



A Conceptual Exploration of Phonetic Transcription in Improving EFL Learners' Pronunciation

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Abstract

Pronunciation continues to be a significant hurdle for numerous EFL learners, especially in situations where particular English phonemes do not exist in their native language. Although prior research has examined different techniques like mobile apps, phonetic exercises, and shadowing methods. Phonetic transcription is frequently overlooked as an organized tool for teaching pronunciation. This conceptual article suggests a gradual way to integrate phonetic transcription, specifically the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA), into EFL classrooms to enhance long-term pronunciation improvement. The discussion is structured into four primary sections: the common pronunciation difficulties encountered by learners, the phonetic transcription, the importance of phonetic transcription for enhancing pronunciation, and the incorporation of this method into education. Based on theories and earlier studies, the findings indicate that phonetic transcription can enhance pronunciation skills among EFL learners. Additionally, once learners familiar with English phonemes, they can independently search for phonetic transcriptions in dictionaries or online resources.

1. Introduction

The ability to speak is one of the four skills essential in English communication. This skill holds vital role as it reflects person's intentions, thus speaking requires more attention (Jezhny & Bapir, 2020). Among the components of speaking, pronunciation is a significant factor. Yürük (2020) asserts that it is one of the basic skills learners should have in language teaching, and contributes significantly. It affects the speaker's clarity to be understood by others which crucial for effective communication. Not only important in communication or speaking, but also in conveying messages and ensuring that others understand the intended meaning in a way that can be heard and understood (Pennington & Rogerson-Revell, 2019). Therefore, EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners need to take this aspect of speaking seriously.

Although it is an essential aspect of learning a language, pronunciation tends to be difficult to learn. As stated by Albiladi (2019) that pronunciation is one of the obstacles faced by language learners in their learning process. Numerous factors can lead to this issue, and everyone faces their challenges. Plailek & Essien (2021) state that the lack of English phonemes in the phonological system of some EFL learners can contribute to challenges in producing accurate pronunciation.

This results in learners replacing unfamiliar English sounds with the closest sounds to their first language (L1), which can lead to inaccurate pronunciation and reduced speech clarity. Similarly, the pronunciation problem can be attributed to the influence of the L1 in pronouncing second language (L2) words (Cheng, 2023; Aryanika, 2025).

Most EFL learners can face this problem in their pronunciation attempts. Indonesian EFL learners experience difficulties in pronouncing consonant minimal pairs such as /d/ & /ð/, /f/ & /v/, and /ʃ/ & /tʃ/, mainly because some of these consonants are absent in their language (Sayogie & Adbaka, 2022). Dewi et al. (2025) also found that Korean speakers' mispronunciation of English is also caused by a different sound system that leads them to change the consonant /f/ to /p/ and replace the consonant /w/ by placing first the vowels /u/ or /o/. These cases illustrate on how the influence of the learner's L1 can interfere with the production of correct English sounds, frequently resulting in systematic mispronunciations that can impact intelligibility. Addressing these problems require a deeper understanding of phonological differences and the implementation of effective instructional strategies in teaching pronunciation.

The importance of various techniques in improving EFL learners' pronunciation have been highlighted in several previous studies. These earlier studies have shown that the integration of certain strategies into their learning approach can result in better English pronunciation among learners. Rismawati et al. (2022) implemented ELSA Speaking application to improve students' pronunciation. The results found that the ELSA application was effective in improving students' English pronunciation. Meanwhile Dandee & Pornwiriyaakit (2022) found an improvement in EFL students' English pronunciation skills

through the use of English phonetic alphabet drills. All students improved their accuracy in pronouncing both English consonant and vowel sound after practicing with the English phonetic alphabet drills. Hamada (2018) further showed that the shadowing technique, as combined with phonetic transcription through IPA-shadowing, improved learners' segmental comprehension and pronunciation.

The strategies mentioned above have been effectively employed to enhance pronunciation of EFL learners. Nonetheless, systematic classroom practice of phonetic transcription is lacking. In order to bridge this gap, this conceptual article will discuss phonetic transcription in enhancing pronunciation of English. It is also meant to facilitate and enhance phonetic transcription in the improvement of segmental features in pronunciation among EFL learners. By discussing relevant theories and pedagogical insights, this article will provide a structured foundation for integrating this specific approach into pronunciation instruction by combining several strategies with phonetic transcription.

2. Method

The method of this article is a conceptual approach. The purpose of this is to develop a new perspective based on the review of the literature and synthesis of information on the topic.

Books and articles were used as the sources of the literature. These were chosen based on the relevance to the topic, covering pronunciation problems, English phonetic transcription, the enhancement of pronunciation through phonetic transcription, and the implementation of phonetic transcription. The sources were filtered by the year of publication, which needed to be between 2010 and 2025. This selection was made to ensure the research remains relevant.

This analysis was conducted into several processes in which the literature was categorized based on four main aspects: Pronunciation Problems, English Phonetic Transcription, Transcription in Pronunciation Improvement, and Incorporating Phonetic Transcription into Teaching. Each aspect was examined separately to gain a more in-depth understanding. A comprehensive synthesis was then developed to provide a thorough understanding of how phonetic transcription can serve as an effective tool for improving students' pronunciation.

3. Result & Discussion

This section addresses the main argument of this conceptual article. It is divided into four main points. It includes common pronunciation challenges faced by EFL learners, the phonetic transcription, the role of phonetic transcription in pronunciation improvement, the educational integration of this strategy, and synthesis of systematical integration of phonetic transcription.

English Pronunciation Problem

Good pronunciation is crucial. However, some learners may struggle to master it. Language learners who learn English as their L2 or do not speak it regularly may experience challenges in pronouncing English words. Indonesians or any other non-English-speaking countries might experience this challenge, as they typically communicate in their native languages as their primary language. The linguistic background of learners can cause differences between the phonological systems of their L1 and the phonological system of English, making some English sounds difficult to hear or pronounce correctly.

As a result, mispronunciations often occur, especially when learners deal with sounds that do not exist in their native language. This issue has been observed among learners from various non-English-speaking countries. English consonant sounds like /ð/, /v/, /θ/, /z/, and /ʒ/ are often difficult for Indonesian EFL learners to pronounce (Kaharuddin et al., 2020; Ristati et al., 2024; Yulianti et al., 2025). Similarly, Turkish EFL learners also found sounds /r/, /ð/, /w/, /θ/, /ŋ/, /ou/, /ə/, and /æ are problematic (Arikan & Yilmaz, 2019). Meanwhile, for Thai EFL learners, Sridhanyarat (2017) reported fricatives such as /v/, /z/, /θ/, /ð/, and /ʒ/ are English sounds that have difficult pronunciation.

A significant reason for this issue is the lack or infrequent occurrence of particular English phonemes in the phonological systems of the learners' native languages (Sridhanyarat, 2017; Zaman et al., 2019; Arikan & Yilmaz, 2019; Kaharuddin et al., 2020; Dandee & Pornwiriyaakit, 2022; Ristati et al., 2024; Yulianti et al., 2025). Consequently, EFL learners often replace unfamiliar English sounds with comparable sounds from their first language, resulting in frequent mispronunciations. Recognizing these common challenges is crucial not only for creating more effective teaching methods but also for helping learners identify and address their persistent mistakes. Thus, targeted pronunciation instruction, which includes the use of phonetic resources or examples, is crucial to help EFL learners achieve more precise and clear pronunciation.

Phonetic Transcription

Transcription refers to the process of systematically and consistently recording spoken sounds in a written format, often referred to as notation or script (Crystal, 2008). In the context of language learning, transcription plays an important role in helping learners recognize and produce sounds accurately. It bridges the gap between how words are written and how they are pronounced, as many English words are often inconsistent. This will support better understanding and reflection of English pronunciation. The application of symbols differs from spelling in transcription. As Roach (2009) stated, phoneticians use a much broader set of symbols when attempting to represent sounds with greater accuracy. These symbols are commonly known as the IPA (International Phonetic Alphabet) (IPA, 1999).

Unlike spelling, IPA symbols offer a standard method for describing the pronunciation of words. Each symbol represents a specific sound (phoneme), allowing learners, educators, linguists, and speech therapists to transcribe and understand pronunciation accurately. Szpyra-Kozłowska (2014) further noted that IPA provides visual reinforcement of auditory input. This visual helps learners identify and distinguish subtle phonetic variations that may not be apparent. Thus, EFL learners should not only focus on spelling, as there are many discrepancies between spelling and sounds. For instance, the pronunciation of the word “island” cannot be understood simply by looking at its spelling.

The pronunciation of this word is very different from its written form, specifically pronounced as /'aɪlənd/. EFL learners who are unaware of this may pronounce it by its spelling. This difference highlights the complex relationship between English spelling and sound. According to Yavaş (2011), sound can be represented by different letters, a letter can represent several sounds, a combination of letters can represent a single sound, and a single letter can represent more than one sound. At least one of these factors contributes to the difference between spelling and pronunciation, which can lead to homophones such as rite, right, write, and wright (Yavaş, 2011). These homophones have one identical pronunciation, which is /raɪt/.

EFL learners may consider two types of transcription in transcribing English words. These are referred to as broad transcription and narrow transcription. Broad transcription, often referred to as phonemic transcription, indicates only phonemes and this transcription type is typically represented in slash brackets / /, for example in the word part /part/ (Carley & Mees, 2020). This type of transcription appears to be the simplest of all because it only represents units that distinguish meaning, e.g. /pin/, /pen/, /pæn/ (Crystal, 2008). These words are differentiated only by phonemes or variations in sound.

Hence, this transcription type clearly omits subtle details regarding how sounds are articulated, concentrating instead on the fundamental sound units that set one word apart from another. Roach (2009) points out that this transcription is relatively easy to put into practice and doesn't take much time to learn it. This advantage makes it particularly beneficial for EFL learners, as it offers clear and uncomplicated guidance on pronunciation without added complexity.

The following type is narrow transcription, also known as phonetic transcription. According to Heselwood (2013) phonetic transcription is a written representation of the analysis of elements in spoken language expression by utilizing symbols that have phonetic meaning based on phonetic theory. Carley & Mees (2020) emphasize the existence of more detailed allophonic differences in phonetic transcription, which are surrounded by square brackets [], for example, part [p^hɑrt]. By showing the allophones of existing phonemes, it becomes clear whether plosive consonants are aspirated or unaspirated (Knight, 2012). Such details make this type of transcription more detailed in comparison to phonemic

transcription.

However, Collins et al. (2019) also argue that both phonetic and phonemic transcription have their own functions, where phonemic transcription, despite its simplicity, is in fact a more complex system, as it requires a strong understanding of the language closely from the reader. This shows that learners need to have a good understanding English's sound system to accurately comprehend the intended pronunciation of its words. On the other hand, phonetic transcription offers a more comprehensive depiction, which is particularly beneficial for language learners or linguists who need to examine specific features of articulation like aspiration, nasalization, or intonation. In conclusion, the decision between using phonemic and phonetic transcription is influenced by the purpose of the learner or educators.

Phonetic Transcription in Pronunciation Improvement

According to Cromico (2025), phonetic symbols enhance learners' awareness of the phonetic features in the target language. Phonetic awareness may contribute to comprehension in phonetic transcription, which positively impacts pronunciation among EFL learners. By recognizing sound differences more accurately through phonetic symbols, language learners can correct mispronunciations and enhance speech clarity. Through this enhancement in phonetic awareness, learners can speak English with greater accuracy (Istiqomah et al., 2021). This awareness further assists learners in forming more precise articulation habits. As they comprehend the connection between sounds and letters, they can internalize proper pronunciation patterns and more effectively regulate their speech.

Phonetic transcription has been shown to have a positive impact on students' pronunciation. El-Sulukiyyah (2018) noted that phonetic transcription helps students recognize and correct their pronunciation errors. Similarly, Irawan & Tampubolon (2020) discovered that the use of phonetic transcription results in a significant improvement in students' pronunciation skills. These findings highlight that implementing phonetic transcription in pronunciation teaching can be an effective approach to assist EFL learners in developing pronunciation clarity and accuracy. Furthermore, being more aware of these sounds can encourage more regular pronunciation practice and consistent progress in spoken English.

In addition to improving learners' phonetic awareness and contributing to pronunciation improvement, the use of phonetic transcription can also support independent learning. As reported by Uddin & Uddin (2021), the ability to interpret IPA and phonemic transcription allow learners to become more independent in improving their pronunciation through available resources such as dictionaries or other online sources. Likewise, Cromico (2025) emphasizes that phonetic symbols provide learners with practical ways to engage in independent learning, thereby reducing dependence on instructors and encouraging continuous improvement outside the classroom environment. Thus, mastery of phonetic transcription not

only supports the technical aspects of pronunciation but also promotes an active and responsible learning attitude among students, which is an essential element in the development of sustainable language competencies.

Incorporating Phonetic Transcription into Teaching

To optimize the use of phonetic transcription in pronunciation teaching, educators must balance theoretical knowledge and practical application. Although a deep understanding of phonetics may not always be necessary for all learners, introducing phonetic symbols in a meaningful context is important. Educators need to know what needs to be done for teaching and learning activities to perform as planned.

In line with this, Pennington & Rogerson-Revell (2019) suggests that decisions made in the context of teaching pronunciation should consider other factors such as the proficiency level of the learners, their ultimate goals in learning the language, the types of instruction that can be implemented effectively and efficiently, and the likelihood of achieving the best results in the long term. Therefore, teachers need to be flexible and reflective in choosing an approach that suits the needs of their class. An adaptive approach enables pronunciation learning to be more meaningful and relevant, and helps learners achieve sustained progress in line with their learning contexts.

Additionally, it is the responsibility of educators to teach phonetic symbols to EFL learners who are unfamiliar with them. However, Kelly (2000) does not recommend that educators introduce all phonemic symbols to students at once. Instead, it is preferable to focus on sounds that cause difficulty first, followed by the gradual introduction of other phonemic symbols as needed. This gradual approach allows students to more easily understand and remember the phonetic symbols relevant to their pronunciation issues. Moreover, this method helps avoid excessive cognitive load, especially for beginner-level learners who are still adapting to the English sound system, which differs from their native language.

Teaching practices should be flexible and learner-centered, providing space for differentiated approaches based on students' backgrounds and preferences so that learners are motivated to learn. The uniqueness of these symbols can be utilized by educators in pedagogically interesting ways when developing or adapting materials for pronunciation exercises (Mompean, 2015).

By utilizing visual representations of language sounds, teachers can create more explicit and enjoyable learning activities, thereby helping students recognize and distinguish sounds that they often mispronounce. Mompean (2015) also provides examples of the use of visuals, such as changes in font size, font thickness, or font color, to highlight certain aspects of the material. It can be concluded that educators' creativity is also essential in teaching and learning pronunciation.

Synthesizing Phonetic Transcription in EFL Learning

This synthesis suggests a unified method to learn pronunciation using three complementary strategies: phonetic transcription, shadowing, and phonetic drills. This approach does not consider these methods as distinct practices but as integrative steps that complement each other in cultivating the pronunciation abilities of learners. The initial step is to acquire the fundamentals of phonetic transcription using the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA). At this point, students are introduced to individual symbols of English sounds, including consonants, vowels, and diphthongs. This process is necessary since it creates the understanding of the systematic encoding of sounds, and learners can cease to rely on irregular patterns of spelling. Through mastering IPA symbols and practicing phonetic transcription, learners can have a visual and cognitive reference guide for pronunciation. This will assist them in identifying subtle differences between similar sounds.

Based on this foundation, the incorporation of the shadowing technique offers an active transition between recognition and production. Shadowing is based on oral input, listening, and repeating it directly, which helps learners to repeat rhythm, stress, and pronunciation in real-time. This implies that learners are not just able to hear but also know how sounds are built. Connecting sound to IPA symbols, learners strengthen their memory and acquire more precise pronunciation patterns by practicing the knowledge.

Moreover, phonetic drills are a method of systematic reinforcement in this combined method. This exercise includes drilling certain sounds, so that learners can concentrate on pronunciation and regularity. By consistently rehearsing the desired sounds on IPA as a reference, learners can reinforce muscle memory and minimize mistakes.

A combination of these three components, IPA learning, shadowing, and drills, together will form a complete pronunciation learning cycle. Students start with conceptual learning of sounds through transcription, followed by a step toward practical skills via shadowing, and practice their skills through repetitive drills. This order makes learning not a passive process, but it is actively supported at various levels. All the stages are supportive of one another. Phonetic transcription helps to raise awareness, shadowing is used to develop fluency, and the use of drills helps to be accurate. Beyond that, it facilitates the practice and further involvement in language sounds. Consequently, learners will be more prepared to create correct and understandable speech.

4. Conclusion

Phonetic transcription is one of many strategies for helping learners of English as a foreign language develop their pronunciation skills. This transcription has two types, broad and narrow transcription. By representing sounds with symbols, phonetic transcription allows learners to more precisely identify sound distinctions, particularly for sounds that are absent in their first language.

Increased awareness of phonetics through the use of IPA symbols enables learners to self-correct their pronunciation mistakes and grasp the connection between sounds and spellings in English. Moreover, phonetic transcription can be incorporated into teaching methods to enhance understanding of phonology and promote autonomy learning. Therefore, phonetic transcription serves as a powerful strategy for ongoing improvement in pronunciation skills.

As a conceptual article, this study lacks empirical evidence to back its assertions. The analysis draws on theoretical viewpoints and insights from earlier literature, which, although informative, may not entirely reflect the intricacies of actual pronunciation teaching and learning environments. Therefore, the suggested effectiveness of phonetic transcription for enhancing learners' pronunciation, as discussed in this article, still needs empirical support.

Future research is recommended to explore how phonetic transcription can influence students' pronunciation improvement by employing quantitative research on the use of phonetic transcription compared to traditional methods. This allows for empirical data to provide clear evidence. Furthermore, it would be beneficial to investigate the role of factors such as mother tongue background, English proficiency level, and self-directed learning strategies in supporting phonemic symbol comprehension and pronunciation improvement.

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