualitative study by Bose (2022) explored the experiences of pre-service teachers learning phonics and phonemic awareness. The research identified difficulties such as the complexity of phonological concepts and the lack of foundational knowledge, which hindered effective learning. Additionally, teaching phonetics and phonology in multilingual classrooms poses unique challenges. Research by Mariam et al. (2022) highlighted issues such as students' negative attitudes towards the subject, the compulsory nature of the course, and the absence of functional laboratory facilities. These factors contribute to the difficulties educators face in effectively teaching these subjects. Furthermore, the transition to online learning environments has introduced new obstacles. A study by Alkhaleefah (2023) investigated the effectiveness of online phonetics and phonology instruction for international students. The findings revealed challenges related to technological accessibility, reduced student engagement, and the limitations of virtual platforms in facilitating phonetic practice.

Materials and Methods

This section outlines the research design, research tools, and data analysis procedures employed in the study on undergraduate students' perceptions of learning phonetics and phonology. A structured quantitative approach was adopted to systematically analyze students' attitudes toward these subjects, integrating both descriptive statistical analysis and inferential measures to interpret the data. This study employs a quantitative survey research design, which is commonly used in educational research to assess learners' attitudes, perceptions, and challenges (Creswell and Creswell, 2017). A survey-based approach allows for the collection of large-scale, structured data that can be statistically analyzed to identify trends and general perceptions (Dörnyei and Taguchi, 2009). Given that phonetics and phonology are foundational components of linguistics programs, understanding student perceptions through numerical data provides valuable insights into pedagogical effectiveness and areas requiring instructional improvement. The study specifically employs a descriptive cross-sectional survey design, which enables the assessment of participants' perceptions at a single point in time (Bryman, 2016). This approach is advantageous in capturing students' immediate reflections on their learning experiences without the influence of longitudinal variables.

The research utilized a structured questionnaire as the primary instrument for data collection. The questionnaire was adapted from validated instruments used in previous studies on phonetics and phonology learning, ensuring content validity and reliability (Chootarat et al., 2024). The survey comprised ten Likert-scale statements (ranging from 1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree), allowing for a nuanced assessment of students' levels of agreement on various aspects of phonetics and phonology learning. The questionnaire covered the following key themes: (1) Perceived Importance-Students' recognition of phonetics and phonology as essential components of language

learning; (2) Perceived Difficulty-Challenges associated with theoretical content, terminology, and memorization; (3) Perceived Practical Benefits-The impact of phonetics and phonology knowledge on pronunciation and awareness of the English sound system. The study targeted 111 undergraduates enrolled in English with Communication degree program as seen in *Table 1*. Participants were selected through convenience sampling, a non-random method that ensures accessibility while still capturing a representative view of students actively engaged in phonetics and phonology courses (Etikan et al., 2016).

Table 1. *Ditribution of respondents based on gender and semester.*

Category	Frequency (N)	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Female	85	76.6
Male	25	22.5
Semester		
Semester 1	98	88.3
Semester 5	5	4.
Semester 7	8	7.2

The inclusion criteria for participant selection were: (1) Enrollment in an undergraduate phonetics and phonology course; (2) Completion of at least one semester of phonetics instruction; (3) Willingness to participate in the study voluntarily. Participants were assured of anonymity and confidentiality, following ethical research guidelines (Race and Vidal-Hall, 2019). This analysis uses the mean interpretation scale by Ehrman and Oxford (1995) as described in *Table 2*, which categorizes mean scores as follows: The score between 1.0 and 2.4 indicates low perception of agreement never or almost never used which is low, the scores between 1.5 and 2.4 indicates generally not used and also low, next, scores between 2.5 and 3.4 indicates sometimes used or medium, the scores between 3.5 and 4.4 indicates usually used which is high and lastly, the score between 4.5 and 5.0 indicates always and almost always used which is also high.

Table 2. *Mean interpretation score.*

Mean score	Interpretation scale	Evaluation
1.0-2.4	Low	Low perception or agreement
2.5-3.4	Moderate	Moderate perception or agreement
3.5-5.0	High	High perception or agreement

Results and Discussion

The score of mean for perception in learning phonetics can be shown in *Table 3*.

Table 3. *Mean score for perception in learning phonetics.*

No	Statement	Mean
1	Phonetics is important	4.27
2	Phonetics is a challenging discipline to study	4.20
3	Phonetics is too theoretical	3.46
4	Phonetics has too many details to remember	3.91
5	Phonetics is difficult because there are so many new terms	3.82
6	I find learning phonetics interesting	4.24
7	Learning phonetics has made me aware of the English sound system	4.54
8	Learning phonetics has improved my English pronunciation	4.33

9	Learning the places of articulation has improved my English pronunciation	4.31
10	Learning the manners of articulation has improved my English pronunciation	4.28

Perceived importance-Students' recognition of phonetics and phonology as essential components of language learning

The findings indicate that students highly recognize the importance of phonetics and phonology in their linguistic studies. The statement "Phonetics is important" received a mean score of 4.27, placing it in the high perception category. This suggests that students acknowledge phonetics as a fundamental component of language learning, aligning with studies that highlight the role of phonetics in improving pronunciation and speech intelligibility (Pei and Kerong, 2015). Additionally, learning phonetics is found to be interesting (Mean=4.24), indicating that students are generally engaged with the subject despite its challenges. These findings align with previous research that emphasizes the motivational role of phonetics in language acquisition (Ali et al., 2023). Moreover, students strongly agree that phonetics has made them more aware of the English sound system (Mean=4.54), the highest-rated item in the survey. This reinforces the notion that phonetics serves a crucial role in helping students understand the structure and production of sounds, contributing to more precise language learning (Gilakjani and Sabouri, 2016).

Perceived difficulty-Challenges associated with theoretical content, terminology and memorization

Despite recognizing its importance, students also perceive phonetics as a challenging discipline (Mean=4.20), reflecting a high level of agreement. One of the key challenges cited is the complexity of phonetic theory, with the statement "Phonetics is too theoretical" receiving a moderate-high mean score of 3.46. This suggests that while some students might appreciate the theoretical aspects, others find them overwhelming. Another notable difficulty is the amount of detail to remember (Mean=3.91). Phonetics and phonology involve numerous rules, symbols, and concepts, which can make the learning process daunting. Furthermore, the statement "Phonetics is difficult because there are so many new terms" received a mean score of 3.82, indicating that terminology is a significant hurdle. This finding aligns with research by Taladngoen (2020), who noted that technical jargon in phonetics often presents a barrier for students, particularly those with limited exposure to linguistic analysis. These results suggest that while students recognize phonetics as valuable, there is a need for more interactive and simplified teaching approaches to help them grasp theoretical concepts and manage the cognitive load associated with new terminology.

Perceived practical benefits-The impact of phonetics and phonology knowledge on pronunciation and awareness of the English sound system

One of the most significant findings from this study is that students strongly perceive phonetics as beneficial for their pronunciation and linguistic competence. The statement "Learning phonetics has improved my English pronunciation" received a high mean score of 4.33, reinforcing its practical impact on spoken communication. Further breakdowns of pronunciation improvement reveal that students agree that learning the places of articulation (Mean=4.31) and manners of articulation (Mean=4.28) have positively contributed to their pronunciation skills. This aligns with research by Moats and Brady (2000), which emphasizes that explicit instruction in articulation fosters

greater phonemic awareness and accuracy in pronunciation. Additionally, phonetics is viewed as a key factor in students' broader linguistic development, with a strong agreement that it has increased their awareness of the English sound system (Mean=4.54). This high level of recognition suggests that phonetic education plays a crucial role in helping students refine their speech patterns and develop a deeper understanding of phonological structures.

The findings reveal that while students recognize the value and practical benefits of phonetics in improving their understanding of the English sound system and pronunciation, they also perceive it as a challenging subject due to its theoretical nature and the complexity of its terminologies. This dual perception highlights the need for balanced instructional strategies that combine theoretical rigor with practical, engaging, and simplified learning approaches.

Conclusion

Based on the analysis and arguments, students' perceptions of learning phonetics and phonology reveal a dual perspective: while they acknowledge the significance of these subjects in enhancing linguistic competence, they also perceive them as challenging due to theoretical density and technical complexity. However, these challenges do not hinder students' appreciation of phonetics and phonology; instead, they emphasize the need for more engaging and structured pedagogical approaches to facilitate learning. The integration of practical applications, interactive learning tools, and technology-driven instruction can serve as a bridge to enhance student engagement and comprehension. Every educational challenge presents an opportunity to refine teaching methodologies and improve curriculum design. In this case, a balance between theoretical knowledge and applied phonetic skills is crucial to ensuring that students develop both analytical and practical competencies. Dependency on effective teaching strategies and structured learning environments shapes the overall learning experience, contributing to students' confidence in mastering phonetic principles. From foundational phonetic theory to applied linguistic skills, phonetics and phonology remain essential in developing students' pronunciation, speech perception, and overall communication abilities. These subjects play a vital role in training future linguists, educators, and communication professionals. Beyond individual skill development, proficiency in phonetics and phonology has broader implications for language education, intercultural communication, and professional discourse. By addressing students' perceived challenges and enhancing instructional strategies, phonetics and phonology education can continue to evolve in line with the demands of linguistic and communication studies in the 21st century.

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Conflict of interest

The authors confirm that there is no conflict of interest involve with any parties in this research study.

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