

Pronunciation Difficulties Among Azerbaijani Learners of English: A Phonetic Analysis

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Keywords	Abstract
English pronunciation Azerbaijani learners phonetic interference pronunciation difficulties phonetic training EFL learners	<p>English pronunciation represents one of the most challenging aspects of learning English as a foreign language, particularly for learners whose native language differs significantly from English in its phonological and articulatory structure. Azerbaijani learners frequently encounter persistent pronunciation difficulties related to unfamiliar consonant sounds, complex vowel distinctions, and suprasegmental features such as stress, rhythm, and connected speech. These challenges are largely influenced by native language interference, as learners tend to transfer established phonetic patterns and articulatory habits from their first language into English speech production. The present study aims to identify and analyze the primary pronunciation difficulties experienced by Azerbaijani learners of English and to examine the phonetic and linguistic factors contributing to these challenges. Special attention is given to problematic consonant contrasts, vowel production accuracy, and the development of appropriate stress and rhythm patterns in spoken English. The analysis demonstrates that structural differences between the Azerbaijani and English phonological systems play a significant role in shaping learners' pronunciation and may lead to reduced intelligibility and communicative effectiveness. The findings emphasize the importance of systematic phonetic training, increased phonological awareness, and targeted instructional support in improving pronunciation skills. Strengthening learners' phonetic competence can contribute to clearer, more intelligible speech and enhance their ability to communicate effectively in academic and professional contexts.</p>

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Introduction

English pronunciation remains one of the most persistent and challenging aspects of learning English as a foreign language, particularly in contexts where learners have limited exposure to authentic spoken input (Foote et al., 2016; Toçi, 2020). Unlike grammar and vocabulary, which can often be acquired through explicit instruction and visual input, pronunciation requires learners to develop new articulatory habits and acquire sensitivity to unfamiliar phonological patterns.

This challenge is especially evident among EFL learners whose native language phonological system differs significantly from that of English. Learners frequently encounter difficulties in producing unfamiliar phonemes, applying appropriate stress patterns, and maintaining natural rhythm and intonation as a result of first language influence (Plailek & Essien, 2021). These pronunciation difficulties are often deeply rooted in previously established articulatory settings, which may interfere with accurate sound production and contribute to persistent pronunciation errors.

Moreover, insufficient exposure to authentic spoken English further contributes to the continuation and reinforcement of these errors. Over time, such patterns may become fossilized, negatively affecting both intelligibility and overall communicative effectiveness (Derwing & Munro, 2015). In addition, inadequate pronunciation can reduce learners' confidence and limit their ability to participate fully in academic and professional communication. Therefore, the development of accurate pronunciation is essential for achieving effective communicative competence.

Problem Statement and Aim of the Study

Despite prolonged exposure to English instruction, pronunciation continues to represent one of the most problematic areas of proficiency for many EFL learners, particularly in educational environments where authentic spoken interaction remains limited (Foote et al., 2016). Unlike grammatical or lexical competence, which can often be developed through visual input and explicit explanation, pronunciation requires learners to modify deeply established articulatory habits and acquire unfamiliar phonetic patterns. As a result, pronunciation errors frequently persist even at higher levels of language proficiency and may significantly reduce intelligibility and communicative effectiveness (Toçi, 2020).

This issue is especially evident among Azerbaijani learners of English. The phonetic and phonological systems of Azerbaijani and English differ considerably, creating substantial challenges in both the perception and production of English speech sounds (Plailek & Essien, 2021). In particular, English phonemes that are absent from the Azerbaijani sound system, such as /θ/ and /ð/, as well as contrasts like /v/ and /w/, tend to cause consistent and systematic errors. These difficulties arise largely because learners rely on articulatory patterns shaped by their native language, which may not correspond to the phonetic requirements of English (Plailek & Essien, 2021; Derwing & Munro, 2015). Consequently, learners often substitute unfamiliar sounds with



those that are more familiar within their native phonological framework, leading to deviations from target-like pronunciation.

Furthermore, pronunciation difficulties extend beyond the production of individual sounds and involve broader suprasegmental features, including stress, rhythm, and connected speech. The development of phonetic fluidity, which involves the ability to produce smooth transitions between sounds, reduce unstressed syllables, and adjust consonant articulation in natural speech, plays a crucial role in achieving intelligible and fluent communication (Celce-Murcia et al., 2010). When these features are insufficiently developed, learners' speech may sound unnatural or heavily accented, even when their grammatical accuracy is relatively strong.

In view of these challenges, a closer examination of pronunciation difficulties among Azerbaijani learners of English is necessary. Therefore, the aim of this study is to identify the most common pronunciation problems encountered by Azerbaijani learners and to analyze the phonetic and linguistic factors that contribute to these difficulties. Particular attention is given to the influence of the native language on English pronunciation patterns and to the role of phonetic competence in the development of effective oral communication.

Literature Review

Pronunciation is widely regarded as a central component of communicative competence in second language acquisition. Unlike grammar and vocabulary, which can often be developed through explicit instruction and visual reinforcement, pronunciation requires learners to adjust deeply ingrained articulatory routines and acquire unfamiliar phonetic patterns (Toçi, 2020). This process involves not only recognizing new sounds but also developing the motor control necessary for their accurate production. As a result, pronunciation tends to remain a persistent source of difficulty, even among learners who demonstrate relatively strong grammatical and lexical knowledge.

A substantial body of research has shown that many pronunciation errors originate from differences between the phonological systems of the native and target languages. When learners encounter unfamiliar sounds, they frequently rely on existing phonetic categories from their first language, substituting them for target language sounds that are perceived as similar (Derwing & Munro, 2015). Such substitutions often become systematic and resistant to change, particularly in contexts where opportunities for corrective feedback and authentic spoken interaction are limited. Consequently, these pronunciation patterns may continue to influence speech production long after other aspects of language proficiency have improved.

In addition to segmental features, researchers have increasingly emphasized the importance of suprasegmental aspects of speech, including stress, rhythm, and connected speech. These features contribute significantly to the naturalness and intelligibility of spoken language and are closely associated with the development of phonetic fluency (Celce-Murcia et al., 2010). The ability to



link sounds smoothly, reduce unstressed syllables, and adjust articulatory transitions allows speakers to produce more coherent and natural speech. In contrast, the absence of such features may result in speech that, although grammatically accurate, lacks fluency and is more difficult for listeners to process.

Within the Azerbaijani context, pronunciation challenges are particularly evident due to substantial differences between the phonetic structures of Azerbaijani and English. Learners frequently experience difficulty producing English sounds that are absent from their native phonological system, especially interdental consonants such as /θ/ and /ð/, as well as distinctions like /v/ and /w/ (Plailek & Essien, 2021). These difficulties reflect not only phonological differences but also the influence of established articulatory habits, which shape learners' perception and production of foreign language sounds.

Recent research has also highlighted the importance of pedagogical factors in pronunciation development. Effective instruction requires systematic attention to phonetic awareness, articulatory training, and guided pronunciation practice (Gilakjani & Ahmadi, 2011). Instructional approaches that combine theoretical knowledge with practical application enable learners to develop greater control over speech production and improve overall intelligibility. Furthermore, studies have demonstrated that structured pedagogical frameworks and targeted phonetic training can facilitate measurable improvements in learners' pronunciation accuracy, particularly when instruction focuses on problematic sound categories and promotes active learner engagement (Mirzayev, 2023; Mirzayev, 2024a).

Taken together, these findings indicate that pronunciation difficulties among Azerbaijani learners arise from a complex interaction of phonetic, linguistic, and instructional factors. A comprehensive understanding of these influences provides an essential foundation for identifying common pronunciation problems and for developing more effective approaches to pronunciation instruction. These theoretical perspectives provide a foundation for examining pronunciation difficulties in specific linguistic contexts, including Azerbaijani learners.

Recent studies conducted in Azerbaijani university contexts have further confirmed the persistence of pronunciation difficulties among EFL learners and emphasized the effectiveness of eclectic and phonetic-focused instructional approaches in improving pronunciation accuracy and phonological competence (Mirzayev, 2023; Mirzayev, 2024a). In particular, targeted phonetic instruction has been shown to enhance learners' control of vowel production and overall pronunciation clarity (Mirzayev, 2024b). Similarly, the application of eclectic teaching strategies has demonstrated positive effects on students' pronunciation development, communicative confidence, and fluency in tertiary education settings (Mirzayev, 2024c; Mirzayev, 2025a). Furthermore, interactive pronunciation teaching techniques have been found to increase student motivation and contribute to more effective pronunciation learning outcomes (Mirzayev, 2025b).



Analysis of Azerbaijani Learners' Pronunciation Problems

One of the most persistent pronunciation challenges among Azerbaijani learners of English concerns the production of interdental consonants, particularly /θ/ and /ð/. Because these phonemes are absent from the Azerbaijani phonological system, learners frequently replace them with more familiar sounds such as /s/, /t/, /z/, or /d/. Consequently, words such as *think* and *this* may be realized as *sink* or *tink*, and *zis* or *dis*, respectively. This pattern reflects the transfer of established articulatory routines from the native language, which do not involve the interdental placement of the tongue required for these English sounds (Plailek & Essien, 2021). Such substitutions can reduce intelligibility and, in certain contexts, contribute to communication breakdown. Similar pronunciation-related misunderstandings have also been observed in translation and interpreting contexts, where phonetic inaccuracies may lead to misinterpretation of meaning (Mirzayev, 2025).

A further area of difficulty involves the contrast between the consonants /v/ and /w/. In Azerbaijani, /w/ does not operate as an independent phoneme in the same functional capacity as in English, which often leads learners to substitute /v/ in its place. As a result, words such as *west* and *wine* may be pronounced as *vest* and *vine*. This substitution illustrates the influence of the native phonological framework and highlights the challenge of acquiring unfamiliar articulatory configurations (Plailek & Essien, 2021). Evidence from phonetic training contexts suggests that overcoming such difficulties requires targeted and sustained pronunciation practice supported by systematic phonetic instruction (Gilakjani & Ahmadi, 2011; Asadova, 2024).

Vowel production represents another significant source of difficulty. The English vowel system is both larger and more complex than that of Azerbaijani, incorporating phonemic distinctions based on vowel length and quality that are not always present in the learners' native language. Consequently, learners may fail to maintain contrasts between vowels such as /ɪ/ and /i:/, producing words like *ship* and *sheep* with insufficient differentiation. These inaccuracies can affect not only intelligibility but also listener perception of proficiency. However, research indicates that systematic phonetic instruction, combined with consistent and focused practice, can support the gradual development of more accurate vowel articulation (Mirzayev, 2024a). Similar vowel-related pronunciation difficulties have also been observed among Azerbaijani university students, particularly in distinguishing close vowel contrasts, which highlights the importance of focused phonetic training in developing accurate vowel articulation (Mirzayev, 2024b).

Beyond individual sounds, Azerbaijani learners often encounter difficulty with suprasegmental features, particularly stress and rhythm. English relies on variable stress patterns and the reduction of unstressed syllables, whereas Azerbaijani tends to exhibit more regular and predictable stress distribution. As a result, learners may produce speech in which syllables receive relatively equal prominence, diminishing the natural rhythmic variation characteristic of English. Developing appropriate stress and rhythm requires learners to adjust temporal patterns of speech and to incorporate vowel reduction, both of which are essential components of phonetic fluency (Celce-



Murcia et al., 2010). Recent pedagogical research also suggests that structured instructional frameworks that promote cognitive engagement can significantly enhance pronunciation learning outcomes (Mirzayev, 2024).

In addition, features of connected speech such as linking, assimilation, and reduction pose further challenges for many learners, particularly those whose first language phonological system differs substantially from English (Asadova, 2023). Learners who articulate words in isolation, without the phonetic adjustments typical of fluent speech, may produce utterances that sound fragmented or overly deliberate. Mastery of connected speech requires the integration of perceptual sensitivity and articulatory coordination, enabling speakers to produce continuous and natural-sounding speech (Celce-Murcia et al., 2010).

Taken together, these findings suggest that pronunciation difficulties among Azerbaijani learners are shaped by the interaction between native language influence and the structural complexity of English phonology. These challenges extend across both segmental features, such as consonants and vowels, and suprasegmental features, including stress, rhythm, and connected speech. Addressing these issues effectively requires systematic phonetic training, increased exposure to accurate pronunciation models, and sustained opportunities for guided practice in classroom contexts (Asadova, 2024). Previous research conducted in Azerbaijani higher education contexts has similarly emphasized that systematic phonetic instruction and eclectic teaching approaches play a crucial role in helping learners overcome persistent pronunciation difficulties and achieve greater pronunciation accuracy (Mirzayev, 2023; Mirzayev, 2025a). In pronunciation pedagogy, eclectic teaching approaches that combine multiple instructional techniques have also been shown to support the development of phonological awareness and pronunciation accuracy among university learners (Mirzayev, 2024).

Conclusion

The findings of this study demonstrate that pronunciation continues to pose a substantial challenge for Azerbaijani learners of English, primarily as a result of structural differences between the phonological systems of the two languages. These differences influence both segmental aspects of speech, including the accurate production of interdental consonants and vowel distinctions, and suprasegmental features such as stress, rhythm, and connected speech. As the analysis indicates, many of these difficulties can be attributed to the transfer of established articulatory patterns from the native language, which do not always align with the phonetic and phonological requirements of English.

The results further underscore the critical role of systematic phonetic instruction in addressing these persistent challenges. The development of accurate pronunciation extends beyond passive exposure and requires deliberate engagement with phonetic features, targeted articulatory training, and heightened awareness of speech production mechanisms. Instructional approaches that



provide structured and sustained pronunciation practice can support learners in gradually modifying entrenched articulatory habits, thereby enhancing both intelligibility and overall communicative effectiveness.

Moreover, the findings highlight the need to position pronunciation as an integral component of language education rather than a peripheral or supplementary element. Greater pedagogical emphasis on phonetic development can enable learners to achieve clearer, more natural speech and strengthen their capacity to function effectively in academic, professional, and intercultural contexts.

In summary, a detailed understanding of the pronunciation difficulties encountered by Azerbaijani learners offers valuable insights for improving instructional practices and supporting more effective learning outcomes. Continued and focused attention to pronunciation development remains essential for facilitating higher levels of spoken English proficiency and for promoting more confident and effective oral communication.

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