

## EFL students' experiences with pronunciation problems in speaking performance

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### ABSTRACT

#### Keywords:

Pronunciation,  
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*This study aims to examine the fourth-semester students' pronunciation issues of the English Language Education Study Program at Universitas Islam Indragiri. Adopting a descriptive method supported by qualitative data, the study collected data from twenty-one students through questionnaires and interviews. It examined five indicators of perception: the difficulty of pronouncing specific sounds, anxiety caused by pronunciation errors, decreased speaking fluency, lack of knowledge about pronunciation, and the impact of incorrect pronunciation on listener comprehension. The findings reveal that many students have pronunciation issues that impede their confidence, speaking fluency, and overall effectiveness in communication. Although formal instruction in pronunciation is still not wide-ranging, the students are strongly motivated to work on their own through practice and technology use. The study calls for a more systematic and supportive model of pronunciation teaching in the English language curriculum.*

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## INTRODUCTION

English has long been recognized as a global language that plays a significant role in international communication, academic advancement, and professional development. In the Indonesian context, English is learned as a foreign language and is considered one of the important subjects taught at various levels of education, including schools and universities. Mastery of English is increasingly important because it enables learners to access global knowledge, participate in academic discourse, and improve their opportunities in future careers. Therefore, English language learning is expected not only

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to develop learners' knowledge of grammar and vocabulary, but also to improve their ability to communicate effectively in real-life situations.

Among the four major language skills, namely listening, speaking, reading, and writing, speaking is often considered one of the most challenging skills for EFL learners. Speaking requires learners to process ideas in real time, select appropriate vocabulary, apply grammatical structures, and produce understandable speech simultaneously. It also involves fluency, accuracy, pronunciation, and communicative competence, all of which are needed for successful oral interaction (Goh & Burns, 2012; Goh, 2017). Unlike reading or writing, speaking takes place directly and spontaneously, leaving learners with limited time to monitor and correct their language production. As a result, many students experience difficulties when they are required to speak English in classroom discussions, presentations, or other communicative activities.

One of the essential components of speaking competence is pronunciation. Pronunciation plays an important role in helping learners express meaning clearly, make their speech understandable, and build confidence when communicating in English. Good pronunciation does not necessarily mean speaking like a native speaker, but it means being able to produce sounds, stress, rhythm, and intonation in ways that allow listeners to understand the intended message. When pronunciation is unclear, communication may be interrupted, misunderstood, or even avoided by learners. In this sense, pronunciation is closely related not only to intelligibility, but also to learners' confidence and willingness to participate in oral communication (Ali & Ramana, 2021; Levis, 2024).

Despite its importance, pronunciation is often given limited attention in English language classrooms. In many EFL contexts, teaching and learning activities tend to focus more on grammar, vocabulary, reading comprehension, and written exercises. Pronunciation practice is sometimes treated as a minor part of speaking instruction rather than as an integral component of communication. This condition may cause learners to have insufficient knowledge of English sounds, limited exposure to correct pronunciation models, and low confidence in producing spoken English. Consequently, pronunciation problems may lead to communication breakdowns, hesitation, anxiety, reduced classroom interaction, and weak speaking performance.

Previous studies have shown that pronunciation problems are common among English language learners. Arjulayana and Martínez (2022) found that pronunciation and self-confidence had a significant influence on students' speaking performance. This suggests that learners who struggle with pronunciation may also experience lower confidence when speaking English. Tambunsaribu and Simatupang (2021) reported that pronunciation problems among Indonesian learners are influenced by the differences between Indonesian and English sound systems, as well as by ineffective teaching approaches. Similarly, Shak et al. (2016) emphasized the importance of targeted learning resources and regular practice in improving learners' pronunciation accuracy and confidence. These findings indicate that pronunciation difficulties are shaped by both internal factors, such as anxiety, confidence, and phonological awareness, and external factors, such as teaching strategies, learning resources, and language exposure.

In addition, Tiwari (2024) identified nine major challenges in teaching pronunciation, including limited prioritization, inadequate basic-level foundations, ignored pronunciation errors, time constraints, insufficient teacher knowledge, peer imitation, limited instructional resources, poor reading habits among students, and lack of exposure. These challenges show that pronunciation problems are not merely individual weaknesses, but are also connected to broader instructional and environmental conditions. Learners may have difficulty improving their pronunciation when they do not receive sufficient feedback, practice opportunities, or systematic instruction. Therefore, pronunciation learning needs to be supported by consistent classroom practice, appropriate teaching strategies, and a learning environment that encourages students to speak without fear of making mistakes.

Although a number of studies have investigated pronunciation errors, phonological difficulties, and instructional strategies, relatively few studies have focused specifically on learners' perceptions of pronunciation problems and how these problems affect their speaking confidence, fluency, and communication. Learners' perceptions are important because they reveal how students experience pronunciation difficulties in real classroom situations. By understanding their views, teachers can identify the types of pronunciation problems that students consider most challenging, the factors that

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contribute to these problems, and the ways in which pronunciation difficulties influence students' willingness to speak English.

Based on this research gap, the present study aims to examine the pronunciation issues experienced by fourth-semester students of the English Language Education Study Program at Universitas Islam Indragiri. This study focuses on students' perceptions of pronunciation difficulties, including their difficulty in pronouncing specific English sounds, anxiety caused by pronunciation errors, reduced speaking fluency, lack of knowledge about correct pronunciation, and the effect of pronunciation errors on listener comprehension. By exploring these aspects, this study is expected to provide a clearer understanding of how students experience and manage pronunciation problems in English speaking. The findings are also expected to contribute to the development of more supportive, practical, and systematic pronunciation instruction in English language learning.

## **METHODE**

This study uses a quantitative descriptive approach supplemented with open-structured interviews. This technique was chosen because it allows the researcher to describe phenomena systematically using numerical data while simultaneously acquiring deeper insights through participants' verbal responses. Ary (2018) defines statistical analysis as the act of gathering knowledge about the present circumstance of a phenomenon and defining "what is" in respect to variables or circumstances in a certain context. The Likert scale is, according to Boer and Mashamba-Thompson (2021), a well-designed and effective quantitative instrument for properly measuring opinions and attitudes of respondents. They employed a 4-point Likert scale with no middle option so that they could coerce participants to provide more definitive and clear-cut answers.

The participants in this study were twenty-one students of the fourth semester of the English Study Program at Universitas Islam Indragiri. They were picked using selective sampling. This result was based on the students' completion of speaking-related courses, demonstrating that they were appropriate respondents with adequate awareness and experience coping with pronunciation difficulties during speaking in English use.

The data for the present research were mostly gathered by questionnaires, with open-structured interviews serving as a complement. The questionnaire was created to

investigate students' opinions of pronunciation issues in English speaking. The items were created using five perception indicators proposed by Armadi Jaya, Muhammad Basri Wello, and Maemuna Muhayyang (2022), which are: (1) having difficulty pronouncing English sounds; (2) feeling nervous or lacking confidence when speaking due to fear of mispronunciation; (3) struggling with fluency as a result of inaccurate pronunciation; (4) lacking knowledge of correct pronunciation; and (5) pronunciation errors affecting listener understanding. The Likert scale had 15 items designed to assess students' attitudes across these five characteristics.

Boer and Mashamba-Thompson (2021) highly advocate the use of the Likert scale as a systematic and efficient quantitative technique for correctly evaluating respondents' attitudes and beliefs. In their study, they used a 4-point Likert scale, removing the neutral option to urge participants to make more definitive judgments. This strategy has proven especially useful in situations involving varied degrees of reading competence, as the reduced number of response options facilitates data interpretation. Quantitative data were examined using descriptive statistical metrics such as mean scores, standard deviations, and percentages. The findings were then evaluated using the perception categories Very High, High, Low, and Very Low, as described by Boer and Mashamba-Thompson (2021), to discover overall trends in students' impressions of pronunciation issues in English speaking.

**Table 1**  
**Likert Scale Interpretation**

<b>Scale</b>	<b>Range</b>	<b>Interpretation</b>
4	3.01 – 4.0	Strongly Agree
3	2.01 – 3.0	Agree
2	1.01 – 2.0	Disagree
1	0.01 – 1.0	Strongly Disagree

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

### ***Findings***

This study utilized a descriptive survey technique and quantitative design to investigate how students with pronunciation issues affect their ability to speak English. Respondents were 21 fourth-semester students of the Universitas Islam Indragiri Study

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Program of English Education, and all of them had successfully completed speaking courses.

Data were gathered using a closed-ended questionnaire consisting of a 5-point Likert scale and 15 statements from five perception indicators borrowed from Armadi Jaya et al. (2022). The indications were:

- a. Difficulty in pronouncing certain English sounds.
- b. Feelings of anxiety or lack of confidence due to fear of mispronunciation.
- c. Reduced fluency resulting from inaccurate pronunciation.
- d. Limited understanding of how to pronounce specific words
- e. Pronunciation errors that hinder listener comprehension.

**Table 2**  
**Student's difficulty in pronouncing certain English sounds**

No	Statements	Strongly Agree	Percentage (%)		Strongly Disagree
			Agree	Disagree	
1	I find it difficult to pronounce the sound /θ/ as in "think".	4.8%	14.3%	61.9%	19.0%
2	I have trouble pronouncing /ʃ/ as in "she".	4.8%	0.0%	81.0%	14.3%
3	My pronunciation is often different from what I hear in native speakers.	4.8%	76.2%	19.0%	0.0%

Table 2 demonstrates the degree of difficulty learners face in the pronunciation of distinctive English consonants. According to the findings, 61.9% of the learners disagreed and 19.0% strongly disagreed that /θ/ sound for the word "think" is a major difficulty. The majority (4.8% strongly agreed and 14.3% agreed) did not identify any issues. The same pattern applies with the /ʃ/ sound in "she" in that a far greater majority (81.0% disagreed and 14.3% strongly disagreed) indicated no difficulty with pronouncing it. However, in question three, a majority of students (76.2% agreed and 4.8% strongly agreed) indicated that their pronunciation often deviates from the native speaker's, indicating a greater sensitivity to variation in pronunciation. These are corroborated by interview data. Student A admitted that he usually has a hard time with vowel sounds and word endings, such as the word "enough," which he pronounces according to its spelling. Student D found it hard to pronounce unfamiliar or new words. Student B and Student F experienced the same, particularly when faced with foreign words and variation in pronunciation by native speakers. Student B stressed that "the fear of making

pronunciation errors is often at the root." Indeed, to the students' assessment, while they may not have serious trouble with individual phonemes, their overall pronunciation is not native speaker norm.

**Table 3**  
**The student's feelings of anxiety or lack of confidence due to fear of mispronunciation**

No	Statements	Strongly Agree	Percentage (%)		Strongly Disagree
			Agree	Disagree	
4	I don't feel confident speaking English because I might say words wrong.	9.5%	57.1%	23.8%	9.5%
5	I feel nervous when I have to speak English in front of the class.	23.8%	66.7%	4.8%	4.8%
6	I hesitate when I speak because I'm afraid of saying words incorrectly.	14.3%	47.6%	28.6%	9.5%

Table 3 examines students' emotional responses to the pronunciation issues. There was a combined total of 66.6% of respondents who said that they were not confident in using English due to fear of pronouncing it incorrectly (9.5% strongly agreed and 57.1% agreed). This happens in class, where 90.5% of the students (23.8% strongly agreed and 66.7% agreed) confessed to being scared of speaking English in public. Moreover, 61.9% of respondents indicated that they usually hold back while speaking for fear of mispronunciation. These findings are supported by interview results, which repeatedly reflect students' fear and apprehension in speaking situations. Student A, in turn, clarified that he was "embarrassed in front of people, afraid of mistakes, and lacking confidence." Student E clarified that despite having pre-training, she is still "instantly scared" before a crowd. Student B clarified that her nervousness worsens when communicating with a more capable person, while Student F listed "the stares from people" as a source of nervousness. These words accurately reflect the quantitative realities, underscoring the emotional cost demanded by poor pronunciation.

**Table 4**  
**The student's reduced fluency in speaking as a result of inaccurate pronunciation**

No	Statements	Strongly Agree	Percentage (%)		Strongly Disagree
			Agree	Disagree	
7	My speaking is not fluent because I often stop to think about pronunciation.	9.5%	66.7%	19.0%	4.8%
8	My pronunciation affects how well I can express my ideas.	19.0%	66.7%	14.3%	0.0%
9	I want to improve my pronunciation so others can understand me better.	81.0%	19.0%	0.0%	0.0%

Table 4 deals with the effect of incorrect pronunciation on speaking fluency. The greater part of the students (76.2%) agreed slightly or firmly that repetitions in order to consider how to pronounce some words hinder their fluency. Similarly, 85.7% (19.0% agreed firmly and 66.7% agreed) of the respondents believed that their pronunciation hindered their capacity to convey ideas effectively. Notably, every student (100%) mentioned that they felt a need to improve their pronunciation so that they would be able to speak more clearly. Similar worries about fluency can also be seen in interview data. Student A said that he "often mumbles while trying to think of the correct word," but Student B responded by saying that building her vocabulary stops her from pausing when speaking. Both Student D and Student F understood that pronunciation problems might lead to misconceptions, affecting their confidence and fluency. Others even reported using resources like Google Translate or receiving feedback from classmates to improve their pronunciation, which again supports the quantitative findings that students are taking an active role in improving their pronunciation skills

**Table 5**  
**The student's limited understanding of how to pronounce specific words**

No	Statements	Strongly Agree	Percentage (%)		Strongly Disagree
			Agree	Disagree	
10	I often guess the pronunciation of words based on their spelling.	28.6%	61.9%	9.5%	0.0%
11	I don't know the correct pronunciation of many English words.	9.5%	66.7%	19.0%	4.8%
12	I rely more on spelling than sound when trying to pronounce words.	4.8%	52.4%	38.1%	4.8%

Table 5 indicates the use of spelling to guess pronunciation by students. A staggering 90.5% of the participants concurred or strongly concurred that they frequently

guessed the pronunciation of a word from its spelling. Further, 76.2% of the participants confessed that they did not know how to pronounce most of the English vocabulary words. In addition, more than half of the participants (57.2%) indicated that they paid attention to spelling rather than sound in guessing the pronunciation of a word. This is easily seen in the interview data. Student A described that he "uses spelling rather than locating the correct pronunciation," whereas Student B and Student F said that they would prefer hearing speech via Google Translate rather than examine phonetic transcriptions. Student C said that knowing phonetic symbols proves to be useful, but she still greatly benefits from aural input. These results show that because of their weak knowledge of formal pronunciation rules, the majority of students end up applying informal means such as guessing or imitation in pronunciation.

**Table 6**  
**The student's pronunciation errors that hinder the listener's comprehension of the intended meaning**

No	Statements	Percentage (%)			
		Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
13	People often ask me to repeat what I say because they don't understand my pronunciation.	4.8%	42.9%	42.9%	9.5%
14	I have been corrected many times for mispronouncing English words.	9.5%	38.1%	52.4%	0.0%
15	I avoid saying certain words because I'm afraid others won't understand me.	14.3%	42.9%	33.3%	9.5%

Table 6 changes perspective to the social consequences of poor pronunciation. Students were divided as to whether people often asked them to repeat themselves because they had pronunciation issues, with 42.9% agreeing and the remaining 42.9% disagreeing. However 47.6% confirmed they were corrected for mispronunciation (9.5% strongly agreed and 38.1% agreed). A roughly equal number (57.2%) mentioned that they often shy away from specific words in fear of being misunderstood. Interview data supports this trend. Student B liked lecturers' corrections as a form of improvement. Student F described one specific instance where she was corrected in spontaneous speaking. Student A said that he is always being corrected when he speaks informally with the pronunciation that he gets wrong. Student D and Student E underscored how important it is to receive both peers' and teachers' corrections to improve their pronunciation. These findings confirm that pronunciation challenges not just hinder

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communication ability, but also influence students' choice of words and self-monitoring behaviors when they are communicating.

**Table 7**  
**Descriptive Statistic of the Students' Experience with Pronunciation Problems in Speaking Performance**

Indicator	Total Score	Mean	Std. Deviation
Difficulties in pronouncing certain English sounds.	144	2.29	0.72
Feelings of anxiety or lack of confidence due to fear of making pronunciation errors.	177	2.81	0.79
Reduced fluency in speaking as a result of inaccurate pronunciation.	203	3.22	0.70
Limited understanding of how to pronounce specific words.	180	2.86	0.69
Pronunciation errors that hinder the listener's comprehension of the intended meaning.	160	2.54	0.75
<b>Overall Mean Score</b>		<b>2.74</b>	
<b>Criteria</b>		<b>High</b>	

Table 7 outlines the overall statistical findings in terms of students' experiences with pronunciation issues in their speaking task. It can be deduced from the findings that students have severe pronunciation issues, as shown by the overall mean value of 2.74 which falls under the "High" category. All the indicators have different levels of difficulty where the lowest mean score of 2.29 was scored by the first indicator (difficulty in pronouncing specific English sounds), and the third indicator recorded the highest mean score at 3.22 (slowed speech fluency due to mispronunciation). Other groups, such as apprehensiveness or confidence (mean = 2.81), a poor sense of pronunciation norms (mean = 2.86), and mispronunciations that inflict injury on listeners' comprehension (mean = 2.54), are responsible for this result. Furthermore, the values for standard deviation, between 0.69 and 0.79, show a comparatively uniform pattern of responses among the students, where the fourth one has the lowest value (0.69) and the second one has the highest value (0.79). Those data indicate that fourth semester students of English Language Study Program, Universitas Islam Indragiri, generally assume that pronunciation is a gigantic obstacle in their oral proficiency and they have shared experiences in this aspect.

### **Discussion**

The findings of the research imply that the fourth-semester students of the English Language Education Study Program at Universitas Islam Indragiri consider pronunciation

a major issue in English speaking. Arjulayana and Martínez (2022) identified that pronunciation and confidence had a great impact on speaking performance. In this study, the total mean score of 2.74 indicates high overall difficulty, which shows that pronunciation problems are not personal problems, but rather common problems for a large number of students. The first indicator, impossibility to pronounce distinctive English consonants, had the lowest mean score (2.29). This shows that, while there are some students who comment on problems with individual phonemes like /θ/ or /ʃ/, there are many who cannot pinpoint a number of different sounds as the root problem. Instead, they are more concerned with general pronunciation patterns and obvious differences from native speaker pronunciation. The relationship between pronunciation, confidence, and speaking performance is also supported by Husna (2021), who found that both students' pronunciation and self-confidence had a positive and significant influence on their speaking ability among fourth-semester English Education students.

This corresponds with the perspective of Shak et al. (2016), who had contended that issues in pronunciation extend beyond phonetic or articulatory aspects to encompass more general factors such as intonation and rhythm. The claim regarding compromised speaking fluency with poor pronunciation elicited a comparatively high mean score of 3.22. This suggests that pronunciation issues have a direct and immediate impact on the ability of students to speak fluently. This was corroborated by interview responses of the participants, wherein they conceded that fear of incorrect pronunciation resulted in excessive pauses, hesitation, or mumbling. These findings confirm Goh and Burns' (2017) proposition that fluency is not just dependent on the accuracy of pronunciation but also on the speaker's confidence, both of which are compromised when learners are not confident of perfect pronunciation. The second and fourth items, anxiety due to fear of mispronunciation (mean = 2.81) and lack of information about correct pronunciation (mean = 2.86), also indicate high concern levels. These findings are aligned with the work of Tambunsaribu and Simatupang (2021), in which it was determined that emotional issues and weak phonological awareness are the primary causes of pronunciation issues in Indonesian learners. In this study, the students reported feeling nervous, embarrassed, and anxious, particularly when presenting in class or speaking publicly, which negatively impacted their participation and confidence level. Interviews also depicted dependence

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on spelling to predict pronunciation, bringing out the notion that formal instruction in pronunciation strategies continues to be inadequate. The final item, pronunciation errors hindering listener understanding (mean = 2.54), indicates that the students are also sensitive to their pronunciation's interpersonal and communicative implications. Several students reported that they tend to avoid certain words or feel uncomfortable when corrected by others or their lecturers. The students mentioned that they shun particular words or feel uncomfortable when corrected by other people or by their teachers. This supports the claim of Levis and Sonsaat (2024), wherein they emphasized that the omission of pronunciation in language instruction could lead to breakdowns in spontaneous speech. However, the fact that the students are aware and are even making an effort to utilize tools such as Google Translate shows a positive attitude towards self-improvement and adaptability. Then this finding is consistent with Gilakjani and Sabouri in Moedjito (2016), who argued that pronunciation is a key element of successful oral communication in EFL contexts and that pronunciation instruction should include both segmental features, such as consonants and vowels, and suprasegmental features, such as prominence, rhythm, and intonation.

The paper contributes qualitative and quantitative evidence for the manner in which learners experience and deal with pronunciation issues. While the existing research was primarily interested in error patterns for the sound system or pedagogy, the present study goes one step further and examines the learners' perspective on the psychological, cognitive, and social dimensions of pronunciation issues. In addition, since the research focuses on students learning Indonesian within local or semi-urban learning settings, the finding offers culturally suited information and emphasizes the need for pronunciation instruction which is compassionate, pragmatic, and consistently integrated into the rhythm of speaking lessons.

In short, this study validates earlier studies claiming that pronunciation is a critical element in enabling speaking proficiency, confidence, and communication performance. This study also emphasizes the importance of considering students' behavioral experience and learning context when designing pronunciation teaching. Teachers are in a better position to enable students to develop the English-speaking skill when pronunciation is

not just a mechanical ability but as an aspect that is strongly integrated with confidence and social communication.

## CONCLUSION

Based on this survey, pronunciation remains a major stumbling block for fourth-semester students of the English Language Education Program at Universitas Islam Indragiri. The overall mean score of 2.74, which is rated as "High," indicates that pronunciation problems are not individual problems but a widespread issue affecting many aspects of learners' speaking ability. These issues span beyond individual sound articulation and affect students' confidence, fluency, comprehension, and general ability to communicate. Although individual phonemes like /θ/ and /ʃ/ were not particularly problematic, most students showed concern about larger patterns of pronunciation, mumbling when speaking, anxiety about misunderstanding, and ignorance about correct pronunciation. This suggests that systemic pronunciation issues exert a greater influence on learners' true time language use and sense of self when communicating. The study also supports past research that has shown how poor pronunciation teaching can impair both speech performance and the affective state of learners. Anxiety, bashfulness, embarrassment, and low self-esteem were commonly reported, especially in formalized contexts of speaking such as classroom debate or presentations. The majority of students admitted to using spelling to predict pronunciation or skipping difficult words altogether, indicating a lack of knowledge about formal phonological methods. In spite of such limitations, students indicated a high desire to correct their deficiencies, most often through peer correction, access to online materials such as Google Translate, and independent practice. These behaviors indicate their resilience and willingness to improve their pronunciation, despite the lack of formal instructional input. Effective use of autonomous learning materials shows students' commitment and interest in acquiring their speaking skill. Teaching pronunciation, therefore, must be made explicitly and consistently a part of the process of English language learning. Instead of being relegated to phone drills independently, the learning of pronunciation must be taught holistically, including addressing such indispensable features as word stress, rhythm, and intonation.

Pronunciation is best learned in communicative activities that reflect the way language is actually used. Instructors should use structured pronunciation practice, peer

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response, live speaking practice, and computer-based language learning programs for learners to become proficient and confident with pronunciation skills. Furthermore, an encouraging learning environment, one where students feel comfortable enough to risk making errors, criticize their own errors, and learn from them, needs to be created. Encouraging the students to risk speaking and reducing their anxiety about committing errors can assist in solidifying speaking activity engagement and a habit of good pronunciation in the long run. In conclusion, pronunciation is not just the production of sound; it is highly related to fluency, confidence, and communicative success.

It decides the way learners communicate and are received by others. Both cognitive and psychological dimensions of pronunciation issues being covered allows teachers to offer more empathetic and efficient support in class. The technique allows students to handle day-to-day communication more professionally and comfortably. Future studies should generalize these findings by studying larger and more diverse student populations and investigating the long-term impact of intensive pronunciation training on learners' overall speaking development. Teachers can help students become more proficient and confident English speakers through the focus on practical and human-centered pronunciation training.

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