# THE ROLE OF PHONETIC AWARENESS IN ENHANCING SPEAKING AND LISTENING SKILLS ON ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS

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**Abstract:** This article examines the impact of phonetic awareness on the development of speaking and listening skills of English language learners (ELLs). The study involved 22 students who were randomly assigned to an experimental group and a control group. The experimental group received intensive phonetic training (shadowing, articulation, minimal pairs, transcription work, stress and intonation exercises, and understanding connected speech elements), while the control group continued with traditional grammar and vocabulary-based lessons. The results of the pre- and post-tests showed that the experimental group significantly improved their speaking and listening comprehension skills, particularly in terms of pronunciation accuracy, fluency, correct use of stress and intonation, as well as in distinguishing complex sounds and understanding connected speech elements. The changes in the control group were minimal. The study confirmed that enhancing phonetic awareness is crucial for improving speaking and listening comprehension skills. Therefore, it is recommended to integrate systematic and targeted phonetic training into the learning process.

**Key Words:** Phonetic awareness, Speaking skills, Listening skills, English language learners (ELLs), Pronunciation accuracy, Shadowing and articulation exercises, Minimal pairs.

**Introduction:** In the current era of globalization, learning English has become increasingly important in the fields of communication, education, diplomacy, and business. In this process, English Language Learners (ELLs) face various difficulties in developing their speaking and listening skills. One of the main reasons for these problems is the insufficient formation of phonetic knowledge. Learners with low phonetic awareness do not fully develop fluency, lack accuracy and naturalness in pronunciation, and have significant difficulties in listening comprehension. Effective oral communication relies primarily on learners' phonetic awareness. Phonetic awareness refers to the ability to recognize, distinguish, and correctly produce the sound patterns of a language, including phonemes, stress, rhythm, and intonation. This concept involves the conscious perception of language sounds, that is, the learner perceives words not only in their general form, but also through the individual sounds that make

them up (for example, /cat/ — /k/, /æ/, /t/). This skill serves as an important basis for the development of speaking and listening. However, in the process of modern language learning, many learners give priority to grammar and vocabulary, not paying sufficient attention to the importance of phonetics. As a result, many ELLs, despite showing good results in written tasks, face serious problems in oral speech. In particular, due to the weak ability to distinguish sounds, they confuse similar words, have difficulty in understanding connected speech, and the level of listening comprehension remains low. Also, due to incorrect pronunciation, stress, and intonation, speech clarity decreases in speaking, accent increases, and the tone becomes artificial. Even grammatically correct sentences can be incomprehensible to the listener.Therefore, studying the role of phonetic awareness in EFL/ESL contexts is an urgent issue from the point of view of developing speaking and listening skills. Learners with developed phonetic awareness pronounce words more accurately, understand faster, and make fewer errors in speech. In particular, it helps to distinguish complex sounds (/w/–/v/, /æ/–/e/), allows for faster understanding of connected speech elements, and reduces stress and forms fluent speech. Although the importance of pronunciation and phonetics is recognized in the existing scientific literature, the joint impact of phonetic awareness on speaking and listening skills, especially in EFL contexts, has not been sufficiently covered. Many studies have focused on individual aspects of phonetics, but the issue of holistic improvement of oral speech through the systematic development of phonetic awareness has been studied less. This situation creates a need for further research in this area. In this regard, the main purpose of this study is to determine the role of phonetic awareness in the development of speaking and listening skills in English language learners and to identify effective methods aimed at increasing phonetic awareness.

**Methodology:** This study used a mixed-methods experimental design to determine the effects of explicit phonetic instruction on the development of English language learners (ELLs) speaking and listening skills.

**Participants:** The study involved 22 ELLs under the age of 18 who were preparing for higher education at a private tutoring center. All participants had intermediate English language proficiency and voluntarily participated in the study. Before the study began, the purpose of the study was explained in detail to all participants and their consent was obtained.

**Procedure:** The study lasted two months and was conducted in three phases.

In the first phase, the participants' initial speaking and listening skills were assessed through pre-tests. Separate tests were used for each skill. The pre-tests focused on determining pronunciation accuracy, fluency, stress,

intonation, sound differentiation, and connected speech skills.

• The listening pre-test consisted of three sections:

1) Sound discrimination: Students listened to audio recordings and distinguished contrasting phonemes (e.g., sheep–ship, wine–vine, pen–pan).

2) Connected speech comprehension: Short dialogues and sentences were presented to help students understand rapid speech and abbreviated forms (e.g., Whatcha gonna do? I'm gonna call him.).

3) Stress and intonation: Students listened to audio samples and determined the effects of stress and intonation on meaning.

•The speaking pre-test consisted of two tasks:

1) Read-aloud task: Participants read aloud a short text. Pronunciation accuracy, clarity of sounds, stress, intonation, and fluency were assessed.

2) Picture description: Students spoke for 1–2 minutes based on a picture. Fluency, accuracy, and accent were assessed in this task.

In the second phase, 22 participants were randomly assigned to two parallel groups: an experimental group (n = 11) and a control group (n = 11). The control group continued with traditionally standardized grammar and vocabulary-focused lessons. However, the experimental group received hands-on phonetic awareness training. These weekly sessions were conducted in the classroom, online, and at home and included using dictionaries for phonetic transcription, rewriting transcribed words, reading aloud transcription, working with minimal pairs, shadowing and articulation exercises, stress and intonation exercises, understanding connected speech elements. These activities focused on developing pronunciation for speaking and listening comprehension.

In the third phase, post-tests were administered to both groups in the same format as the pre-tests, and changes in speaking and listening skills were determined.

**Data Collection and Analysis:** Data were collected through pre-test and post-test results, classroom observations, and participant notes on the learning process. The results of the experimental and control groups were compared to determine the effects of phonetic awareness training on speaking and listening skills. Quantitative data were analyzed to assess the level of improvement, while qualitative observations were used to support and interpret the statistical results.

**Results:** The results of this study demonstrate that phonetic awareness training had a significant positive impact on both speaking and listening skills in the experimental group. In speaking, the experimental group improved from 4.8 to 7.6 points (a gain of 2.8), while the control group showed minimal progress, moving from 4.9 to 5.3 points. Similarly, in listening, the

experimental group increased from 5.0 to 7.4 points (a gain of 2.4), compared to the control group's marginal improvement from 5.1 to 5.4. These findings indicate that the experimental group made considerably greater gains in both skills, particularly in pronunciation accuracy, fluency, phoneme discrimination, and understanding connected speech, while the control group's progress remained limited.

Phonetic awareness training led to notable improvements across key linguistic components in the experimental group. Learners began to pronounce complex sounds more accurately, understood fast speech better, and made fewer phonetic mistakes in the speaking process. Participants reported increased confidence in speaking, fewer breakdowns, and greater awareness of their own articulation. These findings are consistent with Derwing and Munro's (2005) observation that focused pronunciation instruction yields greater gains in intelligibility than incidental correction. The use of technique-based approaches - such as shadowing, minimal pair practice, articulatory training, and phonetic transcription - proved particularly effective in advancing oral English proficiency.

Classroom observation showed consistent progress among experimental group students throughout the instructional period.. First of all, the students overcame the psychological barriers in front of them, increased their self-confidence, and actively participated in practical exercises with high enthusiasm and interest, without fear of making mistakes, without hesitation. As a result, speech activity significantly increased, pronunciation accuracy improved, and they reached the level of expressing their thoughts more freely and fluently in oral tasks. Remarkably, 7 out of 11 participants completed the CEFR exam within two months and reached C1 level (65+ points) in the speaking and listening - a result that was not observed in the control group. These findings confirm that phonetic awareness training improves both language skills and learner confidence in real communication.

**Discussion:** The driving motive of this paper was to investigate whether phonetic practice-based training has a significant impact on enhancing speaking and listening skills. The study’s most notable findings stem from the rapid progress observed in the experimental groups compared to the control group. Essentially, students in the experimental group, who underwent intensive phonetics-based training, demonstrated heightened awareness, which, in turn, indirectly contributed to improvements in their oral and aural performance. Phonetic exercises played a key role in developing the students' skills in identifying subtle differences between sounds, forming clear and professional pronunciation, controlling speech speed, and correctly using stress and intonation. In particular, the use of poems, short dialogues, and chants

provided an opportunity to understand the natural rhythm and musicality of the language as well as to soften the accent. These sessions provided effective solutions to the problems ELLs faced in speaking and listening, and all participants witnessed that phonetic awareness is a cornerstone of speaking and listening skills. If grammar is the foundation of a language, phonetic awareness is its core dynamic force. It is this dimension that takes speaking and listening beyond the ordinary level to a professional level, especially, speaking is always necessary for communication in real life activities. It is worth noting that the experimental group achieved higher scores on CEFR exams in a short time, demonstrating the practical effectiveness of the phonics-based approach. This supports the ideas put forward by Celce-Murcia, Brinton, and Goodwin (2010) and Derwing and Munro (2005) that pronunciation and phonetic instruction play an important role in the development of oral language skills. Surprisingly, phonetic awareness not only helps ELLs improve their speaking and listening skills, but also plays a key role in achieving high scores on national and international English language certificates (CEFR, IELTS, TOEFL). In opposition of this, the lack of significant changes in the control group suggests that traditional teaching approaches do not adequately develop phonetic awareness. This situation once again confirms the need to integrate phonetic training into the teaching process in a systematic, planned and purposeful manner in the EFL context.

**Limitations and Recommendations:** This study has certain limitations. Firstly, the relatively small number of study participants (11 students in the experimental group) limits the generalizability of the results. Secondly, the study was conducted over a short period of time (two months), and the long-term effects of phonetics-based training have not been fully determined. Moreover, the study focused only on speaking and listening skills, and the effects on other language skills were not studied.

It is recommended that future studies increase the number of participants, extend the study period, and analyze the effects of phonetics-based methods on reading and writing skills. Furthermore, comparing the effectiveness of these methods across different age groups and language levels will allow for more in-depth scientific conclusions.

**Conclusion:** On the whole, phonetics plays an invaluable role in learning English, as it not only enhances speaking but also effectively develops listening skills. The findings reveal that there is a critical importance in pronunciation, speech rate, stress, and intonation for the experimental group of students, who carried out intensive phonetic-based activities such as shadowing, articulation, minimal pairs and so on. That is why, the study underscores the significance of integrating systematic and structured phonetic-practice based training into

language teaching programs. Through consistent practice and focused strategies, learners can make stronger oral and aural performances and achieve long-term success.

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