

# Exploration of Instructional Strategies for Teaching Saudi ESL/EFL Students English Pronunciation

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## Abstract

Teaching pronunciation empowers learners to interact and communicate confidently, and clear pronunciation is essential for intelligibility. This study aims to explore the instructional strategies for teaching English pronunciation to ESL/EFL students in Saudi Arabia. A descriptive design was adopted. Through random sampling, a total of 128 English language teachers were recruited from a university in Saudi Arabia. The data were analyzed through Mean, frequencies, and percentages. The overall results suggest a positive environment at the institution for teaching pronunciation, as it is not entirely ignored, despite exam pressure and time constraints. The teachers were willing to support the development of this language aspect. The strategies were mostly centered around behavioural methods, which included minimum pair drills, and communicative activities of discussions and dialogues, which were prescribed in the curriculum. Knowledge of articulatory functions and suprasegmental features, which are important for intelligibility, are also covered.

**Keywords:** EFL, pronunciation, instructional strategies, Saudi Arabia

## 1. Introduction

The Vision 2030 of Saudi Arabia under the leadership of Mohammad Bin Salman has increased the relevance and significance of the English language in the Kingdom (Mendes de Oliveira et al., 2023; Moshashai et al., 2020). Naser and Hamzah (2018) have identified in their study that Saudi students of higher education faced hurdles in pronouncing English correctly. This study was conducted with the students enrolled in the Preparatory Year Program (PYP). The underlying causes of creating difficulties highlighted by the study included ineffective pedagogical strategies, the lack of students' interest and motivation, and the absence of any framework to improve the pronunciation and conversation of students. Additionally, the lack of command over grammar, the external barriers, and the teachers' inadequate preparation led to their inability to gain mastery over English conversation and pronunciation. One issue preventing the implementation of instructional strategies is accepting differing pronunciations, just as alternative English varieties are tolerated. Teachers who share this view may stress intelligibility over native pronunciation imitation (Wang & Wen, 2023). Pronunciation teaching is a pedagogic concern in which standard or accent variety to adopt. If a different one is chosen, usually RP, which differs significantly from the learners' natural accent, it can be a struggling experience for them and lead to questioning one's identity (Caleffi, 2023).

However, teaching pronunciation is not often given priority. It tends to largely get ignored or sidelines for other language aspects in the English curriculum, especially grammar to meet the extravagant syllabus requirements (Alam & Uddin, 2019). As argued by Derwing and Munro (2005), EFL learners can benefit from learning pronunciation if its provision in the curriculum is implemented, whereas this training is not always provided in Saudi Arabia (Khaleghi et al., 2020). However, there may be deficiencies with the curriculum itself. Interviews with Saudi university students revealed that the majority of them perceived their teaching materials and curriculum as inauspicious because they were more of a hindrance than helpful in learning English pronunciation (Alghazo, 2015). This may be another reason why pronunciation teaching is largely avoided. Unfortunately, it is not common for curriculum developers to take learners' views into account (Abdelmalak, 2015). Also, Khaleghi et al. (2020) pointed out that the Saudi EFL curriculum ignores the teaching of suprasegmental language features, which is an essential EFL teaching aspect and metrical poetry can be used in instructional strategy to teach this feature. English teachers in Taif University taught pronunciation using textbook activities, by focusing mainly on specific pronunciation features and correcting words mispronounced by their pupils. The most common problems faced by

students were vowels, echoes, and suprasegmental features, while the teachers considered repetition, segmental, and suprasegmental activities as the most effective in teaching pronunciation. Language labs were lacking at the institution which could be a factor in enhancing pronunciation. Additionally, the EFL teachers emphasized the importance of communicative activities to teach pronunciation (Altoeriqi et al., 2020).

To address the incompetency of students and teachers to pronounce in English, Ali and Zaki (2019) attempted to explore the effectiveness of vocabulary learning strategies (VLS) have documented its effectiveness in building the ability among students to become acquainted with tough, new and intricate phrases and words of English. More interestingly, Shehzad et al. (2022) have discussed the importance of grit in improving linguistic skills among students of English as a secondary language (ESL) and found that grit (characterized by consistent efforts and interest) had a statistically significant relation with the self-efficacy beliefs of students, which led to improved linguistic performance of the students of ESL/EFL in Saudi Arabia. Concerning the conversation and pronunciation issues, another recent study by Al Shaibani (2023) explored inadequate training and skills of teachers, the dearth of students' willingness and confidence, and ineffective instructional design, as the major challenges faced by female students enrolled in an EFL program in Saudi Arabia. However, it is yet unexplored the types of instructional strategies adopted by teachers to teach ESL/EFL students in Saudi Arabia. To fill this gap, the present study examines the instructional strategies adopted at a selected educational institution in Saudi Arabia for teaching English pronunciation. Besides identifying the adopted strategies, it seeks to explore how teachers and students perceive them, discover which ones they prefer, and the opportunities and challenges they experience. The precise objectives of the study are as follows:

- 1) What instructional strategies are adopted in Saudi Arabia for teaching English pronunciation?
- 2) How do teachers perceive the different instructional strategies?
- 3) Which instructional strategy do teachers prefer most, and for what reasons?

Teaching elocution is imperative because it makes learners more capable of social interaction, raises the person's credibility and perceptions of their language abilities, and grants them communicative empowerment (Dendup & Onthanee, 2020). It can also prevent or help a speaker overcome a lack of self-confidence, remove conversational glitches, reduce strain for listeners, and, thereby, improve overall intelligibility. Mastery of pronunciation makes speakers competent in multiple social contexts (Alrefaee & Alghamdi, 2019). Since the greater hurdles for Saudi EFL/ESL students need to be explored and addressed. The significance of the present study lies in exploring the instructional strategies adopted by EFL teachers in Saudi Arabia to find out the relevant and effective teaching strategies that are helpful for both the students and teachers to gain mastery over English conversation and pronunciation.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Pedagogies Adopted for Pronunciation

With the advent of the 21st century, teaching English pronunciation was part of a broadened approach in Europe to teaching English as a language. This was considered more effective than the traditional narrow approach. This instance was endorsed by Derwing et al. (1998), who also recommended giving equal attention to both segmental (consonants and vowels) and suprasegmental (stress, intonation, linking, pitch, and rhythm) language aspects. Another notable development in the domain of teaching English pronunciation was practising British Received Pronunciation (RP) as a principle.

Earlier, teachers had dissidents about his practice, but now, it has gained traction to gain command over pronunciation like natives where the usage of audio-visual tools remained helpful. Notably, it is often the case that neither any learner nor the teacher is a native speaker or has the same accent as in the recordings. Moreover, some may have reservations about trying to sound exactly like a native English speaker, which raises sociolinguistic, psycholinguistic, and political issues (Burns & Claire, 2003). One reason for not strictly adhering to RP is the desire to safeguard and maintain one's identity, both individual and social. Besides, English has spread so widely in numerous non-native countries and re-shaped their identities separately that no one exo-normative English pronunciation model exists to satisfy the diverse needs (Simonsen, 2022). One way around this, however, is to link intelligibility to the language's local usage and identity (Bhatia, 1997). Irrespectively, the need to maintain clarity, mutual intelligibility, and communicative effectiveness globally drives the adoption of instructional strategies in teaching English pronunciation based on RP. Alternative schemes to RP have also been developed, such as Jenkins' (2000) Lingua Franca Core (LFC), which implies considering English as a global language and taking intelligibility issues into account.

Zoghbor (2011) examined the effectiveness of LFC to enhance the pronunciation of Arab learners. Even though

LFC learners had higher scores in comprehensibility and intelligibility relative to those learning from the traditional pronunciation syllabus, the overall difference was not significant. As Dauer (2005) argues, intelligibility should be defined concerning the clarity of communication rather than native-speaker imitation. While many educational systems have undergone this, the same is not generally true for Saudi Arabia. Intelligibility alone can be enhanced by giving attention to the suprasegmental features (Burns & Claire, 2003).

Besides intelligibility and comprehensibility, Burns and Claire (2003) added another dimension of interpretability, where the listener can grasp the objective of communication. A common argument against teaching RP is that teaching it is unrealistic as a learning goal (Hewings, 2004). Moreover, if exact reproduction is given too much emphasis, it can lead to learners getting disheartened (Derwing & Munro, 2005). However, having a standard facilitates teaching, as RP is well-documented, and used extensively, and there are plenty of teaching materials based on it. For these reasons, teachers themselves largely prefer sticking with RP (Jenkins, 2007). It may, therefore, at least be considered as a good starting point for teaching English pronunciation. More recently in pronunciation training, there has been a move toward more phonetic training by focusing more on articulatory functions rather than physical articulation alone, which are all important for clear pronunciation (Naji, 2019), and using the IPA (International Phonetic Alphabet). This is also present in many EFL textbooks, dictionaries, and pronunciation guides nowadays, as phonetic terminology and information can be helpful for language learners (Naji, 2019).

### *2.2 Challenges in Teaching Pronunciation*

The insufficient attention to teaching and learning English pronunciation is mainly due to the pressure of exams, in which pronunciation is not included. This is confirmed in studies in non-native contexts, such as Jayapalan and Pillai (2011) in Malaysia. Even where there is a willingness among teachers to teach their students pronunciation, there are typical issues of poor knowledge or experience (Gilakjani & Rahimy, 2019). Lack of time (Nair et al., 2017) and inadequate teaching materials or resources (Yagiz, 2018). Some teachers themselves have a poor grasp of English pronunciation, or they lack awareness of pronunciation teaching practices and require training (Altoeriqi, 2020). Alfallaj (2013) showed that some of these pronunciation teaching problems can be overcome by ensuring teachers have in-depth knowledge of phonology. This study confirmed that teachers with more extensive knowledge of linguistics were able to help students overcome pronunciation difficulties, especially in dealing with those sounds that are most difficult for Arab students. The worries encountered by Arabic learners of English pronunciation are largely due to differences in the phonological properties of different vernaculars that cause interference. There are regional variations even within a certain language variety (El Zarka, 2013). Generally, they mispronounce some sounds i.e., /dʒ/, /g/, /z/, /θ/, /ð/, /x/, /p/, /f/, /v/, and /ŋ/ (Khalifa, 2020; Albirini, 2016). Saudi EFL learners are not immune from such pronunciation errors, and other difficulties and issues related to learning pronunciation (Hameed & Aslam, 2015). On account of inadequate support activities for pronunciation, the EFL students resort to different methods and resources to learn correct English pronunciation (Alzahrani, 2023). In a study, the opinions of the Saudi EFL students were documented in the challenges of learning English pronunciation. The students identified that the lack of interaction among the students, activities limited to resource books, the absence of technological integration, and inadequate support programs as major challenges or limitations in their existing learning practices which impacted negatively on their language learning. Alamri (2023) conducted an experimental study based on Classroom Action Research (CAR). This research examined the vitality of in-class activities which included vocabulary achievement and their viewpoints to use it. In this study, a total of 43 female Saudi students, studying at the Community College at Taibah University were recruited. In the experimental group, the number of students was 23 and in the control group, there were 20 students. Five research instruments were used to conduct this experimental study which included three vocabulary subskills quizzes, a vocabulary achievement test, a final course exam, reflection cards, and a questionnaire. The findings of the study revealed that the students of the experimental group had recorded an improvement in their vocabulary acquisition during their final course assessment. Also, the scores of vocabulary sub-skills quizzes were improved. The students' perspective was positive towards implementing vocabulary activities.

### *2.3 Computer-Assisted Pronunciation Teaching*

With advancing technology, English language teachers can also utilize various assistive tools. An example of this is the kazoo, a toy in which students hum a melody to learn intonation. A recent study was conducted by Mahmood (2024) to examine the effect of online platforms on the development of pronunciation and understand the perception of Kurdish EFL students through interviews and questionnaire surveys. He found that online tools that integrate High Variability Phonetic Training (HVPT) are strongly accepted among Kurdish EFL students, providing useful understanding to foster language guidance in practical circumstances. In CAPT (Computer-Assisted Pronunciation Teaching), speech analysis software can be used to compare different speech patterns and give visual feedback to see pitch contours, which can aid in recognizing intonation. Bogach et al. (2021) have also

documented the effectiveness of CAPT as a practical approach to teaching pronunciation, phonemes, phrasal rhythm, and tone movement among students. Computer pronunciation software has strong potential in instructional strategies in Saudi Arabia because of the large class sizes and their role in providing individual, corrective feedback. For instance, the English Pronunciation File, which focuses mostly on linking sounds and words to pictures and minimal pairs to provide contrasting forms, also proved to be significantly more helpful to pronunciation learners (Arashnia & Shahrokhi, 2016). Yenkimaleki and van Heuven (2019) conducted a comparative analysis between two pronunciation techniques i.e., CAPT and instructor-based prosody teaching (IBPT) to develop speaking skills among trainees where the students trained with CAPT showed better performance than the students who were taught by IBPT. In addition, Praat is another tool that is used in recording stereo and mono sounds, their intensity, and duration to better understand the pronunciation. Said Mustafa El-Garawany (2021) conducted a study to examine the role of Praat in creating EFL innovation among EFL learners. The researchers conducted an intonation test in English and experimented with it on the experimental group. The results revealed that the students recorded a substantial improvement in the production of intonation in comparison with the control group of the study. Explicit formal instruction (EFI) and explicit pronunciation training (EPT) can also be employed in class as efficient and productive policies to enhance the speech rate, and fluency and minimize the dialectic delay (Mahmood, 2023). Furthermore, the internet also offers a wealth of engaging resources for teaching pronunciation to support teachers in their instructional strategies. Additionally, audio and video language learning resources can be delivered through mobile-assisted language learning (MALL). The efficacy of MALL in teaching pronunciation to Arabic speakers in English has been endorsed by a plethora of studies (Rahman et al., 2018; Al-Ahdal, 2020).

The use of computer-based technology to support pronunciation teaching does not appear to be widespread in Saudi Arabia, but MALL is already providing a lot of opportunities for Saudi learners, according to Al-Ahdal and Shariq (2019). In one language centre, Al-Ahdal (2020) found that educators were using podcasts to expose students to correct English pronunciation. They included engaging activities to check their pronunciation skills. An experimental group showed comparatively “remarkable improvement” over three months by nearly 50 per cent.

### **3. Methodology**

#### *3.1 Study Design and Sampling*

The researcher adopted a descriptive design to explore the instructional strategies for teaching Saudi ESL/EFL students English pronunciation. The researcher used a random sampling technique to recruit the participants. The study population was 2000. According to an online sample size calculator, Raosoft, the recommended sample size was 122. A total of 140 questionnaires were sent to teachers out of which, 128 questionnaires were completed and included in the data analysis.

#### *3.2 Study Instrument*

A survey was conducted among English teachers at a university in Saudi Arabia. The survey questionnaire was designed by the researcher. The teachers were asked to indicate their responses based on a 5-point Likert scale. The first section comprised the demographic details of the participants while the second section included questions about various aspects related to the preferred method of dealing with mispronunciation instances, pronunciation teaching strategies, theoretical aspects of pronunciation teaching, Segmental aspects and features, Suprasegmental aspects and features and the usage of CAPT. The researchers consulted with the field experts to review the questionnaire and suggest the necessary changes. After amending the questions, the researcher tested its reliability by measuring its Cronbach's alpha. The Cronbach's Alpha value of the questionnaire came out to be greater than 0.7 which showed that the questionnaire was fit for the study.

Table 1. Cronbach Alpha Coefficient

Items	Stability coefficient
Preferred method of dealing with mispronunciation instances	0.98
Pronunciation teaching strategies	0.97
Theoretical aspects of pronunciation teaching	0.88
Segmental aspects and features	0.86
Suprasegmental aspects and features	0.84
Suprasegmental features relative to segmental features	0.96
The general perception of teachers about teaching pronunciation	0.85

#### 4. Results

The results of this study are described for each of the main sections in the survey questionnaire below.

##### 4.1 Dealing with Mispronunciation Instances

When asked about their preferred method of dealing with their students' mispronunciation instances, the teachers mostly expressed a preference for taking some positive action to actively support their students rather than doing something negative (Figure 1). Specifically, they were asked to indicate whether they ignored or reprimanded their students, corrected them on the spot, provided corrective feedback, or taught them. The results showed that most of the teachers reprimanded the students when the students mispronounced the words. Ignoring pronunciation errors was the least adopted strategy by the teachers.

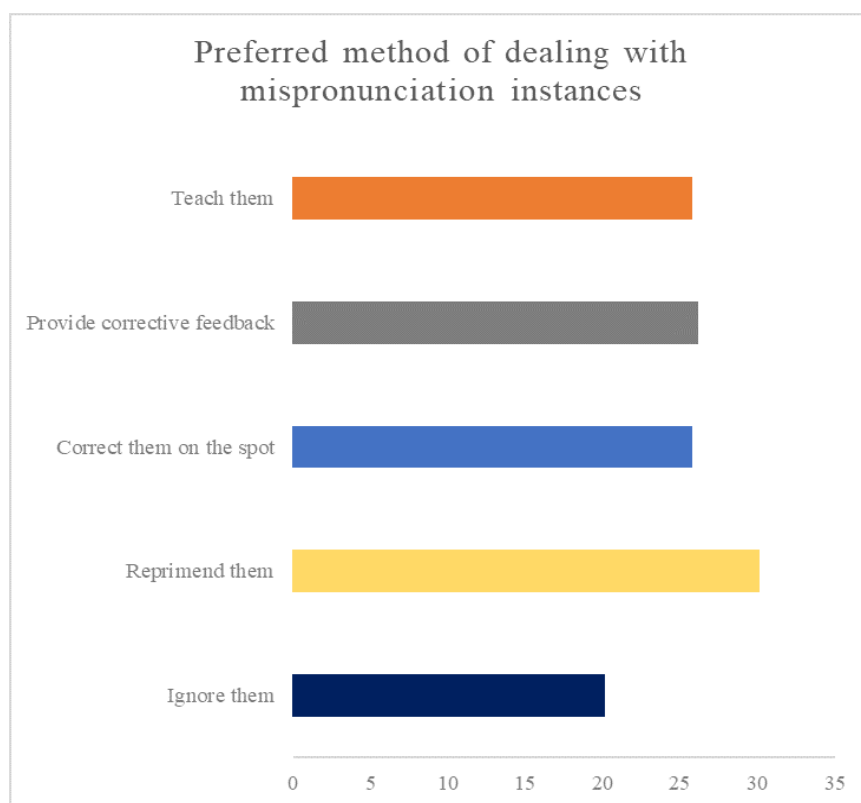


Figure 1. Preferred method of dealing with mispronunciation instances

##### 4.2 Pronunciation Teaching Strategies

The teachers expressed about the adoption of twenty pronunciation strategies, as to whether they were implemented in the past, and if they were applying them now or required under the curriculum or textbook. The results reveal that certain strategies are more popular than others (Figure 2). In particular, behavioural strategies are very popular, as are listening activities, reading aloud, and discussions and dialogues. Of these, only minimum

pair drills and the latter two are required under the curriculum, especially dialogues. Previously popular strategies, which are no longer applied, are language games and drama. However, this may be explained by their being considered more appropriate for a younger generation. In contrast, the use of language analysis software is more popular in the present, as it is among newer methods only made possible in recent times.

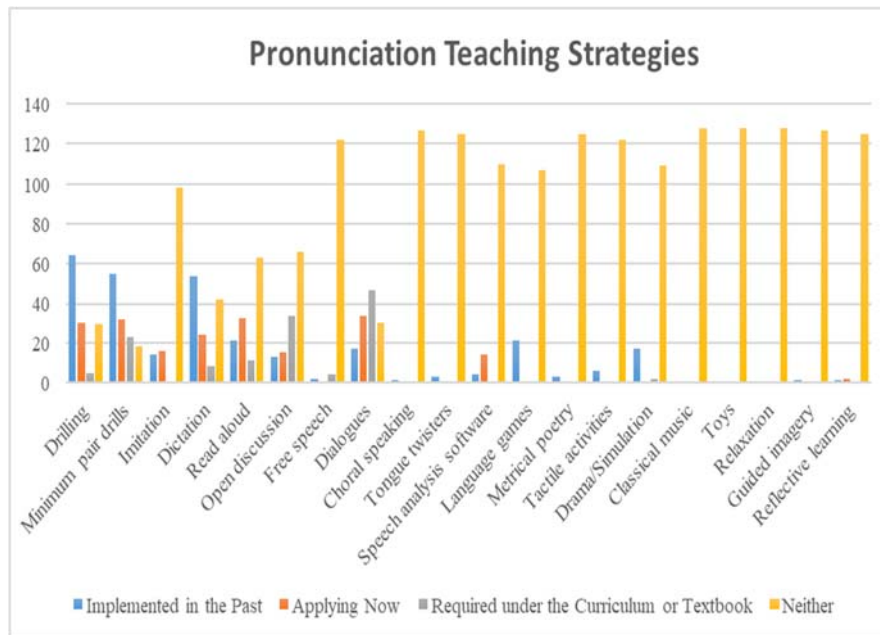


Figure 2. Pronunciation teaching strategies

Concerning theoretical aspects of pronunciation teaching, teachers have been focusing mostly on drawing comparisons with Arabic and this is the most frequent aspect covered (Figure 3) which was succeeded by articulatory functions and IPA re-spellings, where nobody adopted the strategy of corrective feedback.

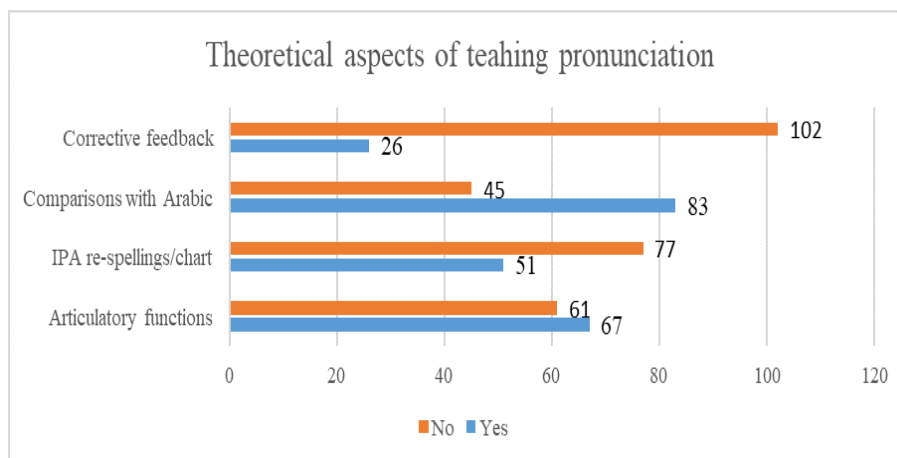


Figure 3. Theoretical aspects of pronunciation teaching

#### 4.3 Segmental and Suprasegmental Aspects and Features

Subsequent data were collected on segmental and suprasegmental aspects and features covered while applying the various pronunciation teaching strategies. A few segmental aspects are most prominent, namely consonants, vowels, diphthongs, and triphthongs, which may be expected (Figure 4). The next most common ones taught are articulation and dissimilation, while lenition and neutralization are the least focused aspects.

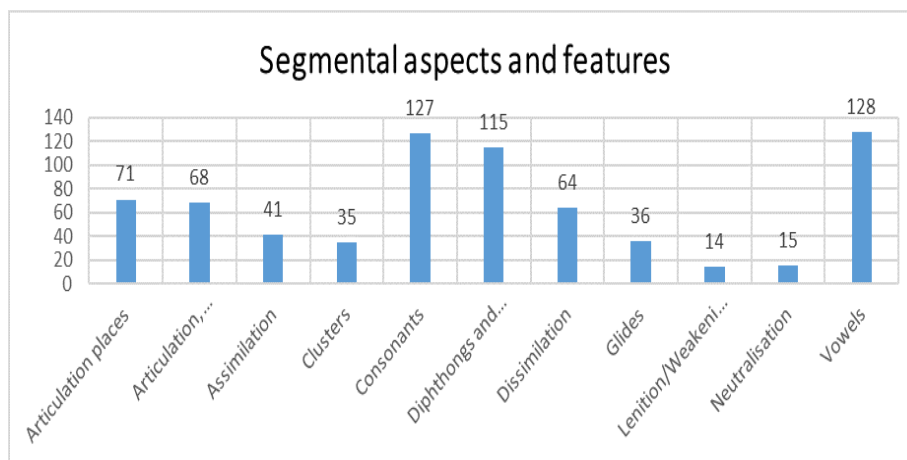


Figure 4. Segmental aspects and feature

For suprasegmental aspects and features, stress and syllabification were adopted by most of the teachers (Figure 5). approach to the teaching of suprasegmental features in comparison with segmental features. More than half (52%) of them do not teach these aspects and features at all, which is an admission of neglect. For those that do, over a quarter (27%) admit that they do not give them much attention, although they are included in the teaching strategy. This leaves a fifth (20%) of which 17% of the total sample give them roughly the same attention as non-segmental aspects and only 3% give them greater attention.

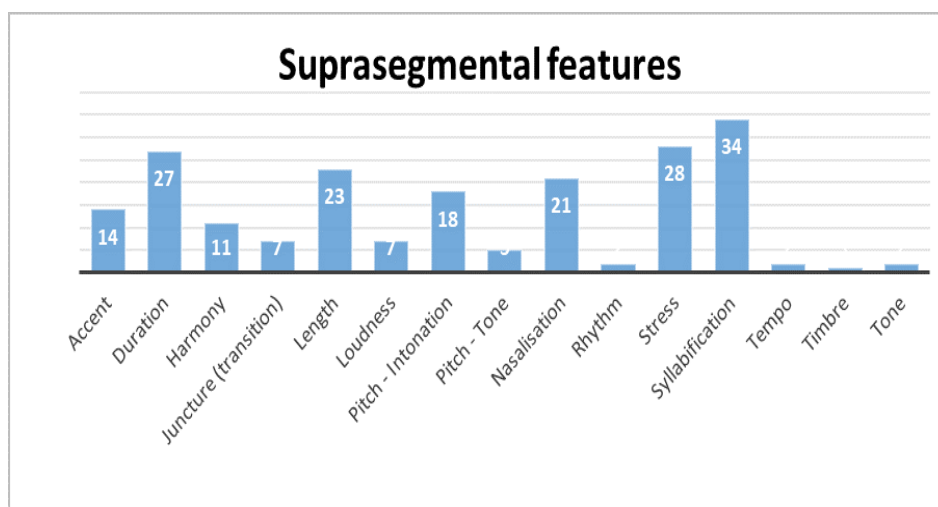


Figure 5. Suprasegmental features

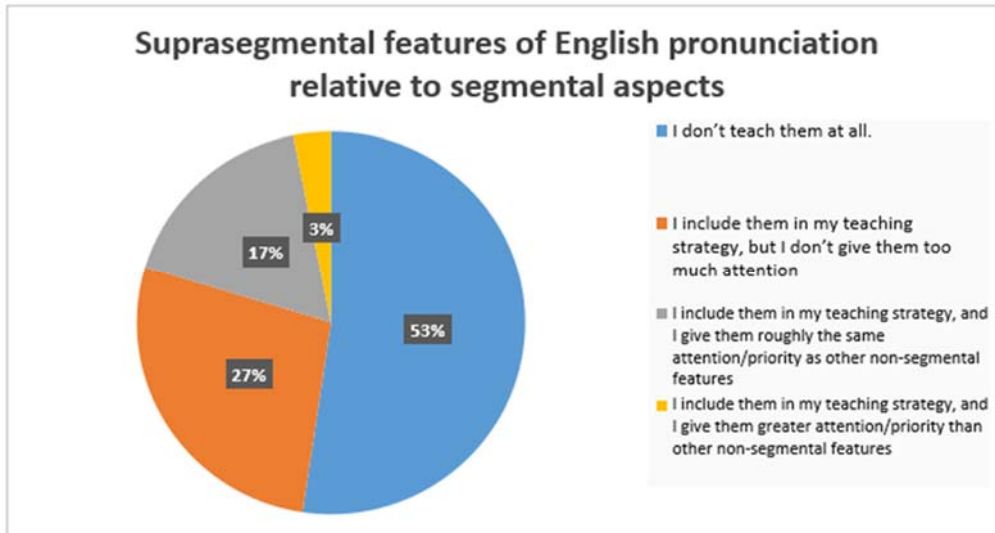


Figure 6. Suprasegmental features relative to segmental features

In addition to the above data, seven statements were presented for teachers to express their extent of agreement on a 5-point Likert scale. The strongest overall agreements are with there being too much exam pressure inhibiting the application of pronunciation teaching strategies, and not having enough time to give attention to improving students' pronunciations. Fairly strong agreements are for finding technology-based strategies unnecessary, and students perceive different strategies constructively. General agreement was less for teachers responding to occasional and frequent mispronunciations alike, and teachers preferring to deal with mispronunciation instances individually, and least for the curriculum or textbook not giving enough priority to pronunciation aspects of learning English.

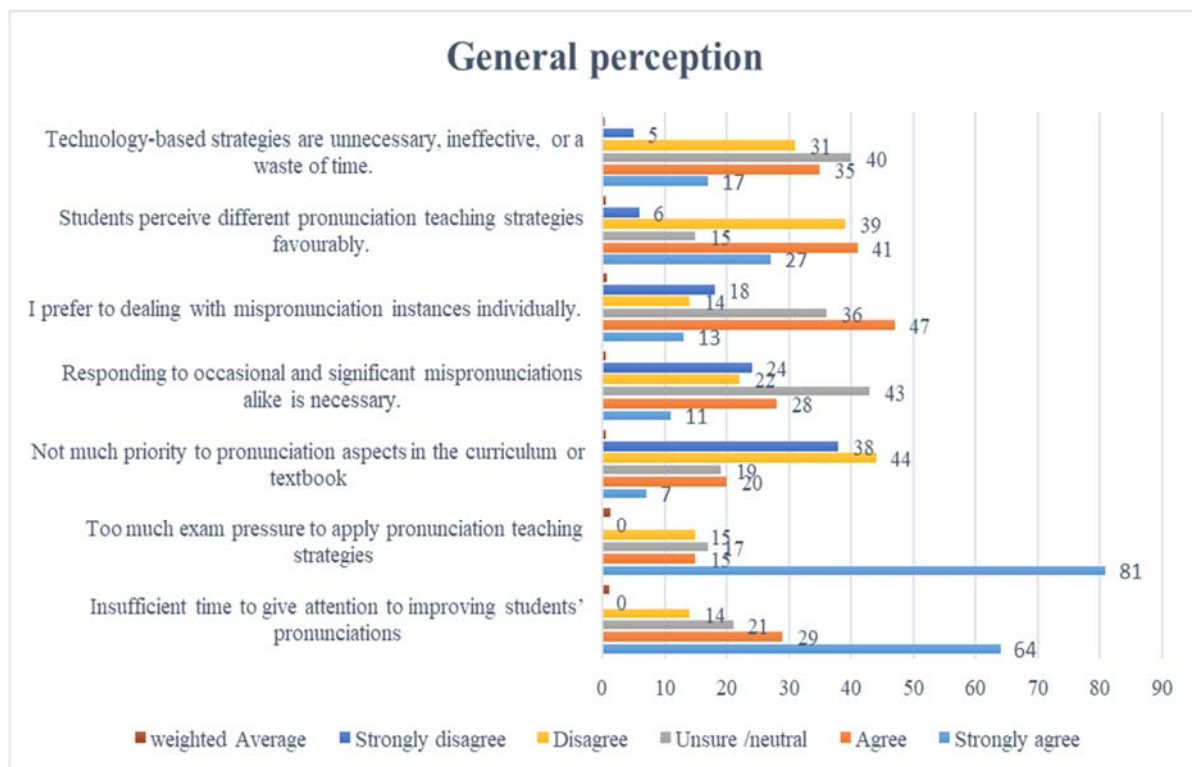


Figure 7. The general perception of teachers about teaching pronunciation



## 5. Discussion

The study sought to investigate the instructional strategies adopted by teachers in universities for teaching pronunciation. Of the twenty predefined instructional strategies for teaching pronunciation, behavioural strategies are the most popular. A few communicative approaches are also being taken, but it appears that they are due to being prescribed in the curriculum, particularly dialogues. Drilling in general and minimum pair drills both continue to be used, although only the latter is prescribed in the textbook, as is the 'read aloud' method. One explanation could be that Saudi students favour guided techniques, as opposed to those in which they are freer to learn of their own accord. A positive result from this study was knowing that the teachers react supportively and proactively overall to instances of mispronunciation.

The comparison between segmental and suprasegmental features of English reveals what may be expected of segmental ones, with a focus on consonants and vowels. The attention on suprasegmental features is another positive indication of teachers at the selected institution taking the teaching of macro-level aspects of pronunciation seriously, despite only 48% doing so. This is promising if it is reflective of the wider Saudi education system because of their role in supporting intelligibility, the potential to eliminate specific phonetic errors due to mother-tongue influence, and thus, overall effectiveness in teaching pronunciation (Alsofyani & Algethami, 2017). The result is contrary to what Khaleghi et al. (2020) found about suprasegmental features being ignored in Saudi English curricula. However, the proportion for teaching suprasegmental aspects is less than half (48% overall), and only 20% give them at least the same priority as segmental aspects. Those that give it a higher priority are only 3%. That only a fifth of the teachers give adequate attention to suprasegmental aspects suggests there is still scope for raising more awareness of their importance and potential benefits. The theoretical aspects given the most attention are comparisons with Arabic and articulatory functions. The latter is important in phonetic training to aid in producing clear pronunciation (Naji, 2019). The attention to developing knowledge of articulation is, therefore, encouraging, especially when combined with attention to suprasegmental features. However, the interlingual comparisons are mostly grammatical differences between the two languages, which suggests an emphasis on the grammar-translation method.

The adoption of Pronunciation Power by 11% of the sample and podcasts by 6% are small proportions, but it could be showing that these newer, technology-based solutions are starting to make inroads. If they can make a significant impact, as found by Baradaran and Davvari (2010) among others, their impact could serve as a model for other teachers who are still considering using them. The opportunities presented to English learners at the institution include the strong willingness of teachers to attend to matters relating to teaching pronunciation. In particular, students can benefit from the teachers' greater preference for dealing with mispronunciation instances on an individual basis. Individual attention can make learners feel more comfortable. The learners themselves also perceive pronunciation teaching methods overall, so this is a good combination for a healthy learning environment. The major challenges highlighted in the data were exam pressure and lack of time, inhibiting the adoption of pronunciation teaching strategies. The results confirm what many researchers have noted about pronunciation teaching being ignored due to the need to prepare students for examinations (Jayapalan & Pillai, 2011; Pillai, 2008). The exams do not contain pronunciation aspects. Communication serves the purpose of language learning with quality of speaking and negotiating. To fulfil the desired purpose, pronunciation and instructions are other two integral factors that are inseparable from language and speaking. During the process of inculcating language speaking skills, the attitude of the learners and teachers as well as the instructions given, determine the quality of learning. Hence, it can be inferred that language learning and acquisition are both learner-independent and learner-independent (Jarosz, 2023).

Similarly, lack of time is another related challenge, which suggests that teaching pronunciation is given lower priority in comparison with the other linguistic aspects (Nair et al., 2017). Computer-assisted pronunciation teaching has not been adopted to a significant degree. Rather, the perception that it is ineffective and time-consuming presents a challenge to show how or in what ways it can be made effective, particularly as a supplementary learning tool for language learners to use in their own time. For instance, this could alleviate or make up for the shortage of attention to teaching pronunciation in a high exam-pressure environment. Behavioural strategies are prevalent, although they include minimum pair drills. Additionally, discussions and dialogues are arranged as communicative methods, but they are specifically prescribed in the curriculum and textbooks. However, the proportion for the latter is less than half and only a fifth give them at least equal priority, which suggests a need for more awareness of their importance, especially for promoting intelligibility. Likewise, the focus on articulatory functions is also encouraging for supporting clear pronunciation.

The study was limited to 128 English teachers at one particular institution in Saudi Arabia in the higher education sector. Further research may be conducted to include the views, perceptions, and experiences of students learning

English pronunciation and to expand the survey to other language-learning institutions in Saudi Arabia. However, there is scope for more emphasis on them and raising awareness of their importance as such software tools are not widely utilized. Recommendations are also given for further research for promoting pronunciation development and adopting more helpful instructional strategies. For instance, it will be useful to obtain more insightful data, such as the attention on suprasegmental features, the use of pronunciation learning software, and conduct interviews to better understand the opportunities and challenges of adopting instructional strategies in different study settings such as the Arabic speaking Middle Eastern states.

## 6. Conclusion

Instructional strategies adopted for teaching Saudi ESL/EFL students English pronunciation were explored. The findings revealed their preferred method of dealing with mispronunciation instances, the pronunciation teaching strategies employed, the attention given to segmental and suprasegmental aspects and features, and their views, perceptions, and experiences on using these strategies. Also, the study found that yet despite greater technological integration, teachers are not inclined to adopt CAPT programs to improve their teaching strategies in building profound conversational and pronunciation skills among the students of ESL/EFL in Saudi Arabia. Thus, the researcher recommended making use of CAPT to prepare a better-learned and skilled workforce in Saudi Arabia that is heading toward a great and all-encompassing transformation.

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## Authors' contributions

Single author paper, Dr W.A contributed in all aspects of the manuscript preparation

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Obtained.

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## Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

## Data sharing statement

No additional data are available.

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