

Revisiting Pronunciation Instruction in Tertiary EFL Contexts: A Systematic Literature Review of Studies Published Between 2015 and 2025

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ABSTRACT

This study systematically reviews pronunciation instruction in tertiary EFL contexts by identifying pedagogical approaches, research trends, and research gaps in studies published between 2015 and 2025. A systematic literature review guided by the PRISMA 2020 framework was conducted from February to July 2026 using ERIC, Google Scholar, and citation searching. Of 302 records identified, 12 peer-reviewed journal articles met the eligibility criteria and were analyzed through descriptive and thematic synthesis. Six major approaches emerged: technology-assisted, explicit and phonetic, classroom-based, teacher professional development, learner-centered, and intervention-based instruction. Research shifted from beliefs and practices toward technology integration, teacher development, and instructional effectiveness. However, longitudinal, comparative, intervention-based, and geographically diverse research remains limited, indicating the need for stronger evidence-based research in tertiary EFL pronunciation instruction.

INTRODUCTION

Pronunciation is an important component of spoken communication because it influences intelligibility and listener comprehension. In English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts, learners need not only grammatical and lexical knowledge but also the ability to produce understandable spoken English. Inaccurate pronunciation may interfere with communication even when learners have sufficient vocabulary and grammatical knowledge. Therefore, pronunciation instruction plays an important role in developing communicative competence (Derwing & Munro, 2005).

Despite its importance, pronunciation has often received less attention than other language components, including grammar, vocabulary, reading, and general speaking activities. Teachers may also face limitations in pronunciation knowledge, confidence, instructional resources, and available classroom time (Foote et al., 2012; Pourhosein Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2016). These conditions may restrict learners' opportunities to receive systematic pronunciation instruction and feedback.

The issue is particularly relevant in tertiary EFL contexts, where university students are expected to use English for academic and professional purposes. Pronunciation instruction at this level may involve explicit instruction, phonetic awareness, communicative practice, corrective feedback, technology-assisted learning, teacher professional development, and learner-centered strategies. Existing studies, however, have examined these dimensions separately and across different contexts, resulting in a fragmented body of literature.

A systematic synthesis is therefore needed to clarify how pronunciation instruction has developed in tertiary EFL settings. In particular, examining pedagogical approaches together with research trends and gaps can provide a broader understanding of the field and identify areas requiring further investigation.

This study consequently reviews research on pronunciation instruction in tertiary EFL contexts published between 2015 and 2025. It aims to identify the pedagogical approaches investigated, examine research trends during the selected period, and identify research gaps that remain insufficiently explored. By synthesizing these dimensions, the study provides an overview of the development of pronunciation instruction research and highlights directions for future evidence-based research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Pronunciation Instruction in EFL Contexts

Pronunciation involves the production and perception of speech sounds as well as suprasegmental features such as stress, rhythm, and intonation. In EFL contexts, pronunciation development can be challenging because learners often have limited exposure to English outside the classroom. Pronunciation instruction therefore provides structured opportunities for learners to develop accurate and intelligible spoken English.

Contemporary pronunciation pedagogy increasingly emphasizes intelligibility and communicative effectiveness rather than the achievement of a native-like accent (Derwing & Munro, 2005). Instruction may involve explicit explanation, controlled practice, communicative activities, corrective feedback, phonetic awareness, and technology-supported practice (Celce-Murcia et al., 2010).

Pronunciation Instruction in Tertiary EFL Contexts

Tertiary EFL settings include universities and other higher education institutions in which English is learned as a foreign language. Pronunciation instruction in these settings may support students' academic presentations, classroom discussions, interviews, teaching practice, and future professional communication.

However, pronunciation teaching is influenced by teachers' knowledge and beliefs, curriculum priorities, instructional materials, learner expectations, available classroom time, and technological resources. These factors contribute to differences in how pronunciation is taught and how learners experience pronunciation learning.

Systematic Literature Review

A systematic literature review (SLR) provides a structured procedure for identifying, selecting, evaluating, and synthesizing previous research. In this study, the PRISMA 2020 framework was used to support transparent reporting of the identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion of studies (Page et al., 2021). The framework enabled the review to systematically examine evidence concerning pronunciation instruction in tertiary EFL contexts.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a systematic literature review guided by the PRISMA 2020 framework. The review was conducted from February to July 2026. Because the study analyzed previously published research, no direct human participants were involved. The data consisted of information extracted from eligible peer-reviewed journal articles.

Search Strategy and Information Sources

Relevant studies were identified through ERIC, Google Scholar, and citation searching. The search focused on three main concepts: pronunciation instruction, EFL, and tertiary education. Search terms included combinations of "pronunciation instruction," "pronunciation teaching," "pronunciation training," "pronunciation pedagogy," "pronunciation learning," and "L2 pronunciation." The

search identified 302 records: 94 from ERIC, 200 from Google Scholar, and 8 through citation searching.

Eligibility Criteria

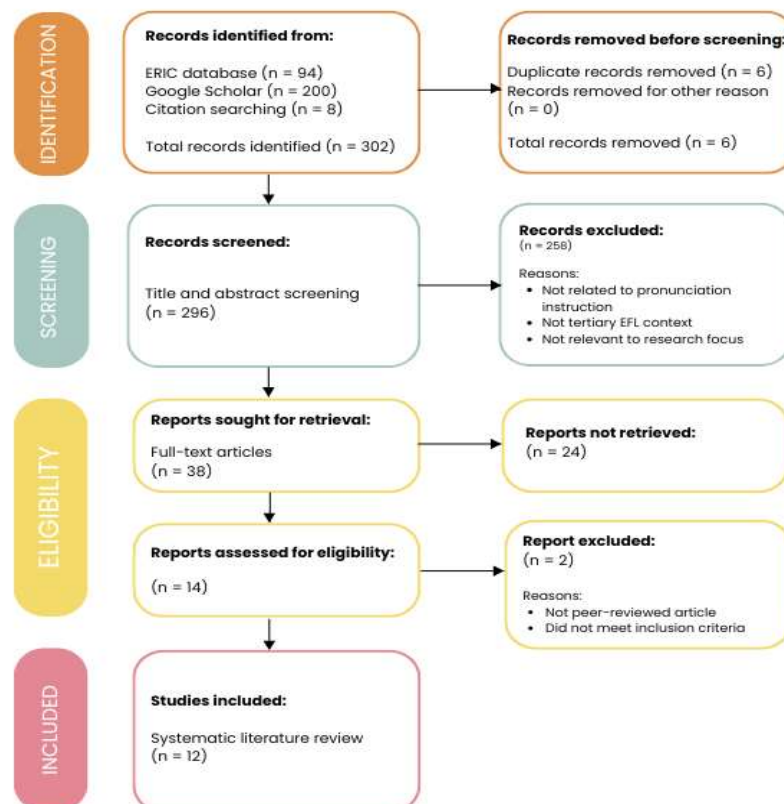
Studies were included when they were peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2015 and 2025, written in English, available in full text, and focused on pronunciation instruction in tertiary EFL contexts. Studies involving university students, undergraduate learners, pre-service English teachers, or tertiary-level English teachers were considered eligible.

Studies were excluded when they were non-journal publications, outside the 2015–2025 publication period, conducted in primary or secondary education, situated in ESL or clinical speech contexts, unrelated to pronunciation instruction, written in languages other than English, unavailable in full text, or lacking sufficient methodological information.

Study Selection

The selection process followed four PRISMA stages: identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion. Of the 302 identified records, six duplicates were removed, leaving 296 records for title and abstract screening. A total of 258 records were excluded during screening, leaving 38 reports for retrieval. Twenty-four reports could not be retrieved, and 14 full-text reports were assessed for eligibility. Two reports were subsequently excluded because one was a conference proceeding and the other was conducted outside a tertiary educational context. Thus, 12 studies were included in the final synthesis.

Figure 1. PRISMA 2020 Study Selection Process



Data Extraction and Analysis

A structured extraction process was used to record publication year, geographical context, participants, research design, pronunciation focus, instructional approach, findings, and reported limitations or gaps. The included studies were analyzed using descriptive and thematic synthesis. Descriptive synthesis summarized publication patterns, geographical distribution, research designs, and study characteristics, while thematic synthesis identified major pedagogical approaches, research trends, and research gaps.

The Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT) was used to assess the methodological quality of the included studies. VOSviewer was also used to visualize keyword co-occurrence patterns in the titles and abstracts of the included studies.

RESEARCH RESULT

Study Characteristics

The final synthesis consisted of 12 peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2015 and 2025. The studies represented eight countries: Saudi Arabia, Taiwan, Indonesia, Vietnam, Thailand, Jordan, Türkiye, and Ecuador. The studies examined different aspects of pronunciation instruction, including teacher beliefs, learner perceptions, classroom practices, instructional materials, pronunciation learning strategies, professional development, technology integration, and instructional interventions.

Qualitative research was the dominant methodology, accounting for seven studies (58.3%). Quantitative and experimental/quasi-experimental approaches each accounted for two studies (16.7%), while one study (8.3%) employed mixed methods.

Table 1. Research Designs of the Included Studies

Research Design	Number	Percentage
Qualitative	7	58.3%
Quantitative	2	16.7%
Mixed Methods	1	8.3%
Experimental/Quasi-experimental	2	16.7%
Total	12	100%

Pedagogical Approaches

The thematic analysis identified six major pedagogical approaches: (1) technology-assisted pronunciation instruction, (2) explicit pronunciation instruction and phonetic awareness, (3) classroom-based pronunciation pedagogy, (4) teacher professional development and cognition, (5) learner-centered pronunciation learning, and (6) intervention-based pronunciation instruction.

Table 2. Major Pedagogical Approaches Identified

Approach	Main Focus
Technology-assisted instruction	CAPT, ICT, digital practice, and feedback
Explicit instruction and phonetic awareness	Direct pronunciation knowledge and phonetic representation
Classroom-based pedagogy	Teaching materials, activities, and classroom practices
Teacher professional development and cognition	Teacher beliefs, knowledge, and professional learning
Learner-centered learning	Learner beliefs, experiences, engagement, and strategies
Intervention-based instruction	Structured interventions and measurable pronunciation outcomes

Technology-Assisted Pronunciation Instruction

Technology-assisted pronunciation instruction emerged as an important approach in the reviewed literature. Liu and Hung (2016) reported improvements in pronunciation performance following Computer-Assisted Pronunciation Training (CAPT), indicating that technology can provide opportunities for repeated practice and feedback. Almithqal and John (2024) also highlighted the role of ICT in pronunciation instruction while emphasizing the importance of teacher readiness, technological accessibility, and institutional support.

These findings suggest that technology is increasingly viewed as a pedagogical resource rather than merely a supplementary tool. Nevertheless, evidence concerning its long-term effectiveness and comparative advantage over conventional instruction remains limited.

Explicit Pronunciation Instruction and Phonetic Awareness

Explicit pronunciation instruction emphasizes direct teaching of pronunciation features and phonetic knowledge. Research included in the review indicates that curriculum representation and phonetic symbols can support learners' pronunciation awareness. However, explicit knowledge is most useful when connected to pronunciation practice and meaningful communication.

Classroom-Based Pronunciation Pedagogy

Classroom-based studies emphasized the role of instructional materials, classroom activities, teacher decisions, and contextual conditions. The findings indicate that pronunciation instruction is shaped not only by individual teaching techniques but also by curriculum demands, available resources, instructional time, and teachers' pedagogical choices.

Teacher Professional Development and Cognition

Teacher-related research demonstrated that teachers' beliefs, knowledge, confidence, and professional experiences influence pronunciation instruction. Professional development can help teachers strengthen pronunciation knowledge and make more informed pedagogical decisions. These findings position teachers as important agents in the development of effective pronunciation pedagogy.

Learner-Centered Pronunciation Learning

Learner-centered studies focused on students' beliefs, experiences, engagement, and pronunciation learning strategies. The findings indicate that learners actively contribute to their pronunciation development through their perceptions and learning strategies. However, much of the evidence is based on self-reported information, indicating a need to connect learner perceptions with measurable pronunciation outcomes.

Intervention-Based Pronunciation Instruction

Intervention-based studies provided direct evidence of pronunciation development. Liu and Hung (2016) reported positive outcomes from CAPT-based training, while Casa Molina et al. (2025) reported improvement following an intuitive-imitative pronunciation intervention. Although these findings indicate the potential effectiveness of structured pronunciation instruction, the limited number of intervention studies restricts broader conclusions regarding effectiveness.

Research Trends

Publication patterns varied throughout 2015–2025. Earlier research primarily examined learners' beliefs, teacher beliefs, curriculum representation, and classroom practices. Research published around 2019–2021 increasingly addressed learner experiences, learning strategies, classroom processes, and teacher professional development. More recent studies, particularly those published in 2024 and 2025, showed increased attention to technology integration, phonetic resources, instructional innovation, and empirical evaluation.

This pattern indicates a gradual shift from descriptive and perception-oriented research toward broader investigations of technology, teacher development, and instructional effectiveness.

Geographical Trends

The 12 studies represented eight countries, with considerable representation from Asian EFL contexts, particularly Saudi Arabia, Taiwan, Indonesia, Vietnam, and Thailand. Jordan, Türkiye, and Ecuador were represented by fewer studies. The distribution demonstrates international interest in pronunciation instruction but also reveals geographical imbalance.

Research Gaps

Three major categories of research gaps emerged from the review.

First, methodological gaps were evident in the dominance of qualitative research and the limited number of longitudinal, comparative, and intervention-based studies. Only a small proportion of the reviewed research directly measured changes in pronunciation performance.

Second, geographical and contextual gaps were identified because the literature was concentrated in particular Asian EFL contexts. Other EFL regions and tertiary educational settings remain comparatively underrepresented.

Third, pedagogical and technological gaps concern the limited comparison of instructional approaches and insufficient evidence regarding the long-term effectiveness of technology-assisted pronunciation instruction. More research is needed to establish stronger relationships between instructional approaches, classroom implementation, and measurable pronunciation outcomes.

Keyword Co-Occurrence

VOSviewer analysis identified 28 terms occurring at least twice in the titles and abstracts of the included studies. The terms formed five interconnected clusters reflecting teacher-related factors and pedagogy, technology integration, instructional approaches, curriculum and materials, and pronunciation learning outcomes.

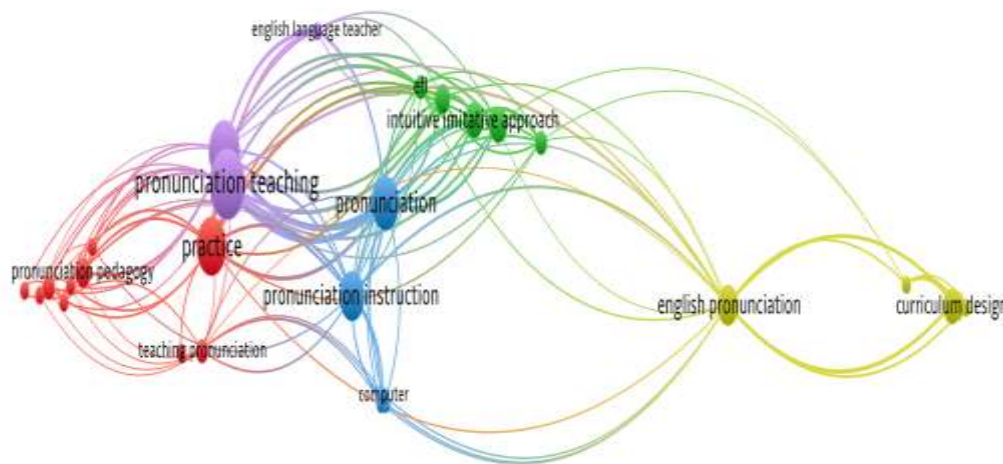


Figure 2. Keyword Co-Occurrence Network of the Included Studies

The keyword network supports the finding that pronunciation instruction has developed into a multidimensional research field involving teachers, learners, pedagogy, technology, curriculum, and learning outcomes.

DISCUSSION

The findings demonstrate that pronunciation instruction in tertiary EFL contexts has expanded beyond a narrow focus on pronunciation accuracy toward a broader pedagogical field involving technology, teachers, learners, curriculum, and instructional effectiveness. This development is consistent with the increasing emphasis on intelligibility and communicative effectiveness in pronunciation pedagogy (Derwing & Munro, 2005).

The six pedagogical approaches identified in this review indicate that pronunciation instruction does not rely on a single instructional orientation. Technology-assisted instruction provides opportunities for practice and feedback, explicit instruction develops pronunciation awareness, classroom-based pedagogy addresses instructional implementation, teacher professional development strengthens teacher capacity, learner-centered approaches recognize learners' active roles, and intervention-based studies provide evidence concerning learning outcomes.

Technology-assisted instruction represents one of the clearest emerging trends. The positive findings reported by Liu and Hung (2016) suggest that CAPT can support pronunciation practice, while Almithqal and John (2024) demonstrate that successful ICT implementation also depends on teacher and institutional factors. Thus, technology should be integrated as part of sound pedagogical design rather than treated as an independent solution.

The findings also emphasize the continuing importance of teachers. Teacher beliefs, knowledge, and professional development influence how pronunciation is understood and implemented. This suggests that institutional efforts to improve pronunciation instruction should include professional development alongside curriculum and technological resources.

Learner-centered findings further demonstrate that pronunciation development depends partly on learners' beliefs, experiences, and strategies. However, the prevalence of self-reported data limits conclusions regarding actual pronunciation development. Future research should therefore combine learner perspectives with direct measures of pronunciation performance.

The methodological distribution is another important finding. With qualitative research accounting for 58.3% of the included studies, the literature provides substantial contextual information but comparatively limited evidence concerning instructional effectiveness. Only two studies employed experimental or quasi-experimental designs. Consequently, stronger empirical designs are needed to determine whether particular pronunciation approaches produce sustained improvements.

The geographical concentration of studies also limits generalizability. Although eight countries were represented, Asian EFL contexts accounted for a substantial proportion of the reviewed literature. Pronunciation instruction may be influenced by linguistic, cultural, institutional, and educational factors; therefore, findings from one context should not automatically be generalized to other EFL settings.

Overall, the review indicates that pronunciation instruction should be understood as a multidimensional field in which pedagogy, technology, teacher expertise, learner engagement, and curriculum interact. Future research should examine these dimensions together rather than treating them as isolated areas of investigation.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This systematic literature review examined pronunciation instruction in tertiary EFL contexts through studies published between 2015 and 2025. Twelve studies met the predetermined criteria and revealed six major pedagogical approaches: technology-assisted instruction, explicit pronunciation instruction and phonetic awareness, classroom-based pedagogy, teacher professional development and cognition, learner-centered learning, and intervention-based instruction.

The findings also indicate a shift in research focus from beliefs, perceptions, and classroom practices toward technology integration, teacher development, instructional innovation, and empirical evaluation. Despite this development, important gaps remain in longitudinal, comparative, intervention-based, and geographically diverse research.

For pronunciation instruction, teachers should combine explicit pronunciation knowledge with meaningful communicative practice and use technology strategically to provide additional opportunities for practice and feedback. Institutions should support teachers through professional development, appropriate resources, and curriculum structures that provide sufficient opportunities for pronunciation learning.

Future researchers should conduct larger, longitudinal, comparative, and mixed-methods studies to establish stronger evidence concerning the effectiveness and sustainability of pronunciation instruction approaches across diverse tertiary EFL contexts.

ADVANCED RESEARCH

This review is limited by the relatively small number of studies that met the inclusion criteria and by the uneven geographical distribution of the literature. The dominance of qualitative research also limits the amount of empirical evidence concerning measurable pronunciation outcomes. In addition, the limited number of intervention and longitudinal studies makes it difficult to determine the long-term effectiveness of specific instructional approaches.

Future research should address these limitations through larger and more diverse samples, controlled intervention designs, longitudinal investigations, comparative studies, and mixed-methods approaches. Greater attention should also be given to technology-assisted pronunciation instruction and emerging digital technologies, including automated pronunciation feedback and artificial intelligence. Such research could strengthen the connection between instructional approaches, classroom implementation, and measurable pronunciation outcomes in tertiary EFL contexts.

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