



## Pronunciation Challenges in Libyan EFL Classrooms: Insights from Teachers, Learners, and Oral Performance

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### تحديات النطق في فصول اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية في ليبيا: تصورات المعلمين والدارسين والأداء الشفهي

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#### Abstract:

Research on second language pronunciation has shifted from near-native accuracy toward intelligibility as the primary instructional goal. This study investigates pronunciation challenges in Libyan EFL university classrooms by triangulating teacher reports, learner self-assessments, and oral performance data. Quantitative evidence was gathered through questionnaires administered to 20 instructors and 25 English-major students, complemented by oral tests with 10 participants. Results revealed systematic difficulties with consonants absent from Arabic (/p/, /v/), silent letters, and consonant clusters, all of which frequently disrupted classroom communication. Teachers reported increased listener effort and slowed interaction, while learners associated these challenges with anxiety, reduced confidence, and avoidance of oral participation. Interpreted through a communicative framework, the findings highlight pronunciation difficulties as both linguistic and affective, underscoring the need for pedagogy that prioritizes intelligibility, integrates pronunciation into communicative tasks, and provides constructive feedback to support learner confidence.

**Keywords:** Pronunciation challenges; classroom communication; EFL learners; pedagogy; teacher and learner perspectives; Intelligibility.

#### المخلص:

لقد تحول تركيز الأبحاث المتعلقة بنطق اللغة الثانية من دقة النطق القريبة من متحدثي اللغة الأصليين (near-native accuracy) نحو "وضوح الكلام" (Intelligibility) باعتباره الهدف التعليمي الرئيس. تبحث هذه الدراسة في تحديات النطق داخل فصول اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية في الجامعات الليبية، وذلك من خلال التثليث المنهجي (triangulation) بين تقارير المعلمين، والتقييم الذاتي للدارسين، وبيانات الأداء الشفهي. تم جمع الأدلة الكمية عبر استبيانات يتم توزيعها على عينة من 20 محاضرًا و 25 طالبًا من المتخصصين في اللغة الإنجليزية، واستُكملت باختبارات شفوية أجريت مع 10 مشاركين. وأظهرت النتائج وجود صعوبات في نطق الحروف الساكنة التي لا تتوفر في اللغة العربية مثل (/p/, /v/)، والحروف الصامتة، والمجموعات الساكنة (consonant clusters)، والتي تسببت جميعها مرارًا في عرقلة التواصل داخل الفصل الدراسي. وأفاد المعلمون بزيادة الجهد المبذول من المستمع وبطء التفاعل، بينما ربط الدارسون هذه التحديات

بالقلق، وتراجع الثقة بالنفس، وتجنب المشاركة الشفهية. وتُبرز هذه النتائج التي تم تفسيرها في ضوء إطار تواصلية أن صعوبات النطق تُعد تحديات لغوية ووجدانية في آنٍ واحد، مما يؤكد الحاجة إلى ممارسات بيداغوجية تُعطي الأولوية لوضوح الكلام، وتدمج النطق في المهام التواصلية، وتقدم تغذية راجعة بناءة لدعم ثقة الدارسين بأنفسهم

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** تحديات النطق، التواصل الصفّي، دارسو اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية (EFL)، طرق التدريس، تصورات المعلمين والدارسين، مفهومية الكلام (الوضوح).

## **Introduction:**

Spoken communication is central to second and foreign language learning, and pronunciation plays a decisive role in whether learners' spoken output is understood (Munro & Derwing, 1995). While grammatical or lexical inaccuracies may not obstruct meaning, pronunciation difficulties often lead to misunderstanding and breakdowns in classroom interaction (Jenkins, 2000; Field, 2005). In contexts such as Libyan universities, where English is taught primarily as a foreign language with limited exposure to authentic spoken input, students frequently demonstrate adequate written competence but struggle with oral clarity and confidence (Omar, 2019).

This study investigates pronunciation challenges in Libyan EFL classrooms by examining how they affect communication and learner participation. Drawing on teacher reports, learner self-assessments, and oral performance data, the research adopts a communicative perspective that emphasizes the consequences of pronunciation difficulties for classroom interaction (Gilakjani, 2016). Rather than treating pronunciation errors as isolated phonetic deficits, the study positions them as both linguistic and affective challenges that shape pedagogy and learner identity (Derwing & Munro, 2005; Morley, 1991; Levis, 2005; Couper, 2003).

## **Research questions:**

1. What specific pronunciation challenges do Libyan EFL learners face in classroom communication?
2. How do these challenges affect oral performance and learner participation?
3. To what extent do pronunciation errors interfere with intelligibility in connected speech, and what pedagogical implications arise from these findings??

## **Literature Review**

### **Intelligibility as a Goal of Pronunciation Instruction**

Intelligibility refers to the extent to which a listener can understand a speaker's intended message without strain, making it the central goal of pronunciation instruction. Pronunciation teaching therefore emphasizes communicative effectiveness rather than accent elimination. Derwing and Munro (2005, 2015) argue that non-native accents are not inherently problematic; communication breaks down when pronunciation errors obscure lexical identity or disrupt phonological contrasts. Levis (2005) emphasizes the "Intelligibility Principle," which prioritizes being understood over achieving native-like accuracy. From a theoretical perspective, Dalton and Seidlhofer (2001) describe pronunciation as the production of significant sounds, highlighting its dual role as both a linguistic code and a vehicle for meaning. Seidlhofer (2001) further stresses that pronunciation projects identity while simultaneously ensuring intelligibility. These perspectives underscore why intelligibility, rather than native-like accuracy, has become the central pedagogical goal.

### **Pronunciation and Intelligibility in EFL Contexts**

In EFL environments, limited exposure to authentic spoken English exacerbates pronunciation challenges and reduces communicative effectiveness. Celce-Murcia, Brinton, and Goodwin (2010) note that learners often develop internally consistent pronunciation patterns that remain unintelligible to outsiders. Gilbert (2008) and Fraser (2000) argue that pronunciation has historically been neglected in EFL classrooms, despite its critical role in communication. Morley (1994) and Fraser (2000) emphasized that many adult learners find English pronunciation one of the most difficult aspects to acquire, requiring explicit support from teachers. Gilakjani (2012) stresses that mastering pronunciation is essential for communication, noting that learners with accurate pronunciation are generally understood even when grammatical errors occur. In Arab contexts, consonants absent from Arabic, silent letters, and consonant clusters are particularly disruptive (Morley, 1991).

O'Connor (1980) observed that consonants contribute more to intelligibility than vowels, while Roach (2000) classified 24 consonant phonemes that pose systematic challenges for learners. Kharma and Hajjaj (1989) and Mitchell & Hassan (1989) documented persistent pronunciation errors among Arab learners, attributing them to mother-tongue interference. Lekova (2010) defines language interference as the negative transfer of phonological habits from the mother tongue to a foreign language, explaining why Libyan learners substitute /p/ with /b/ and /v/ with /f/. More recent studies (Ababneh, 2018; Jabali & Abuzaid, 2017; Hassan, 2014) confirm that fossilization, lack of exposure, and limited teaching aids exacerbate these difficulties.

Recent Libyan studies reinforce these findings. Hamuda et al. (2024) found that Libyan secondary students struggle with phonetic contrasts such as /p/, /v/, and interdental /θ/ and /ð/, due to first-language transfer and insufficient classroom focus on pronunciation. Similarly, Al Shredi (2023) reported that Libyan university students value phonetics instruction and expect more interactive, technology-based teaching methods to improve pronunciation.

### Teacher and Learner Perspectives

Teacher perceptions provide insight into pronunciation challenges and their impact on classroom communication. Derwing and Munro (2005) highlight that pronunciation errors increase processing effort and slow classroom interaction. In Libya, Ali and Bianku (2025) found that 80% of secondary students reported pronunciation difficulties, while teachers noted frequent communication breakdowns. Importantly, 83% of learners valued intelligibility over native-like accuracy, reflecting a shift toward communicative effectiveness. Learner perceptions reveal the affective dimension of pronunciation difficulties, particularly anxiety and reduced confidence.

Anxiety, fear of negative evaluation, and lack of confidence are recurring themes (Cutrone, 2009; Occhipinti, 2009). Libyan learners often avoid oral participation due to fear of ridicule or misunderstanding, reinforcing fossilized pronunciation patterns. Seidlhofer (2001) emphasizes that pronunciation is tied to identity, which may intensify anxiety when learners feel their speech marks them as outsiders.

### Factors Affecting Pronunciation

Research identifies several recurring factors that contribute to reduced intelligibility:

- **Mother tongue interference:** Negative transfer from Arabic phonology leads to substitutions such as /p/ → /b/ and /v/ → /f/ (Lekova, 2010).
- **Fossilization:** Persistent errors become entrenched when not corrected (Ababneh, 2018).
- **Consonant clusters:** Learners struggle with sequences absent in Arabic, especially in connected speech.
- **Silent letters:** Orthographic interference leads to mispronunciations of words like **comb** and **receipt**.
- **Lack of practice and exposure:** Limited opportunities to hear and use authentic English hinder progress.
- **Teacher factors:** Some teachers neglect immediate correction or themselves model incorrect pronunciation, perpetuating errors.
- **Confidence and motivation:** Learners often avoid oral participation due to fear of mistakes, which reduces opportunities for communicative practice and reinforces fossilized errors.

### Intelligibility as an Interactional Construct

From an interactional perspective, pronunciation and intelligibility are co-constructed between speakers and listeners. Communication breakdowns arise not solely from incorrect pronunciation but from the interplay of speech production, listener expectations, and contextual support. This aligns with findings by Diaab (2016) and Pardede (2018), who argue that pronunciation instruction in EFL contexts must be embedded in communicative practice, supporting both linguistic clarity and learner confidence.

### Methodology

#### Research Design

This study adopted a descriptive triangulated quantitative design, drawing on three complementary sources of data: teacher questionnaires, student self-assessment questionnaires, and oral pronunciation tests. Although the instruments were primarily quantitative, they captured both linguistic performance and affective dimensions such as confidence and anxiety. By combining these perspectives, the design provided a fuller picture of how pronunciation difficulties affect communication and participation in Libyan EFL classrooms. The triangulation of teacher perceptions, learner reports, and oral performance strengthened the reliability of the findings and ensured that the analysis reflected classroom realities from multiple viewpoints.

#### Participants

The study involved three groups of participants drawn from Libyan university EFL contexts:

- 20 instructors from the English departments contributed through questionnaires, offering insights into how pronunciation errors affect classroom communication.
- 25 undergraduate English-major students completed self-assessment questionnaires, reflecting on their own difficulties, confidence, and anxiety in oral performance.
- 10 students who completed an oral pronunciation test which focused on consonants absent from Arabic, silent letters, and consonant clusters.

This combination of teacher perspectives, learner self-reports, and direct oral performance data ensured that the study captured pronunciation challenges from multiple viewpoints and provided a balanced picture of both pedagogical and learner experiences

## Instruments

Three instruments were used to collect data:

- **Teachers' questionnaire:** explored perceptions of pronunciation errors and their impact on classroom communication.
- **Students' questionnaire:** addressed learners' awareness of pronunciation difficulties, confidence, and anxiety.
- **Oral test:** elicited pronunciation of consonants absent from Arabic, silent consonants, and consonant clusters in isolated words and sentences.

**Table 1.** Summary of Research Instruments

Instrument	Focus	Sample Items
Teacher Questionnaire	Perceptions of pronunciation errors & communication	"Pronunciation errors make students difficult to understand."
Student Questionnaire	Learner awareness, confidence, anxiety	"I worry that others cannot understand my English pronunciation."
Oral Test	Pronunciation of absent consonants, silent letters, clusters	<i>comb, cupboard, receipt, marked, sixth</i>

Appendices A–C provide sample questionnaire and oral test items that directly informed the findings reported in Section 4. This ensures transparency and demonstrates how the instruments align with the results and subsequent discussion.

## Procedures

Data collection was conducted in two stages. First, questionnaires were distributed to teachers and students to gather perceptions and self-reports. Second, the oral test was administered to a subset of students, focusing on problematic consonants, silent letters, and clusters. Responses were recorded and analyzed for systematic error patterns.

## Data Analysis

Questionnaire responses from teachers and students were entered into SPSS and analyzed descriptively using frequency counts, percentages, means, and standard deviations. This made it possible to identify recurring themes in teacher perceptions and learner self-reports, particularly in relation to confidence, anxiety, and intelligibility. Items were grouped into thematic categories to allow comparison across participant groups.

Oral test recordings were transcribed and coded according to error type (consonants absent from Arabic, silent letters, and consonant clusters). Each item was scored as correct or incorrect, and error frequency and accuracy rates were calculated for both isolated words and connected speech. To ensure absolute accuracy and eliminate coding bias, the transcription and scoring were cross-verified and confirmed by an expert professor specializing in English pronunciation. This expert validation guaranteed the reliability and consistency of the coding process.

This combination of SPSS-based descriptive statistics and systematic coding provided a clear and reliable picture of the distribution of pronunciation errors and their impact on intelligibility, while remaining faithful to the study's descriptive design.

## Results

The oral test conducted with ten students revealed consistent pronunciation difficulties across several categories. Substitution errors were particularly frequent with consonants absent from Arabic, most notably the replacement of /p/ with /b/ and /v/ with /f/. Silent consonants produced the highest error rates, while consonant clusters also showed significant challenges. In isolated word production, some students managed occasional accuracy, but performance declined sharply in connected speech. For example, silent consonants were pronounced correctly by only one student in isolation (10%), yet none managed them accurately in connected speech (0%). Similarly, consonant clusters showed a drop from 30% accuracy in isolated words to 20% in connected speech, confirming that increased communicative pressure exacerbated pronunciation difficulties.

**Table 2.** Major English Consonant Error Categories (10 oral test participants)

Error Category	Example Words	Errors / Total	Percentage
/p/ → /b/ substitution	pen, map	7/10	70%
/v/ → /f/ substitution	very, arrive	5/10	50%
Silent consonants	comb, cupboard	9/10	90%
Consonant clusters	marked, sixth	7/10	70%

**Table 3.** Accuracy in Isolated Words vs. Connected Speech (10 oral test participants)

Error Category	Isolated Words (Correct/Total)	Percentage	Connected Speech (Correct/Total)	Percentage
Absent consonants	3/10	30%	2/10	20%
Silent consonants	1/10	10%	0/10	0%
Consonant clusters	3/10	30%	2/10	20%

The teacher questionnaire (n=20) provided complementary insights into classroom realities. A large majority of teachers agreed that pronunciation errors made students difficult to understand, with 80% highlighting this issue. Silent letters were identified as a major source of intelligibility problems by 75% of respondents, while 85% reported that errors required frequent clarification during lessons. Consonant clusters were also noted as problematic, with 70% of teachers observing that they reduced intelligibility in connected speech. Furthermore, 75% agreed that mispronounced consonants absent from Arabic increased listener effort, and 85% confirmed that errors slowed classroom interaction. Teachers also reported practical consequences: 80% said they often had to repeat or rephrase instructions due to unintelligible speech, and 65% believed that pronunciation difficulties negatively affected the assessment of oral performance.

Student questionnaire responses (n=25) revealed both linguistic and affective dimensions of the problem. 76% of students worried that others could not understand their pronunciation, and 80% reported that mistakes reduced their confidence when speaking. Avoidance was common, with 72% admitting they sometimes refrained from speaking because of pronunciation problems, while 84% said they felt anxious when asked to participate orally. Even when they knew the answer, 68% hesitated to speak, reflecting the strong emotional impact of pronunciation difficulties. Interestingly, 40% believed silent letters were easy to pronounce correctly, suggesting some underestimation of their complexity. At the same time, 60% felt more confident speaking in pairs or small groups, and 72% believed pronunciation affected how teachers evaluated their performance. More than half (56%) admitted to switching to Arabic when unable to pronounce English words, while 80% expressed the view that pronunciation practice should be integrated into communicative classroom activities.

### Discussion

The combined findings confirm that pronunciation difficulties among Libyan EFL learners are both systematic and multifaceted. Silent consonants emerged as the most problematic feature, with error rates reaching 90% in isolated words and complete breakdown in connected speech. Teachers reinforced this observation, with three-quarters identifying silent letters as a major source of unintelligibility. These results support Fraser (2000) and Morley (1991), who emphasized orthographic interference as a persistent barrier to intelligibility, and they align with Hamuda et al. (2024), who reported similar difficulties among Libyan secondary students.

Substitution of /p/ with /b/ (70%) and /v/ with /f/ (50%) reflects mother-tongue transfer from Arabic, which lacks these phonemes. This pattern has been consistently documented in Arab EFL research (Kharma & Hajjaj, 1989; Mitchell & Hassan, 1989) and continues to appear in recent Libyan studies (Ali & Bianku, 2025). Teachers in the present study confirmed the impact of these absent consonants, with 75% agreeing that they increase listener effort. The persistence of these substitutions highlights the entrenched influence of Arabic phonology and the limited corrective focus in classroom practice.

The decline in accuracy from isolated words to connected speech, particularly with consonant clusters, echoes O'Connor (1980) and Roach (2000), who noted that consonants are central to intelligibility and especially vulnerable under communicative pressure. Teachers in this study agreed, with 70% reporting that clusters reduce intelligibility, while students themselves described the affective consequences: 84% reported anxiety when asked to speak, and 72% admitted to avoiding oral participation. These findings mirror Cutrone (2009) and Occhipinti (2009), who emphasized the role of anxiety in limiting learner participation.

Teacher responses further confirm Derwing and Munro's (2005) observation that pronunciation errors increase listener effort and disrupt classroom flow. Eighty-five percent of teachers reported slowed communication, and 80% said they often repeated or rephrased instructions due to unintelligible speech. Student responses highlight the emotional dimension, with 80% reporting reduced confidence, 68% hesitating even when they knew the answer, and 56% switching to Arabic when pronunciation difficulties arose. These findings resonate with Al Shredi (2023), who found that Libyan university students value phonetics instruction and expect more interactive methods.

Taken together, the evidence situates Libyan learners within broader Arab EFL trends while highlighting the urgent need for pedagogical reform. Pronunciation teaching in Libyan universities must move beyond isolated drills and toward integrated, communicative practice that supports both clarity and learner confidence. By combining oral test performance with teacher and student perceptions, this study provides a comprehensive account of pronunciation difficulties and their impact on classroom communication and learner identity, strengthening the case for pronunciation instruction as a central component of EFL pedagogy.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

This study was conducted with a relatively small sample size (20 teachers, 25 students, and 10 oral test participants). While the findings provide valuable insight into pronunciation challenges in the Libyan EFL context, the limited number of participants restricts generalizability. Future research should expand the sample to include multiple universities and larger cohorts and employ mixed-methods approaches that combine quantitative error analysis with qualitative interviews. This would provide a more comprehensive understanding of how pronunciation difficulties affect communication, confidence, and classroom interaction.

### **Pedagogical Implications**

The findings of this study point to the need for a more systematic approach to pronunciation teaching in Libyan universities. The oral test showed that silent consonants, absent phonemes such as /p/ and /v/, and consonant clusters are the most persistent sources of unintelligibility. Teachers confirmed that these errors slow classroom interaction, increase listener effort, and require frequent clarification, while students reported reduced confidence, hesitation, and avoidance of oral participation.

Pronunciation practice should therefore be integrated into communicative activities rather than treated as isolated drills. Since accuracy declined sharply in connected speech, learners need opportunities to use problematic sounds in meaningful discourse. Pair and group work, which students found less intimidating, can provide supportive contexts for practice. At the same time, explicit attention to silent consonants and absent phonemes is necessary, using awareness-raising tasks and minimal pair exercises embedded in communicative tasks.

Finally, the affective dimension must be considered. With most students reporting anxiety and loss of confidence, teachers should adopt strategies that build learner self-assurance and provide constructive feedback. Clear assessment criteria that value intelligibility will encourage learners to prioritize pronunciation while ensuring fairness in oral evaluation.

In short, pronunciation teaching should balance accuracy, communication, and affective support, enabling learners to improve intelligibility while developing the confidence to participate actively in English-medium classrooms.

### **Conclusion**

This study demonstrates that pronunciation challenges play a central role in shaping classroom communication and learner confidence in Libyan EFL university contexts. Systematic difficulties with consonants absent from Arabic, silent letters, and consonant clusters were shown to disrupt oral performance and increase listener effort, while learners reported anxiety, reduced confidence, and avoidance of oral participation. By framing pronunciation as both a linguistic and pedagogical challenge, the findings highlight the need for instruction that prioritizes communicative effectiveness, integrates pronunciation into meaningful classroom tasks, and provides constructive feedback to support learner confidence.

Although the sample size was relatively small (20 teachers, 25 students, and 10 oral test participants), the results provide valuable insight into pronunciation challenges in the Libyan EFL context and point to directions for future research with larger cohorts. Expanding the scope to multiple universities and employing mixed-methods approaches would allow for a more comprehensive understanding of how pronunciation difficulties affect communication and pedagogy. Ultimately, pronunciation and communication are inseparable in EFL teaching, and focusing on their intersection offers practical pathways for improving classroom interaction and learner outcomes.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A: Sample Teacher Questionnaire Items

1. Pronunciation errors make students difficult to understand.
2. Silent letters cause significant intelligibility problems.
3. Pronunciation errors require frequent clarification in class.
4. Consonant clusters reduce students' intelligibility in connected speech.
5. Mispronounced consonants absent from Arabic increase listener effort.
6. Pronunciation errors slow classroom interaction.
7. Teachers need to repeat or rephrase instructions due to unintelligible speech.
8. Pronunciation difficulties affect assessment of oral performance.

### Appendix B: Sample Student Questionnaire Items

1. I worry that others cannot understand my English pronunciation.
2. Pronunciation mistakes reduce my confidence when speaking.
3. I avoid speaking because of pronunciation problems.
4. I feel anxious when asked to participate orally in class.
5. I hesitate to speak in English even when I know the answer.
6. I believe silent letters are easy to pronounce correctly.
7. I feel more confident speaking English in pairs or small groups.
8. I think my pronunciation affects how teachers evaluate me.
9. I sometimes switch to Arabic when I cannot pronounce English words.
10. I believe pronunciation practice should be part of communicative activities.

### Appendix C: Sample Oral Test Items

#### Isolated Words:

1. comb
2. cupboard
3. receipt
4. marked
5. sixth
6. helped
7. psychology
8. debt
9. island
10. Wednesday

#### Sentence-Level Items:

11. *She combed her hair before class.*
12. *The cupboard was full of books.*
13. *I never keep the receipt after shopping.*
14. *He marked the sixth answer correctly.*
15. *They helped their friends with homework.*
16. *Psychology is an interesting subject.*
17. *He paid off his debt last year.*
18. *The island is very beautiful in summer.*
19. *Wednesday is my busiest day.*
20. *Clusters of consonants make pronunciation difficult.*