

The Impact of Explicit Phonetic Instruction on EFL Learners
El impacto de la instrucción fonética explícita en los estudiantes de
inglés como lengua extranjera

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Resumen

Este estudio examina el impacto de la instrucción fonética explícita en estudiantes adolescentes de inglés como lengua extranjera (EFL), con énfasis en la precisión de la pronunciación, la comprensión auditiva y la confianza al hablar. Los hallazgos evidencian que la formación fonética estructurada mejora significativamente la percepción y producción de sonidos en inglés, lo que favorece la inteligibilidad y la fluidez comunicativa. Asimismo, se resalta el papel de los elementos suprasegmentales como el ritmo, el acento y la entonación en el desarrollo de las competencias orales. Aunque persisten desafíos, como la transferencia de los avances en pronunciación al habla espontánea, la investigación respalda la integración de la instrucción fonética explícita en los programas de enseñanza del inglés. El estudio concluye con recomendaciones para implementar una formación fonética sistemática en los planes curriculares de EFL y sugiere nuevas líneas de investigación sobre sus efectos a largo plazo.

Palabras clave: instrucción fonética; precisión en la pronunciación; comprensión auditiva; confianza al hablar; estudiantes de EFL; adquisición de idiomas



Abstract

This research explores the impact of explicit phonetic instruction on teenage EFL learners, focusing on pronunciation accuracy, listening comprehension, and speaking confidence. The findings show that structured phonetic training significantly enhances learners' ability to perceive and produce English sounds, contributing to greater intelligibility and fluency. The study also emphasizes the importance of suprasegmental elements such as rhythm, stress, and intonation in improving communication skills. Although some challenges persist, including the transfer of pronunciation gains to spontaneous speech, the evidence supports integrating explicit phonetic instruction into EFL curricula. The study concludes with recommendations for the systematic implementation of phonetic training in language programs and calls for further research into its long-term effects.

Keywords: phonetics instruction; pronunciation accuracy; listening comprehension; speaking confidence; EFL learners; language acquisition



Introduction

In today's globalized world, being able to speak English clearly and confidently has become a vital goal for many language learners, especially teenagers learning English as a foreign language (EFL). Among the different skills involved in language learning, pronunciation plays a key role in being understood and feeling confident while communicating (Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2017). However, many EFL programs continue to overlook explicit phonetics instruction, which can limit students' ability to express themselves effectively (Rao, 2019). Explicit phonetics instruction goes beyond just teaching how words sound. It includes both segmental features, like individual sounds (phonemes), and suprasegmental elements, such as rhythm, intonation, and stress. These elements shape how natural and fluent speech sounds. As Ahmed (2022) explains, these suprasegmental aspects are not just technical details—they make a real difference in how easily learners can be understood in everyday conversations.

Over the past years, researchers have shown that teaching pronunciation explicitly helps students become more aware of how English sounds are produced and perceived. For example, studies by Gordon et al. (2013), Kissling (2013), and Saito (2007) found that when students receive focused instruction, they can identify and correct errors more effectively, improve their listening, and feel more comfortable speaking. Kissling (2013) also highlights that phonetics instruction helps bridge the gap between spelling and pronunciation something that often confuses EFL students.

Several techniques have proven useful in this process, such as minimal pairs, articulatory training, and phonetic transcription (Hardison, 2006; Thomson & Derwing, 2014). Yet, when phonetics is not taught explicitly, students may fossilize pronunciation errors, mistakes that become permanent and reduce their clarity and confidence when speaking (Al-Khresheh, 2024). This is especially problematic for sounds that don't exist in their first language, making it harder to understand and be understood (Khaghaninejad & Maleki, 2015; Saito, 2011).

In fact, pronunciation accuracy is deeply connected to how we hear and produce language. The Motor Theory of Speech Perception (Liberman & Mattingly, 1985) explains that learners recognize sounds more easily when they understand how those sounds are made. This



awareness not only improves speech intelligibility but also strengthens listening comprehension, especially when learners become familiar with rhythm and stress patterns (Cutler, 2012; Lambacher, 1999; Sardegna et al., 2014).

At the same time, improving pronunciation has an emotional impact. It can help students feel more confident and motivated to speak, reducing anxiety and encouraging participation (MacIntyre et al., 1998). When students realize they are being understood, they tend to speak more, try harder, and stay engaged in learning.

In this way, explicit phonetics instruction creates a positive cycle: better pronunciation leads to better listening, which boosts speaking confidence (Ahangari et al., 2015). When pronunciation activities are integrated into communicative tasks, learners are more likely to use these skills in real conversations (Trofimovich & Isaacs, 2012). Still, some studies, such as Nguyen (2019) and Saito and Plonsky (2019), remind us that gains in pronunciation may not always carry over to spontaneous speech or long-term listening improvements, suggesting the need for extended practice and support.

Considering the increasing attention to pronunciation instruction in EFL contexts (Gharamah et al., 2024), and the lack of consistent research on its broader effects, this study seeks to explore a central question:

How does explicit phonetic instruction impact teenage EFL learners' pronunciation accuracy, listening comprehension, and speaking confidence?

Materials and Methods

This study was developed using a research synthesis methodology, which allowed for the integration and analysis of empirical findings from multiple academic sources. As noted by Cooper and Hedges (2009), a research synthesis “attempts to integrate empirical research to make generalizations,” while acknowledging that such generalizations must be approached with caution (p. 6). In educational research, this approach is particularly effective in identifying patterns across diverse instructional contexts and in generating evidence-based recommendations.

To ensure the selection of high-quality sources, a systematic literature search was conducted using academic databases such as SSRN, ERIC, ResearchGate, and Taylor & Francis Online.



The search strategy included keywords such as phonetics, instruction, pronunciation, listening, confidence, EFL learners, and teenagers. These terms were combined to locate studies that specifically explored the impact of explicit phonetic instruction on key oral language skills.

The inclusion criteria for the review were clearly defined. Selected studies had to be empirical in nature, published within the last eight years, and focused on teenage learners of English as a foreign language. Each study also needed to present measurable outcomes related to at least one of the following areas: pronunciation accuracy, listening comprehension, or speaking confidence. Preference was given to peer-reviewed journal articles and doctoral theses that offered detailed methodological information and practical implications for EFL instruction. As a result of this process, 22 empirical articles were selected and systematically analyzed. These studies were categorized by region to observe geographical trends and identify areas with higher research concentration. Special attention was paid to the type of instruction applied, segmental, suprasegmental, or combined, as well as to the pedagogical strategies and tools employed. Journals such as the Journal of Studies in Learning and Teaching English and the Indonesian Journal of Applied Linguistics provided several of the studies reviewed. The main objective of this synthesis was to offer a comprehensive perspective on how explicit phonetic instruction influences oral language development in EFL learners. Beyond identifying effective practices, the study also aims to inform future curriculum design and teacher training by shedding light on what works, for whom, and under what conditions in the realm of pronunciation and speaking skills.

The following table summarizes the key features of the 22 empirical studies included in this research synthesis. Each entry outlines the authors, year, and country of origin, as well as the research design, data collection instruments, approach to phonetics instruction, and a brief description of the contextualized strategy applied. This information provides a comprehensive overview of the methodological diversity and instructional practices explored in the field of explicit phonetic instruction for EFL learners.

Table 1. Methodological Overview of the 22 Studies



Authors / Year (Country)	Research Design	Data Collection Instruments	Approach	Description of Contextualized Strategy
Asrul & Husda (2022, Indonesia)	Quantitati ve	Pre/post-tests, observation	Explicit phonetic instruction	Integrated phonetic explanation with classroom pronunciation activities.
Latorza (2020, Philippine s)	Quasi- experimen tal	Pronunciation tests, oral tasks	Modular instruction with drills	Applied modular explicit instruction and oral practice.
Kissling (2013, USA)	Experimen tal	Pre/post pronunciation tasks	Phonetics-focused pronunciation training	Used phonetic rules and contrastive drills in lab-based sessions.
Gordon & Darcy (2022, Costa Rica)	Quasi- experimen tal	Pronunciation ratings	Segmental and suprasegmental integration	Blended stress, intonation, and segmental drills in EFL classes.
Nguyen (2019, Vietnam)	Quantitati ve	Listening tests	Focus on difficult phonemes	Focused on problematic phonemes in Vietnamese learners.
Yenkimal eki et al. (2022, Iran)	Experimen tal	Listening tasks, interviews	Segmental/suprasegm ental comparison	Compared effectiveness of instruction types on listening tasks.
McAndre ws (2019, USA)	Quasi- experimen tal	Perceptual tests	Instructional intervention	Trained learners using prosodic

features and
feedback.

Pardede (2018, Indonesia)	Quasi-experimental	Phonetic transcription tests	Phonetic transcription strategy	Used transcription to analyze and improve learner output.
Alharbi (2021, Australia)	Experimental	Pronunciation recordings	Early-stage segmental instruction	Introduced segmentals in beginner-level phonetics curriculum.
Mahmood (2024, Pakistan)	Qualitative	Focus group, reflections	High-variability phonetic training (HVPT)	Engaged learners with diverse English inputs using HVPT.
Darijani et al. (2023, Iran)	Experimental	Listening and pronunciation tasks	Explicit vs. implicit instruction	Compared explicit and implicit teaching impacts on listening.
Saito & Plonsky (2019, Japan)	Meta-analysis	Data from multiple studies	Measurement framework development	Synthesized L2 pronunciation instruction data across studies.
Zhang & Yuan (2020, China)	Experimental	Speech analysis software	Controlled phonetic input	Measured development of pronunciation using controlled input.
Lasi (2020, Indonesia)	Descriptive	Speaking performance rubric	Segmental/suprasegmental focus	Assessed ability in segmental/suprasegmental aspects.
Umar & Aspany (2024, Indonesia)	Quasi-experimental	Segmental/suprasegmental ratings	Explicit pronunciation practice	Emphasized rhythm, stress and connected speech practice.



Peltekov (2020, USA)	Experimen tal	Pre/post production tasks	Input-based instruction	Analyzed implicit vs. explicit phoneme teaching methods.
Gharamah et al. (2024, Yemen)	Quasi- experimen tal	Pronunciation rubrics	Communicative phonetic activities	Promoted communicative pronunciation through tasks.
Yenkimal eki & Van Heuven (2021, Iran)	Experimen tal	Comprehensibility tests	Attention-based training	Practiced prosody using focused perceptual tasks.
Farabi et al. (2017, Iran)	Quasi- experimen tal	Oral presentations	Guided oral presentations	Combined speaking tasks with feedback and self-analysis.
Gordon (2020, Costa Rica)	Case study	Audio analysis, teacher reflection	Pronunciation through L1 transfer	Studied code- switching and L1 influence on L2 speech.
Lacabex & Gallardo (2018, Spain)	Experimen tal	Phonological awareness tasks	Schwa awareness in CLIL	Raised awareness of reduced vowels through phonetic tasks.
Ahangari et al. (2015, Iran)	Experimen tal	Listening and speaking tasks	Dual focus on listening/speaking	Linked perception and production via integrated training.

Results

To provide a clear contextual framework for this study, the analysis was organized around three key variables: pronunciation accuracy, listening comprehension, and speaking confidence. A total of 22 empirical articles were systematically reviewed, representing research conducted in diverse EFL contexts such as Indonesia, Iran, the United States, Costa Rica, Vietnam, China, Thailand, Spain, Yemen, and Australia. These studies offer important insights into regional trends, instructional strategies, and the overall effectiveness of explicit phonetic instruction on teenage learners of English.

Table 2. Geographical Distribution of Studies on Explicit Phonetics Instruction

Country	Number of Studies	Studies
Indonesia	5	Asrul & Husda (2022), Mawardi (2023), Pardede (2018), Lasi (2020), Umar & Aspany (2024)
Iran	5	Darijani et al. (2023), Yenkimaleki et al. (2022), Yenkimaleki & Van Heuven (2021), Yenkimaleki (2019), Farabi et al. (2017)
USA	3	Kissling (2013), McAndrews (2019), Peltekov (2020)
Costa Rica	2	Gordon (2020), Gordon & Darcy (2022)
Vietnam	1	Nguyen (2019)
China	1	Zhang & Yuan (2020)
Thailand	1	Dandee & Pornwiriyaakit (2022)
Spain	1	Lacabex & Gallardo (2018)
Yemen	1	Gharamah et al. (2024)
Australia	1	Alharbi (2021)

Note. This table summarizes the number of studies by country from the reviewed literature. A total of 22 studies are included.

1. Effectiveness of Explicit Phonetics Instruction on Pronunciation Accuracy

The majority of studies revealed that explicit phonetic instruction has a significant impact on improving learners' pronunciation accuracy. Asrul and Husda (2022) emphasized that "having phonetic knowledge helps learners acquire an understanding of speech organs and places of articulation, enabling them to produce English sounds more accurately and correctly" (p. 612). Similarly, Latorza (2020) implemented a modular instructional strategy and reported that explicit phonetics instruction "increased active learning among students and provided them with adaptable and engaging exercises" (p. 51). These findings are consistent with those of Zhang and Yuan (2020), who found that structured pronunciation activities resulted in notable gains in intelligibility.

Segmental and suprasegmental instruction played a crucial role in pronunciation development. Gordon and Darcy (2022) demonstrated that students who received training on both phoneme-level and prosodic features "were rated as significantly more comprehensible and fluent in post-tests" (p. 189). Mawardi et al. (2023) further noted that teaching segmental contrasts supported learners in distinguishing and producing vowel and consonant sounds with greater clarity.

However, the degree of improvement was not uniform across all learners. Lasi (2020) observed that some students "had not fully mastered the 'voice quality' element of the suprasegmental aspect," highlighting the need for ongoing practice and teacher guidance (p. 435). The role of phonological awareness was also addressed: Darijani et al. (2023) emphasized its importance in helping students internalize sound patterns, while Lacabex and Gallardo (2018) concluded that explicit instruction had a greater effect than exposure alone. These findings reinforce the conclusion that explicit phonetic instruction—especially when both segmental and suprasegmental features are addressed—enhances learners' pronunciation accuracy and overall speech intelligibility.

Table 3. Effectiveness of Explicit Phonetics Instruction on Pronunciation Accuracy

Aspect	Number of Studies	Studies
Explicit Phonetic Instruction	6	Asrul & Husda (2022), Dandee & Pornwiriyaikit (2022), Latorza (2020), Peltekov (2020), Zhang & Yuan (2020), Mahmood (2024)
Segmental and Suprasegmental Instruction	5	Mawardi (2023), Gordon & Darcy (2022), Lasi (2020), Umar & Aspany (2024), Alharbi (2021)
Phonological Awareness and Accuracy	3	Darijani et al. (2023), Lacabex & Gallardo (2018), Pardede (2018)

2. Impact on Listening Comprehension

Several studies confirmed that explicit phonetic instruction contributes positively to learners' listening comprehension. Yenkimaleki and Van Heuven (2021) explained that learners who received explicit instruction "became more conscious of segmental and suprasegmental rules that might play a key role in L2 speech intelligibility" (p. 3). McAndrews (2019) added that this awareness facilitated students' ability to perceive prosodic cues and decode meaning in authentic speech.

Kissling (2018) suggested that instructional components such as targeted exposure, dictation, and transcription may be just as important as phonetics instruction itself, as they allow learners to refine bottom-up listening skills. However, not all findings were conclusive. Nguyen (2019) reported that despite receiving phonetic training on four challenging phonemes, learners' listening performance did not significantly improve in the post-test phase. The study's limitations—including the lack of delayed post-tests and the narrow range of sounds analyzed—suggest that more comprehensive training may be needed to affect long-term perceptual gains.



Overall, while explicit phonetic instruction has the potential to strengthen learners' auditory processing skills, the durability and transfer of these improvements remain dependent on instructional scope and reinforcement over time.

Table 4. Impact on Listening Comprehension

Aspect	Number of Studies	Studies
Explicit Instruction	2	Kissling (2018), Nguyen (2019)
Segmental and Suprasegmental Instruction	3	McAndrews (2019), Yenkimaleki et al. (2022), Yenkimaleki & Van Heuven (2021)
Limitations	1	Nguyen (2019)

3. Influence on Speaking Confidence

The reviewed literature also highlighted the positive influence of explicit phonetic instruction on students' confidence when speaking. Gordon (2020) stated that structured pronunciation training "can help learners develop intelligible and comprehensible L2 speech in spite of the presence of a foreign accent" (p. 2). Farabi et al. (2017) emphasized that "guided oral presentations" encouraged students to speak more confidently and participate more actively in class discussions (p. 20). In the same vein, Pardede (2018) found that the use of phonetic transcription enhanced learners' recognition of sounds and reduced hesitation during oral production.

Instructional strategies that incorporated corrective feedback, peer practice, and self-reflection also appeared to increase learners' self-awareness and willingness to engage in spontaneous conversation. Alharbi (2021) argued that pronunciation instruction should begin at early stages of learning, in tandem with grammar and vocabulary development. Studies by Yenkimaleki (2019) and Yenkimaleki and Van Heuven (2021) supported this idea, noting that learners who practiced both segmental and suprasegmental elements reported higher levels of comfort and perceived fluency when speaking.

These results indicate that well-structured phonetic instruction not only improves learners' technical abilities but also plays an important role in promoting motivation, self-confidence, and a positive classroom climate.

Table 4 Influence on Speaking Confidence

Aspect	Number of Studies	Studies
Explicit Instruction	2	Gordon (2020), Pardede (2018)
Guided Practice & Corrective Feedback	3	Farabi et al. (2017), Pardede (2018), Alharbi (2021)
Segmentals and Suprasegmentals	4	Gordon & Darcy (2019), Yenkimaleki & Van Heuven (2021), Yenkimaleki (2019), Alharbi (2021)

4. Limitations and Negative Findings

Despite the generally positive findings, several studies pointed to limitations in the scope and impact of phonetic instruction. Saito and Plonsky (2019), for example, noted that improvements in controlled settings did not always transfer to spontaneous speech or long-term usage. Similarly, Nguyen (2019) acknowledged that without sufficient practice and reinforcement, gains in listening and speaking may fade over time.

These findings suggest the need for more extended interventions, integration of phonetics into communicative tasks, and continuous teacher training to ensure effective implementation and sustainable outcomes.

Discussion

The studies reviewed in this synthesis offer a clear and encouraging message: explicit phonetic instruction makes a meaningful difference in how teenage EFL learners develop their oral language skills. Across various countries and educational contexts, the research consistently points to the benefits of teaching pronunciation in a structured and intentional way.



One of the most compelling outcomes was the improvement in pronunciation accuracy. When students are given the tools to understand how English sounds are produced through visual explanations, repetition, transcription, and direct feedback, they begin to hear and replicate sounds more clearly. This was especially true in studies that combined segmental instruction (individual sounds) with suprasegmental elements (rhythm, intonation, and stress). These two dimensions, when taught together, gave students a more complete understanding of what fluent, natural English sounds like, and how to achieve it.

Listening comprehension also improved in many cases, though the results were more nuanced. Some learners became more aware of sound patterns and prosodic cues in speech, which helped them process spoken English more easily. However, not all listening gains were sustained over time, especially when instruction was short or narrowly focused. This highlights the need for continued practice and reinforcement, so that learners can internalize these auditory patterns and apply them beyond controlled tasks.

Perhaps one of the most powerful yet often overlooked effects was on students' confidence. Speaking in a foreign language can be intimidating, but many of the reviewed studies showed that when learners felt more secure in their pronunciation, they became more willing to speak. This boost in confidence was often linked to a sense of control: students who understood how their speech was formed felt more empowered to use the language in real settings. Activities that included oral presentations, group tasks, or peer feedback were especially effective in nurturing this growth.

That said, not everything was straightforward. Some research reminded us that even when pronunciation improves in structured exercises, it does not always carry over to spontaneous conversation. Fluency takes time. Learners need multiple opportunities to apply what they have learned in real contexts. This reinforces the idea that phonetic instruction should not be treated as a one-time workshop, but rather as an ongoing part of the language learning process.

Another key insight is the importance of making phonetics instruction meaningful. The most successful strategies were not isolated drills, but activities that connected pronunciation with authentic communication such as storytelling, interviews, or real-life simulations. When

learners understand the purpose behind what they're practicing, they are more likely to stay motivated and retain the skills they acquire.

In short, this synthesis confirms that teaching pronunciation explicitly is not only effective, it is necessary. And when that instruction is embedded in engaging, contextualized, and student-centered activities, the results go beyond accuracy: they shape confident, competent communicators.

Conclusions

This study confirms something that many teachers have long suspected: when we take the time to teach pronunciation explicitly and meaningfully, students grow, not just in skill, but in confidence. The review of 22 empirical studies has shown that teenage EFL learners benefit greatly from phonetic instruction that is structured, intentional, and relevant to their communicative needs. This kind of instruction allows learners to perceive and produce English sounds with greater clarity, and helps them understand how pronunciation affects intelligibility and fluency in real-world interactions.

One of the strongest findings is that learners show greater progress when instruction includes both segmental features—like individual phonemes—and suprasegmental elements, such as rhythm, intonation, and stress. These two levels of instruction complement each other and give students a fuller, more natural command of spoken English. In addition, strategies like transcription tasks, minimal pairs, and articulatory training offer students tools to self-correct, recognize errors, and apply improvements over time.

Beyond technical accuracy, the reviewed studies also reveal the important emotional benefits of phonetic instruction. Learners who participated in guided pronunciation tasks and received constructive feedback often felt more confident and less anxious when speaking. In many cases, this confidence led to more active participation, increased willingness to communicate, and a more positive overall attitude toward language learning. These affective gains are especially valuable in adolescence, when many students may feel vulnerable using a foreign language aloud.

Despite these positive outcomes, the research also identifies certain limitations. Pronunciation gains achieved in controlled or classroom settings did not always transfer to spontaneous speech, especially when instruction was short-term or not supported by ongoing



practice. This highlights the importance of sustained, long-term programs that integrate phonetics across multiple stages of the curriculum and link pronunciation practice with communicative activities.

Based on these insights, it is recommended that EFL programs incorporate explicit phonetic instruction as a central and continuous component of language learning. Instruction should include both technical and communicative dimensions, allowing students to connect pronunciation with real interaction. Teachers also need access to training and resources that help them feel confident in delivering phonetics instruction. Furthermore, schools and curriculum designers should provide learners with multiple, meaningful opportunities to apply their pronunciation skills in authentic, engaging contexts.

Looking ahead, future research should explore how explicit phonetics instruction influences learners' long-term speaking development and communicative competence. It would also be useful to investigate the role of new technologies such as mobile applications or AI-based platforms in making phonetics instruction more accessible, interactive, and personalized for learners.

In short, explicit phonetic instruction is not just a set of technical exercises. It is a pedagogical tool that empowers learners to find their voice in a new language. By helping them speak with greater clarity, awareness, and confidence, we are giving them much more than pronunciation, we are giving them the ability to connect, express, and participate fully in a global world.

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