

Staged Implementation Of Phonetic Exercises In Primary EFL Classrooms

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Abstract: Effective phonetic instruction for young EFL learners requires not only appropriate exercise types but also their methodical, staged application. This study explores the pedagogical value of implementing phonetic exercises across three structured stages: perception, controlled production, and contextualized application. Through classroom observations and teacher interviews in primary schools in Uzbekistan, the research identifies how gradual sequencing of phonetic tasks influences learners' sound recognition, pronunciation accuracy, and fluency. Findings reveal that when phonetic activities are scaffolded progressively, learners demonstrate higher retention, reduced anxiety, and more confident oral performance. A three-phase instructional model is proposed to guide teachers in applying phonetic exercises systematically.

Keywords: Phonetic instruction, staged learning, pronunciation practice, EFL, young learners, scaffolding, phonetic progression.

Introduction: In English as a foreign language (EFL) classrooms, especially at the primary level, the development of phonetic competence is crucial to ensure clear, intelligible speech and successful communication. However, phonetic instruction is often delivered inconsistently—through isolated drills or sporadic correction—without a structured progression that reflects how young learners acquire language (Shin & Crandall, 2014; Levis, 2020).

Recent research in phonological pedagogy supports the idea of staged or phased instruction, where learning moves from receptive awareness to productive control and ultimately to functional use in meaningful contexts (Nation & Newton, 2020). Applied to pronunciation, this means starting with exercises that train learners to perceive phonetic contrasts, then progressing to guided pronunciation practice, and finally integrating these skills into communicative tasks.

This study investigates how phonetic exercises can be implemented step by step, and how this scaffolding contributes to better learning outcomes in pronunciation for young EFL learners in Uzbekistan.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

2.1 Design and Participants

The study employed a mixed-method design involving

qualitative observations and teacher interviews, complemented by classroom-based implementation of a three-stage phonetic exercise model.

Participants included 32 learners from two second-grade EFL classrooms and four teachers with experience in early pronunciation instruction.

2.2 Instructional Model

Phonetic exercises were organized into three sequential stages:

1. Perception Stage – focused on ear-training through listening activities and discrimination drills.
2. Controlled Production Stage – involved repetition, articulation drills, and pronunciation modeling.
3. Contextual Application Stage – integrated pronunciation goals into communicative tasks such as storytelling, dialogue, and singing.

Teachers were guided to follow the same sequence over three weeks, using equivalent target sounds (e.g., /θ/ vs. /s/, rising vs. falling intonation).

2.3 Data Collection and Analysis

- Pre- and post-tests assessed learners' pronunciation accuracy.
- Observation rubrics tracked engagement,

correction patterns, and self-confidence.

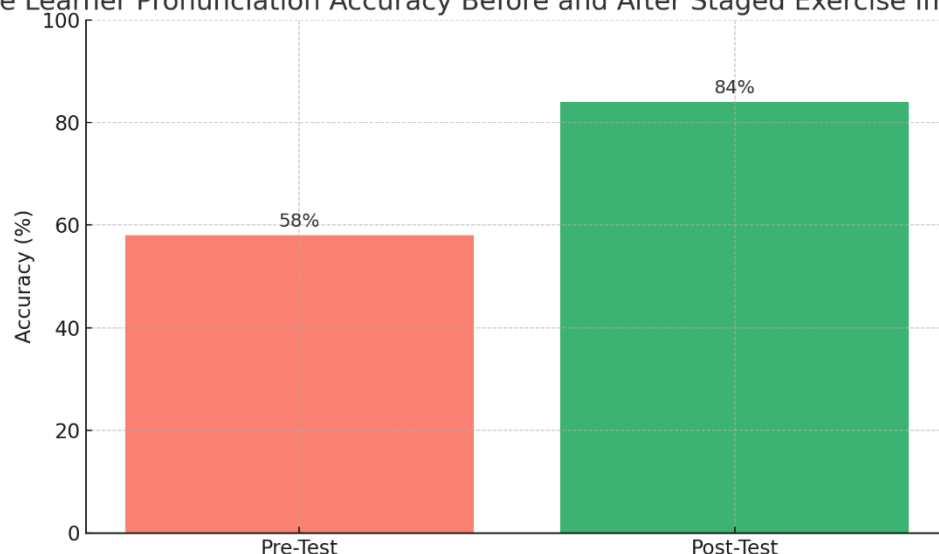
- Teacher interviews gathered feedback on feasibility, learner response, and perceived effectiveness.

Quantitative improvements in test scores were measured, while qualitative data were thematically coded.

3. RESULTS

The application of phonetic exercises in a structured, staged manner produced measurable and observable improvements in learners' phonetic competence. Data were collected from pronunciation pre- and post-tests, classroom observations, and teacher interviews over a three-week intervention period.

Average Learner Pronunciation Accuracy Before and After Staged Exercise Implementation



3.2 Engagement and Response Across Instructional Stages

Classroom observation data revealed that learner engagement increased with each stage. In the initial perception phase, engagement was passive and cautious, particularly among less confident students. By the second week, during the controlled production stage, students began to mimic sounds more accurately, and peer-assisted repetition was frequently observed. By the third week, during contextual communicative tasks (e.g., performing short dialogues or chants), more than 75% of students participated voluntarily, and several demonstrated near-native stress and intonation patterns.

3.3 Qualitative Teacher Feedback

Teacher interviews confirmed that the staged approach

3.1 Improvement in Pronunciation Accuracy

Learners were assessed on their ability to distinguish and pronounce target phonemes (/θ/, /w/, /v/, and rising vs. falling intonation patterns). At the outset, their average pronunciation accuracy stood at 58%, with common errors including phoneme substitution and flat intonation. After three weeks of progressive instruction through perception, production, and contextual application stages, this score rose to 84%, as shown in Figure 1. Notably, learners who struggled in the initial perceptual tasks performed more confidently in the final oral communicative tasks, indicating that the staged approach helped consolidate learning incrementally.

improved both classroom management and pronunciation outcomes. Teachers highlighted the following observations:

- Learners were more attentive during perception tasks because they knew they would later apply the sounds.
- Controlled production helped shy students rehearse sounds in a non-threatening context.
- Contextual application activities, especially group storytelling and chants, were reported to be the most enjoyable and effective stage for long-term retention.

3.4 Comparative Effectiveness of Each Stage

Table 1 summarizes the perceived impact of each instructional stage as evaluated through observation and teacher feedback:

Table 1. Impact of Each Instructional Stage on Learner Outcomes

Instructional Stage	Core Activity	Key Observed Outcomes
Perception	Listening, discrimination	Increased phonemic awareness, better attention to contrasts
Controlled Production	Repetition, articulation drills	Improved sound articulation, increased self-monitoring
Contextual Application	Communicative speech tasks	Greater fluency, confidence, improved spontaneous pronunciation

Overall, teachers emphasized that although contextual usage was the most engaging and visibly effective stage, it depended heavily on the groundwork laid during the earlier perception and production stages. Skipping stages or reversing the order often led to confusion and anxiety in learners.

4. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reinforce a growing body of research advocating for staged or scaffolded instruction in phonetic learning, particularly in EFL contexts involving young learners. The consistent improvement in pronunciation accuracy, learner confidence, and engagement observed throughout this study demonstrates that a systematic progression through perception, controlled production, and contextual application significantly enhances phonetic competence.

4.1 Alignment with Language Acquisition Theories

The staged methodology implemented here mirrors the natural order hypothesis and input-output models proposed in second language acquisition (SLA) theory. According to Krashen's Input Hypothesis, language learning begins with sufficient comprehensible input—represented here by the perception stage—before transitioning into meaningful output (Krashen, 1985). Similarly, Nation and Newton (2020) emphasize the necessity of balanced receptive and productive skills training, which this staged approach directly supports.

In the current study, learners were not expected to produce sounds until they had first heard and cognitively processed them in minimal pair and listening discrimination tasks. This gradual build-up appears to reduce learner anxiety, a point echoed by teachers who reported greater participation once students were familiar with the phonetic targets.

4.2 Role of Controlled Production as a Bridge Stage

The controlled production phase served as a crucial intermediary between passive recognition and active communicative use. This stage enabled learners to practice muscle movements, imitate models, and

receive immediate feedback, all of which are essential for articulatory development (Celce-Murcia et al., 2010). Teachers noted that learners who were hesitant to speak in perception activities became more vocal and accurate when supported through structured repetition and physical modeling (e.g., mirror drills).

The importance of this stage is supported by Derwing and Munro (2015), who stress that automatization of pronunciation patterns requires focused practice in low-risk settings before students can apply them fluently in conversation.

4.3 The Power of Contextual Application

The third stage—contextual application—was consistently ranked as the most effective in terms of fluency and motivation. By embedding phonetic targets into communicative activities such as chants, storytelling, and role-play, students were able to transfer form-focused knowledge into real-world use. This finding aligns with the principles of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT), which prioritize meaning-making and purposeful interaction (Richards, 2006).

More notably, this stage was instrumental in improving suprasegmental competence—intonation, rhythm, and stress—which are often neglected in mechanical drills but are essential for natural-sounding speech and listener comprehension (Levis, 2020).

4.4 Affective Factors and Learner Psychology

The staged approach also appeared to positively impact affective variables. The gradual buildup allowed for confidence scaffolding, reducing fear of error and boosting learners' self-perception as successful communicators. This supports the findings of Shin and Crandall (2014), who emphasize that psychological safety and motivation are essential for effective pronunciation learning in young learners.

The increased participation observed in the final stage is a strong indicator that staging phonetic instruction can nurture a classroom culture in which learners feel both capable and excited to engage in spoken English.

5. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrated that a staged implementation of phonetic exercises—moving systematically from perception, to controlled production, and finally to contextual application—leads to significant improvements in young EFL learners' pronunciation accuracy, fluency, and confidence. Rather than introducing pronunciation in isolation or relying on correction-only models, this approach aligns with both linguistic theory and child-centered pedagogy.

The observed increase in learners' active participation, reduced anxiety, and enhanced performance in spontaneous speech tasks suggests that scaffolded phonetic instruction enables more meaningful and lasting acquisition of both segmental and suprasegmental features of English. Teachers found the structured progression intuitive to apply and observed clearer outcomes when exercises were sequenced intentionally.

The results also call for greater attention in curriculum design and teacher training. Methodological frameworks for phonetic instruction should include both clear typologies of exercises and a staged delivery model that aligns with how children learn best: through repetition, progression, and communicative use.

Future research may expand on these findings by integrating digital tools and comparing the effects of alternative staging models across different learner profiles. For now, this study provides actionable evidence that stage-based phonetic instruction is both feasible and highly effective in primary EFL contexts.

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