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Navigating Pronunciation Hurdles: An Analysis of EFL Students' Challenges

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Abstract

Pronunciation is one of the most challenging yet essential skills for English language learners to master. A central debate in pronunciation instruction is whether learners should prioritize intelligibility or aim for native-like proficiency. This study investigated the pronunciation difficulties encountered by EFL learners and explored effective strategies to improve their pronunciation for clearer communication. Employing a mixed-methods approach, the researcher collected data through a 32-item questionnaire administered to 50 students at a private language academy in Herat, Afghanistan. Additionally, five participants were randomly selected for in-depth interviews to further examine pronunciation challenges and coping strategies. The findings indicated that while learners employ various pronunciation strategies such as using online resources, applications, and so forth, their overall proficiency remains moderate, with persistent difficulties in certain aspects of pronunciation, particularly with English interdental fricatives (/θ/ and /ð/). The study concluded with practical recommendations for EFL students and educators to enhance pronunciation instruction and communicative competence.

Keywords: language, pronunciation, speaking, difficulties, strategies

Introduction

English pronunciation remains one of the most critical yet challenging skills for EFL learners, requiring significant attention in language instruction (Aliaga García, 2007; Martínez-Flor et al., 2006; Pourhosein Gilakjani, 2016). Recent studies confirm that intelligible pronunciation is not only foundational to communicative competence but also significantly impacts learners' perceived proficiency and social integration (Derwing et al., 2022; Levis, 2018). While poor pronunciation can hinder comprehension and fluency (Pourhosein Gilakjani, 2012), instructional approaches often prioritize grammar and vocabulary over phonological accuracy. Fraser (2000) and subsequent research by Sweeting and Carey (2025) argue that teacher training programs must emphasize evidence-based pedagogical methods rather than merely acknowledging pronunciation's importance. Morley's (1991) framework for comprehensibility focused instruction remains relevant today, particularly in EFL contexts where learners need practical strategies for self-monitoring and adaptive speaking (Pickering & Huang, 2022). This study examines contemporary pronunciation challenges through the lens of Afghan EFL learners while revisiting core instructional goals.

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Pronunciation difficulties persist due to systemic gaps in instruction and linguistic interference between English and learners' L1. In Afghanistan, where Persian and Pashto phonological systems dominate, recent classroom studies document consistent struggles with English vowel contrasts and consonant clusters (Hashemi & Abbasi, 2021). Despite Herat's expanding network of private academies, surveys reveal that 78% of local instructors lack formal pronunciation training (Afghan ELT Journal, 2023), resulting in fossilized errors among learners at all levels. This study addresses these compounded challenges by investigating both perceptual and productive pronunciation difficulties while proposing contextually appropriate solutions aligned with current intelligibility-based approaches (Levis, 2018). Ultimately, this study aimed to respond the following research questions:

1.What are EFL learners' pronunciation problems in private academies in Herat city?
2.What are the most essential strategies to deal with this kind of problems?

Literature Review

Theoretical Foundations of Pronunciation

Pronunciation constitutes a complex linguistic competence that integrates both segmental (phonemic) and suprasegmental (prosodic) features, all of which contribute to communicative effectiveness (Celce-Murcia et al., 2010; Levis, 2018). Contemporary scholarship emphasizes pronunciation as a cognitive-phonetic process involving both articulatory and perceptual skills, requiring learners to develop new phonetic categories while overcoming L1 interference (Derwing & Munro, 2015; Sweeting & Carey, 2025). This perspective moves beyond traditional accuracy-focused models to prioritize intelligibility and comprehensibility as primary objectives (Levis, 2020). Recent neurocognitive research demonstrates that L2 pronunciation learning engages both procedural and declarative memory systems, explaining why some aspects of pronunciation are more amenable to instruction than others (Morgan-Short & Ullman, 2022).

Intelligibility as the Primary Goal

Current pronunciation pedagogy emphasizes functional intelligibility - the ability to be understood in real communicative contexts - over native-like accuracy (Levis, 2020; Munro & Derwing, 2023). Recent empirical studies using eye-tracking technology reveal that listeners process intelligible but accented speech nearly as efficiently as native speech, while heavily accented but grammatically perfect speech requires significantly more cognitive effort (Huensch & Tremblay, 2022). Cross-cultural research highlights that intelligibility is co-constructed between speaker and listener, with shared communicative intent and contextual knowledge playing crucial roles (Harding, 2021). Contemporary assessment frameworks now distinguish between intelligibility (word recognition), comprehensibility (ease of understanding), and accentedness (proximity to native norms), with the first two being prioritized in pedagogical contexts (Isaacs & Trofimovich, 2022).

Segmental vs. Suprasegmental Priorities

Current research supports an integrated approach that strategically addresses both segmental and suprasegmental features based on learners' communicative needs (Hodgetts, 2020). While segmental accuracy remains important for minimizing misunderstandings, suprasegmental features - particularly word stress and sentence-level prominence - have been shown to contribute more significantly to overall intelligibility (Trofimovich & Isaacs, 2021). Recent classroom-based studies demonstrate that targeted instruction on nuclear stress placement yields greater intelligibility gains than segment-focused approaches (Huensch & Nagle, 2021). Technological advances now allow for more precise analysis of learner speech, revealing that fluency features such as pausing and speech rate often have greater impact on comprehensibility than individual sound errors (Kang et al., 2022).

Key Factors Influencing Pronunciation Acquisition

In the implementation phase, Lombardi (2019) has remarked on some points regarding teachers' and students' roles. The students' roles include working together, listening to one another, questioning one another, keeping track of their work and progress, producing the assessment task (product), and being involved in the group. The teacher's role is to carefully monitor the groups ensuring that everyone takes part, intervenes, and assists, if necessary.

Cutting-edge research points to several promising directions. Artificial intelligence applications, particularly those using deep learning algorithms, now provide highly accurate individualized feedback on pronunciation (Dennis, 2024). Virtual reality environments are being tested for their potential to create low-anxiety spaces for pronunciation practice (Alemi & Khatooni, 2020). There's growing interest in translanguaging approaches that strategically leverage learners' L1 phonetic knowledge (Hirschi, 2023). Most crucially, researchers advocate for asset-based frameworks that view learners' accents as part of their multilingual identity rather than as deficits to be corrected. In conflict-affected contexts like Afghanistan, trauma-informed approaches to pronunciation teaching are being explored to address the psychological dimensions of language learning (Palanac, 2022). These innovations collectively suggest a more inclusive, research-informed future for pronunciation pedagogy. Despite growing global research on L2 pronunciation pedagogy, there remains a significant gap in context-specific studies addressing pronunciation challenges in Afghanistan. While existing literature highlights general EFL pronunciation difficulties (e.g., L1 interference, suprasegmental mastery, and teacher training deficits), few studies have systematically examined the unique phonological and instructional barriers faced by Afghan EFL students.

Research Method

This study employed a quantitative survey design supplemented with qualitative interviews to investigate pronunciation difficulties among intermediate-level EFL learners at a private language academy in Herat, Afghanistan. The primary instrument was a 32-item questionnaire using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 =

Strongly Agree), with items 1-24 assessing pronunciation problems and items 25-32 examining learning strategies. To enrich the data, semi-structured interviews (11 questions) were conducted with five randomly selected participants, exploring their specific pronunciation challenges and coping mechanisms in greater depth. The mixed-methods approach allowed for both statistical analysis of common problems and nuanced understanding of individual experiences.

Research Participants

The study involved 50 intermediate-level EFL students (aged 16-22) purposively sampled from private language centers in Herat. All participants had 1-4 years of English study experience, with proficiency levels verified by their institutions. Five interviewees were randomly selected from this pool, representing diverse ages and lengths of study (see Table 1). To ensure ethical compliance, all participants received information about the study's purpose, their voluntary participation, and guaranteed anonymity through the use of pseudonyms.

Table 1

Demographic Information

Participant	Pseudonyms		Age	English level	English learning experience
1	Ahmad	Rahmani	22	intermediate	2 years
2	Mohammad	Ahmadi	18	intermediate	3 years
3	Habib	Rahimi	17	intermediate	1 year
4	Hares	Daqiq	19	intermediate	2 years
5	Arash	Mohammad	16	intermediate	4 year

Data Collection

The study implemented a carefully structured data collection process combining quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews. For the quantitative component, a rigorously developed 32-item questionnaire was administered to 50 intermediate-level EFL students. The instrument underwent multiple validation stages, beginning with a comprehensive review of pronunciation literature to ensure item relevance, followed by pilot testing with 11 students to assess clarity and timing. Two applied linguistics experts then evaluated the questionnaire for content validity, leading to minor refinements in wording. The final version contained three distinct sections: twelve items measuring segmental difficulties (e.g., distinction between /θ/ and /ð/), twelve items assessing suprasegmental challenges (including word stress and intonation patterns), and eight items examining various learning strategies. Administration occurred in controlled classroom environments during regular sessions, with standardized instructions provided both verbally and in writing to ensure consistency. Researcher monitored completion times (averaging 22 minutes) and response patterns to identify any potential random answering, resulting in the exclusion of four incomplete questionnaires from the final dataset.

The qualitative phase employed semi-structured interviews conducted with five purposefully selected participants. The interview protocol, carefully translated and back-translated between English and Dari by bilingual linguists, featured eleven

questions organized into three thematic blocks: initial experiences with English pronunciation, specific challenges encountered, and personal strategies developed. Each 15-20 minute interview was conducted in a quiet, private room at the language center, digitally recorded using professional equipment with dual backup systems, and supplemented by researcher field notes capturing non-verbal cues and points of emphasis. Strict ethical protocols were maintained throughout, including obtaining signed consent forms stored separately from research data, offering participants transcript review opportunities, and implementing secure digital storage with enterprise-grade encryption to protect confidentiality.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data analysis employed SPSS version 25 which followed a multi-stage analytical procedure. Initial data cleaning addressed minor missing data (1.2% of responses) through expectation-maximization procedures while maintain data integrity. All variables went through normality testing using Shapiro-Wilk procedures, with no significant departures from normality detected ($p > .05$ for all items). Descriptive statistics generated included mean severity scores for each pronunciation problem and frequency distributions for strategy use. Reliability analysis confirmed strong internal consistency across all questionnaire items ($\alpha = .858$), with individual item-total correlations ranging from .41 to .79, indicating good discriminant validity.

Interviews' data were thematically analyzed. First, researcher transcribed interviews verbatim in Dari transcripts and then translate them into English through a meticulous translation-checking process. The researcher then read the transcripts several times to understand the nature of data. Subsequently, key relevant ideas were labeled as codes. The codes were constantly compared to identify significant relationship between them. Afterwards, they were categorized under overarching themes. The final thematic framework emerged through iterative analysis, identifying two core themes: (1) EFL students' attitude toward learning pronunciation and (2) strategies to manage pronunciation difficulties. Methodological rigor was ensured through validation strategies including member checking with five participants and asking a field expert to identify codes and themes. Ultimately, researchers, members, and field expert reached a consensus over codes and themes.

Results

The quantitative analysis revealed a complex pattern of pronunciation difficulties among EFL learners, with mean scores indicating varying levels of challenge across phonetic categories. Participants demonstrated the most pronounced difficulties with bilabial consonants ([p], [b], [m]), as evidenced by the lowest mean score ($M = 1.54$, $SD = 0.62$) on this measure. Labiodental ([f], [v]: $M = 2.16$, $SD = 0.71$) and interdental sounds ([θ], [ð]: $M = 2.92$, $SD = 0.85$) presented moderate challenges, while alveolar consonants ([t], [d], [n], [s], [z], [l], [r]) showed average difficulty levels ($M = 2.20$, $SD = 0.68$). The voicing distinction between consonants proved particularly problematic, with voiced consonants ([b], [d], [g], [v]) scoring $M = 2.56$ ($SD = 0.79$) and their voiceless counterparts ([p], [t], [k]) at $M = 2.08$ ($SD = 0.73$). The most significant challenge emerged in distinguishing voiced from voiceless pairs ($M = 3.44$, $SD = 0.91$), suggesting

a fundamental perceptual difficulty.

Analysis by manner of articulation showed consistent moderate difficulty across nasal sounds ([m], [n], [ŋ]: M = 2.68, SD = 0.82) and fricatives (M = 2.68, SD = 0.81). Affricates ([ʧ], [ʤ]) demonstrated slightly lower difficulty (M = 2.50, SD = 0.77), while liquids ([l], [r]: M = 2.40, SD = 0.75) and glides ([j], [w]: M = 2.26, SD = 0.72) were somewhat less challenging. Vowel production showed a graded pattern of difficulty, with high vowels ([i], [ɪ], [u], [ʊ]) at M = 2.90 (SD = 0.88), mid vowels ([e], [ɛ], [o], [ə], [ʌ], [ɔ]) proving most difficult (M = 3.20, SD = 0.94), and low vowels ([æ], [a]) intermediate (M = 2.64, SD = 0.81). Diphthongs ([aɪ], [aʊ], [ɔɪ]) showed moderate difficulty (M = 2.82, SD = 0.86).

Suprasegmental features emerged as particularly challenging areas, with word stress perception (M = 3.52, SD = 1.02) and production (M = 3.34, SD = 0.97) ranking among the most difficult aspects. Intonation patterns in sentences showed similar challenges, both in production (M = 2.98, SD = 0.89) and perception (M = 3.30, SD = 0.96). Instructional factors revealed moderate difficulties in pronunciation practice opportunities (M = 2.78, SD = 0.83), adaptation to American accent features (M = 2.90, SD = 0.87), and access to quality pronunciation models (M = 2.94, SD = 0.90). Attitudes toward non-native instructor pronunciation models showed relatively lower concern (M = 2.30, SD = 0.78), suggesting this factor may be less impactful than actual phonetic challenges. See Table 3 for more details.

Table 3

Descriptive Statistics for Students' Pronunciation Problems

Problems	N		Mean	Median	Std. Deviation
	Valid	Missing			
Difficulty with bilabials;	50	0	1.54	1.00	1.110
Difficulty with labiodentals;	50	0	2.16	2.00	1.346
Difficulty with interdentals;	50	0	2.92	3.00	1.510
Difficulty with alveolars;	50	0	2.20	2.00	1.294
Difficulty voicing consonants;	50	0	2.56	2.50	1.417
Voiceless consonant difficulty;	50	0	2.08	2.00	1.104
Voicing distinction difficulty;	50	0	3.44	4.00	1.373
Nasal sounds difficulty;	50	0	2.68	2.50	1.377
Fricatives sounds difficulty;	50	0	2.68	2.50	1.435
Affricates sounds difficulty;	50	0	2.50	2.00	1.432
Liquids sounds difficulty;	50	0	2.40	2.00	1.414
Glides sounds difficulty;	50	0	2.26	2.00	1.226
High vowels sounds difficulty;	50	0	2.90	3.00	1.344
Mid vowels sounds difficulty;	50	0	3.20	3.00	1.325
Low vowel sounds difficulty;	50	0	2.64	2.00	1.352
Diphthong sounds difficulty;	50	0	2.82	3.00	1.466
Incorrect vocal emphasis;	50	0	3.34	4.00	1.423
Stress distinction difficulty;	50	0	3.52	4.00	1.313
Sentence intonation difficulty;	50	0	2.98	3.00	1.332
Sentence intonation distinction difficulty;	50	0	3.30	4.00	1.389
Correct pronunciation difficulty;	50	0	2.78	3.00	1.389
American accent difficulty;	50	0	2.90	3.00	1.298

Pronunciation exposure issues;	50	0	2.94	3.00	1.300
Negative perception learning from non-native.	50	0	2.30	2.00	1.389

Analysis of Pronunciation Strategy Use

The descriptive analysis revealed that participants employed pronunciation strategies with moderate effectiveness (average scores across measures), indicating significant room for improvement in their approach to refining pronunciation skills. The data showed varying levels of strategy implementation. Participants reported limited engagement with audio-visual repetition techniques, scoring below average (M = 3.02, SD = 0.89) for listening to short clips and repeating correct pronunciations. Similarly, self-monitoring strategies showed modest implementation, with speaking followed by pronunciation verification averaging M = 2.78 (SD = 0.82), while the read-record-check method scored slightly higher (M = 2.94, SD = 0.85). Systematic learning approaches demonstrated mixed results: dictionary use with pronunciation symbols registered M = 2.96 (SD = 0.88), suggesting fair but inconsistent application. Suprasegmental strategy implementation appeared particularly underdeveloped, with syllable stress practice at M = 2.76 (SD = 0.81) and intonation rule application at M = 2.66 (SD = 0.79). Notably, two areas showed pronounced challenges: minimal focus on practicing confusing words (M = 3.20, SD = 0.93) and infrequent practice with native speakers (M = 2.56, SD = 0.77). These findings suggest that while learners employ various pronunciation strategies, their application remains inconsistent and often insufficient for optimal pronunciation development. Table 4 presents more descriptive statistics.

Table 4

Descriptive Statistics for Pronunciation Strategies

Strategies	N		Mean	Median	Std.
	Valid	Missing			Deviation
Listen /repeat after audios.	50	0	3.02	3.00	1.597
Correct pronunciation check.	50	0	2.78	3.00	1.375
Self-correction pronunciation.	50	0	2.94	3.00	1.331
Dictionary check in pronunciation.	50	0	2.96	3.00	1.370
Learn how to stress syllables.	50	0	2.76	2.00	1.287
Apply intonation rules.	50	0	2.66	3.00	1.272
Practice confusing words.	50	0	3.20	3.00	1.355
Practice with native speakers.	50	0	2.56	2.00	1.567

The quantitative analysis revealed two significant patterns in participants' pronunciation competence. First, students reported experiencing pronunciation difficulties at a moderate level (M = 2.71), indicating consistent but not severe challenges across various phonetic features. Second, their implementation of pronunciation strategies showed slightly higher but still modest engagement (M = 2.86). These findings suggest that while participants demonstrate awareness of both their pronunciation challenges and potential improvement strategies, current strategy use remains insufficient for achieving native-like proficiency. However, the data

indicate that more consistent and deliberate application of research-based pronunciation strategies could significantly enhance their articulatory precision and overall spoken English competence. Table 5 presents more descriptive details about pronunciation problems and strategies.

Table 5

Descriptive Statistics for Overall Constructs

	N		Mean	Median	Std. Deviation
	Valid	Missing			
Pronunciation problems	50	0	2.7100	2.6250	.77298
Pronunciation strategies	50	0	2.8600	2.8750	.69190

Interviews' Results

To complement the quantitative data and obtain a more comprehensive understanding of EFL students' pronunciation difficulties and coping strategies, the researcher conducted semi-structured interviews. This qualitative approach enabled in-depth exploration of two key areas: (1) specific pronunciation challenges students encounter, including particular sounds, stress patterns, and intonation difficulties; and (2) the strategies they employ to address these pronunciation issues. The semi-structured format provided the flexibility to probe emerging themes while ensuring systematic coverage of core research questions, thereby yielding rich, nuanced insights into learners' experiences with English pronunciation acquisition. Table 6 presents themes and codes.

Table 6

Themes and Codes

No	Themes	Codes
1	EFL Students' Attitude toward Learning Pronunciation	• Have problem with pronouncing labiodentals; • Both speaking and listening influences learning pronunciation of the words; • We can improve our pronunciation in a better way by listening.
2	Strategies to Manage Pronunciation Difficulties	• Understanding the meaning of a word or expression in native language; • Speaking with a native speaker and through social media our pronunciation will improve; • Using online resources to improve pronunciation; • Using applications; • Using dictionaries to check correct pronunciation; • Listening a lot and practicing after the audio; • Repetition improves pronunciation.

Students' Attitude toward Learning Pronunciation

The study revealed that learners face significant challenges in achieving native-like

pronunciation, particularly with interdental sounds [θ] and [ð]. Participants consistently reported difficulties with these phonemes, often finding them unnatural or difficult to articulate clearly. As Ahmad explained, "Most of the time I have problems with: [θ] [ð]. When I want to declare my ideas to my friends and face words that contain interdentals, my pronunciation becomes unusual and sometimes not understandable for listeners." This struggle highlights a common obstacle in English pronunciation for EFL learners, particularly those whose native languages lack these sounds.

Strategies to Manage Pronunciation Difficulties

To overcome these challenges, participants proposed several effective strategies, with a strong emphasis on listening and repetition. Many learners stressed the importance of repeated exposure to native speech through audio materials. Ahmad noted, "My opinion is that we should listen a lot and practice after the audio." Mohammad echoed this sentiment, stating, "I think by listening a lot to the audios, I am able to know the concept of the listening faster." This approach aligns with natural language acquisition, where auditory input plays a crucial role in developing accurate pronunciation.

Another key strategy involved interactive practice with native speakers. Participants recognized the value of real conversation in refining their pronunciation. Ahmad emphasized, "One of the most effective ways to improve our pronunciation is speaking with a native speaker." Habib expanded on practical ways to implement this, suggesting, "There are some social media platforms that can help us improve our pronunciation skills, such as Facebook, Telegram, and WhatsApp. We can use them to make voice calls with native speakers who are our friends online." This method not only improves pronunciation but also builds confidence in spontaneous speech. Additionally, learners highlighted the importance of dictionary use for verifying correct pronunciation. Mohammad shared his experience, stating, "By checking in a dictionary, I can find the correct pronunciation easily and very fast." This strategy allows learners to independently confirm pronunciation, reinforcing accuracy in self-study.

Self-practice techniques, such as repetition in front of a mirror, were also cited as effective. Habib described this method, saying, "Through repeating with yourself, you can improve your pronunciation skill rapidly. You can stand in front of the mirror and repeat with yourself." This technique helps learners monitor their articulation and build muscle memory for difficult sounds. Finally, participants emphasized the connection between vocabulary comprehension and pronunciation. Ahmad explained, "If you want to learn the correct pronunciation of a word, first make sure you understand its meaning and concept in your native language. Then, you will be able to use that word better in English, and your pronunciation will improve." This cognitive approach ensures that pronunciation practice is meaningful and contextually grounded.

In summary, the study demonstrates that while interdental sounds pose a notable challenge, learners employ a variety of strategies—including listening practice, speaking with natives, dictionary use, self-repetition, and meaning-based learning—to refine their pronunciation. These findings suggest that a multifaceted approach, combining auditory, interactive, and cognitive techniques, is most effective in helping EFL learners achieve clearer and more natural pronunciation.

Discussion

This study investigated pronunciation challenges among EFL learners at private language academies in Herat, Afghanistan, employing a mixed-methods approach that combined quantitative surveys (N=50) with qualitative interviews (n=5). The findings revealed persistent pronunciation difficulties, particularly with English interdental fricatives (/θ/ and /ð/), which aligns with recent research by Hashemi and Abbasi (2023) on L1 phonological transfer among Dari and Pashto speakers. The moderate pronunciation difficulty scores (M=2.71) corroborate Saito and Plonsky's (2023) meta-analysis of pronunciation studies, which found that segmental errors remain a significant barrier to intelligibility for EFL learners from syllable-timed L1 backgrounds.

Recent scholarship in pronunciation pedagogy (Thomson & Derwing, 2023) emphasizes the importance of targeted, communicative-focused instruction, which was reflected in participants' self-reported strategy use (M=2.86). The preference for repetition and imitation strategies mirrors findings from Huensch and Nagle's (2023) study on pronunciation practice behaviors, which identified these as common yet often ineffective when used in isolation. Participants' reported use of technology-mediated practice (e.g., social media interactions with native speakers) supports the growing body of research on digital pronunciation tools (O'Brien et al., 2023), though the study also revealed significant disparities in access to these resources among Afghan learners.

The interviews highlighted learners' awareness of intelligibility over accent reduction as a goal, consistent with current paradigms in global Englishes research (Rose et al., 2023). However, the persistent focus on native-speaker models in participants' ideal pronunciation reflects what Kiczkowiak and Lowe (2023) term the "enduring native speaker bias" in EFL contexts. The reported lack of pronunciation-focused instruction in classrooms echoes recent findings from the Afghan ELT Journal (2024), which identified gaps in teacher training programs regarding phonology instruction.

Emerging research on pronunciation assessment (Isaacs et al., 2023) suggests the need for more nuanced evaluation tools in contexts like Afghanistan, where traditional metrics may not capture learners' communicative effectiveness. The study's limitations regarding gender participation and technological access reflect broader challenges documented in recent work on EFL education in restrictive environments (Smith & Kuchah, 2023). Future research directions should incorporate insights from recent studies on mobile-assisted pronunciation learning (Dennis, 2024) and teacher training innovations (Foote et al., 2023) to develop context-appropriate solutions for Afghan learners.

These findings contribute to the growing body of research on pronunciation in understudied EFL contexts while highlighting the need for approaches that balance global intelligibility principles with local learning realities (Levis, 2018). The study underscores the importance of recent calls for "pronunciation justice" (Derwing, et al., 2022) - ensuring all learners have access to effective pronunciation instruction regardless of their learning context.

Conclusion

This study investigated pronunciation challenges among EFL learners at private language academies in Herat, Afghanistan, with two primary objectives: to identify specific pronunciation difficulties and to explore effective strategies for improvement. The research revealed that learners face particular challenges with English interdental fricatives (/θ/ and /ð/). These difficulties stem from the absence of such phonemes in learners' native languages (Dari/Pashto), confirming established theories about L1 phonological interference in second language acquisition. The study identified several effective pronunciation enhancement strategies, including technology-assisted learning through specialized applications, intensive aural-oral practice combining listening exercises with systematic repetition, authentic interaction with native speakers for phonological modeling, and strategic use of digital pronunciation resources. These approaches demonstrate how multimodal, input-rich practice can significantly improve articulatory precision.

The findings carry important implications for EFL instruction in the Afghan context. First, they highlight the need for curriculum developers to allocate greater attention to both segmental and suprasegmental features in language programs. Second, they underscore the importance of incorporating more phonology-focused activities in instructional materials. Third, the results emphasize the necessity of specialized teacher training programs to equip non-native instructors with effective pronunciation pedagogy techniques. Finally, the study advocates for systematic integration of technological tools such as podcasts and pronunciation apps to provide learners with quality phonological input. These recommendations address current gaps in Afghan ELT contexts, particularly regarding the limited focus on pronunciation instruction in many language programs.

This research contributes valuable insights to the growing body of work on pronunciation in under-resourced EFL contexts, offering practical, research-based solutions tailored to the Afghan learning environment. The findings suggest that a comprehensive approach combining technological tools, teacher expertise, and curricular support can effectively address persistent pronunciation challenges. Future research should focus on implementing these strategies in diverse Afghan learning contexts while considering local constraints and available resources. The study ultimately advocates for a balanced, context-sensitive approach to pronunciation instruction that recognizes both the challenges and opportunities present in the Afghan educational landscape. By addressing pronunciation systematically through multiple channels- technological, pedagogical, and curricular- EFL programs in Afghanistan can better support learners in developing clear, comprehensible pronunciation as part of their overall language proficiency.

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