| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Phonetics and Phonology Within the Expanding Circle: Saudi Arabia as an Example

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| **ABSTRACT**

Phonetics and phonology instruction have held a pivotal position in recent research in the field of language learning. Notably, many attempts have been made to discover the relationship between phonetics and phonology instruction and learners' pronunciation skills. The current study sought to contribute to the growing body of evidence by observing and analyzing how the instruction methods employed in a course on phonetics and phonology, undertaken in the Expanding Circle setting, impacted students' pronunciation skills development. Adopting qualitative research principles, the convener of a phonetics and phonology course in the English Department at a university in Saudi Arabia was observed for 10 weeks, with observation notes on his instruction methods recorded. Data analysis revealed that the phonetics and phonology instruction did not meet the general aim of the course to develop students' pronunciation skills. Several issues emerged to negatively impact the learning outcomes of students primarily related to the course content and the instruction strategies employed by the teacher. The current study has also revealed several issues in need of further investigation.

Introduction

In the context of accelerating global advancement, English has become the cornerstone of communication. Indeed, recent developments in Saudi Arabia demonstrate how the English language has become a pivotal part of modern Saudi culture. Even though English is considered a foreign language for Saudi people, its use has grown rapidly, and many nationals striving to reach the native-like proficiency. The ability to speak English has also become a leading requirement for many jobs. Therefore, English is taught at all education levels; namely, kindergarten, elementary, intermediate, secondary and tertiary levels. In this regard, English departments are full of students who are, primarily, intending to become English teachers. The programs and curricula designed to prepare English teachers are attractive superficially; however, they need to be adapted to better meet the needs of future English teachers. Students are exposed to both theoretical and applied linguistics courses, one of which integrates phonetics and phonology teaching.

One of the main goals of teaching phonetics and phonology in this context is to provide learners, who are set to become the next generation English language teachers, with basic proficiency needs in second language communication. This includes how sounds are articulated, perceived and transcribed. As such, the driving motive and aim of the current study is to uncover how phonetics and phonology teaching occurs through classroom observation. Indeed, teaching phonetics and phonology has a significant role in encouraging learners to reach fluency in second language pronunciation. This exposure to phonetic instruction can help learners to become knowledgeable of the appropriate production and perception of sounds in comparison with those of 'proficient target-language speakers' (Derwing & Munro, 2005). For this reason, the current study seeks to discover if the way in which the phonetics and phonology course is taught reflects the general aim of the course. Even if the learning materials do

not directly support the aim of the course, a professional teacher can adapt them as a resource to better meet the course aim. According to Hayati (2010), if a textbook is mainly used for reading, it is the responsibility of the teacher to make his/her students practice pronunciation using such a textbook.

However, teaching English to Saudi students is associated with a range of unresolved and challenging issues giving Saudi Arabia's positioning within the Expanding Circle. According to Kachru (1992), the Expanding Circle includes countries where English in only used as a foreign language (i.e., not used extensively for communication), yet it is part of the education system. To elaborate, in Saudi Arabia English is taught at all educational levels, but the main medium of communication between a student and teacher in the corridors of the English department is Arabic language. Furthermore, most classrooms where English is taught embrace Arabic language as the medium of instruction to simplify teaching and tend to teach about the language rather than teach the language directly.

A key issue in need of attention is the low English pronunciation proficiency demonstrated by Saudi students learning the language. This is because pronunciation is a core speaking skill during everyday communication. As pointed out by Almoayidi (2025), "...the appropriate production of sounds is important for most English language learners. This emerges from the belief that students who have accurate pronunciation have better ability to understand others' speech and utterance" (p. 1). Pronunciation is considered the most important factor to consolidate the English as a foreign language (EFL) learner's ability to communicate in English effectively and to reduce the extent to which they feel intimidated to use the language. This means that pronunciation competence is essential for effective communication because pronunciation defects can cause problems such as loss of self-confidence, hesitance, and interaction breakdown. Therefore, learners of English in countries within the Expanding Circle need to master the basic element of phonetic sounds and the symbols they represent. This is achieved via numerous strategies, but it depends entirely on the skills of the course convener who is assigned the task to prepare future teachers.

There have been several attempts to resolve the issues related to poor pronunciation skills by students learning English in Saudi universities, but more in-depth investigations are required. Several studies have shown that many EFL or English as a second language (ESL) learners experience pronunciation expertise as a barrier in their learning (Asadian, 2022; Begum & Hoque, 2016; Haghighi & Rahimy, 2017; Pennington, 2021). As such, this study has been conducted to flip the script and to reverse the trend by investigating what and how phonetics and phonology are taught in an English department tasked with preparing Saudi learners as future English teachers.

Phonetics refers to the sound systems of a language. This includes how sounds are perceived and articulated, along with the physical properties of the sounds. Phonology refers to the ways in which word-sounds function within a particular language and how rules and constraints confine the use of these sounds in a particular context. For many EFL learners, being a good speaker of English depends heavily on pronunciation accuracy. According to Jenkins (2000), and Derwing and Munro (2005), pronunciation helps to enhance competence in communication and in return, it reduces misunderstanding. Pronunciation, as the actual production of sounds to deliver a meaningful message, thus depends on phonetic and phonological inputs to produce adequate outputs.

Literature Review

In recent years there has been a dramatic increase and shift in the direction of research on pronunciation and how it is taught to achieve intelligible communication. A considerable body of literature has been published on the teaching of pronunciation (e.g., Brekelmans, 2015; DeKeyser, 2003; Derwing & Munro, 2005; Field, 2005; Gordon et al.,, 2013; Hamzah, 2014; Kissling, 2013; Koike, 2014; Lee & Lyster, 2018; Lord, 2005; Saito, 2011; Venkatagiri & Levis, 2007) where researcher focused on the relationship between pronunciation improvement and the phonetics and phonology instruction. Other studies have investigated the impact of phonetic and phonological instruction on learners' pronunciation achievement. In most studies (e.g., Kissling, 2013; Saito, 2011; Saito & Lyster, 2012) the researchers found that phonetic and phonological instruction makes a positive contribution towards improving learner pronunciation.

Researchers have also found however that many English teachers avoid teaching pronunciation in their classrooms because they do not feel confident to pronounce words and syllables due to their own lack of pronunciation proficiency (Derwing & Munro, 2005). Moreover, some studies have reported that teachers of English will avoid teaching pronunciation directly due to lack of knowledge about linguistics and appropriate teaching methodologies (Hayati, 2010).

The lack of a solid background in phonology adds oil to fire in this problem as reported by teachers in a study by Burgess and Spencer (2000). As a result, these researchers suggest that training programs for English teachers need to include both phonology and pronunciation courses. A consensus is evident among linguists and researchers in second language acquisition that a relationship exists between the qualification of the teachers and their professional performance. As Kanellou (2013) points out, to improve language learners' pronunciation, language teachers must be well-qualified in pronunciation instruction by

completing courses in both phonetics and phonology. The researcher also suggests that English language teachers should be mindful of what and how to teach pronunciation and have good knowledge of the strategies needed to teach this language component effectively. This view is supported by Lintunen and Mälilähde (2015) who state that phonetics and phonology courses are essential in teaching any foreign language; that is, they are vital for equipping students with important knowledge of the second language inventory system. In return, this will help learners to improve their own pronunciation.

Other studies have been conducted to explore the type of phonetic instruction believed to be most beneficial to EFL learners. Abel et al. (2016), for example, compared four different phonetic instruction strategies delivered to 151 students enrolled in Linguistics 100 (Introduction to Language and Linguistics) at the University of British Columbia. One group of students received textbook-based instruction about the production of sounds, whereas another group of students received mimic-based instruction in which they followed a listen-and-repeat approach. A third group of students received instruction based on pair-work activities, and a fourth group received instruction that involved watching ultrasound-based videos that showed how sounds are produced. The authors found significant differences in the outcomes of the four groups. Even though many studies have shown that activities and learning interactions are triggers for pronunciation improvement of second language (L2) learners of English, Abel et al.'s (2016) study does not support this. It is found that traditional phonetic instruction is beneficial to students, and that using ultrasound videos can have a positive impact on teaching phonetics even though it is an interactive-free method.

The limited generalizability of published research on methods of pronunciation instruction shows that the issues are rooted in teachers' background knowledge. For example, in 2009 Deng et al. conducted a comprehensive study to track articles published between 1999 and 2008 by 14 academic journals in language learning, second language acquisition (SLA), applied linguistics, teaching English as a second of other Language (TESOL), and applied language learning. The authors found that only 2.7% to 7.4% of publications tackled the teaching of pronunciation. Indeed, a significant number of the published studies reported that most teachers lacked even the ABC knowledge of phonology necessary to help them to teach pronunciation appropriately (Breitkreutz et al., 2001; Brown, 1992; Burgess & Spencer, 2000; Burns, 2006; Foote et al., 2011; Fraser, 2000; Henderson et al., 2012; Walker, 1999). As a result, several studies have been conducted in relation to teaching phonetics and phonology and their contribution in teaching pronunciation accuracy and skills to students. According to Derwing (2019), the unprecedented growth in pronunciation research over the last decade is evidenced by the increase in the number of publications each year. Indeed, the American Association of Applied Linguistics, for example, developed a new issue for Phonetics, Phonology and Oral Communication in 2018 due to the vast number of submissions they received for their 2017 Annual Conference.

Several cohort studies have examined the interrelations of phonetics and phonology and their importance in the field of pronunciation teaching and learning. Some studies have also focused on the phonological aspects of L2 teaching and learning such as supra-segmental elements (Edward & Zampini, 2008; Major, 1998). This is compared to the relatively limited number of studies on the teaching of segmental components in pronunciation conducted prior to the twentieth century (Celce-Murcia et al., 2007). Phonetics and phonology are vital components in the field of teaching, particularly when theories about sounds are implemented and practiced (Celce-Murcia et al., 2007). For example, a course in phonetics is needed to help learners to become acquainted with the air stream mechanism, speech organ anatomy, and how sounds are perceived and articulated. Furthermore, a course in phonology demonstrates how sounds function in a variety of contexts and how to adapt these sounds accordingly. Consequently, those who teach pronunciation should be qualified in both phonetics and phonology components, including the segmental and the supra-segmental levels (Celce-Murcia, et al., 2007; Derwing & Munro, 2005; Roach, 2009).

Several researchers have attempted to investigate the role of phonetics and phonology instruction in assisting students to achieve proficiency in L2 pronunciation. However, there remains a lack of research to investigate how this course is taught within English departments. There is little research to date to have explored the nexus between teachers' knowledge of phonetics and phonology, pronunciation ability, and pedagogical skills to apply in the classroom. A consistent theme in many of these studies is the importance of providing explicit phonetic and phonological instruction to enhance pronunciation. Yet, other studies have examined the absence of pronunciation instruction in teacher preparation programs, particularly knowledge of phonetics and how to teach pronunciation (Arimoto, 2005; Burgess & Spencer, 2000; Derwing & Munro, 2005; Foote et al., 2011; Gilbert 2010; Kanellou, 2013; Ota, 2015). Each of these studies investigated aspects of teacher competencies and qualifications to provide pronunciation instruction in their classrooms. In addition, some studies focused on whether or not teachers in the English department were well-prepared to teach pronunciation, and their level of confidence to apply what they had learned in actual teaching settings and contexts.

One other study worth mentioning is by Lipińska (2013) which explored the relationship between phonetics and phonology course instruction and learners' pronunciation outcomes. The study specifically examined how phonetics and phonological instruction impacted Polish learners' pronunciation of the English vowel /æ/. The findings confirmed that instruction in phonetics and phonology can help to improve learner pronunciation. The researcher pointed out that even though the English vowel /æ/ is considered difficult to pronounce by Polish students, phonetic instruction helped to minimize this difficulty as it enabled the learners to distinguish between the English vowel and the Polish one. However, what is missing in this study, in my point of view,

is the human rating, which is essential to determine if learners' vowel production after training is intelligible. Acoustic analysis could show sound waves and many other features, but these do not assist in identifying whether vowel production was perceived by learners correctly.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research principles with a focused on classroom observation for data collection. This method offers an effective platform from which to explain the linguistic phenomenon under investigation. One (and the only) convener of the phonetics and phonology course participated in this current study. He has a PhD in translation and has been teaching in the English department at the university for six years. He did not specialize in phonetics and phonology but had completed courses in phonetics and phonology during his undergraduate and post-graduate degrees. He was assigned by the head of the department to teach the course, with the group of students observed for the whole semester.

Table 1. Demographic information of the participant

Pseudo-name	Age	Education	Field	Experience	Native language
Mazin	45	PhD	Translation	10 years	Arabic

As stated earlier, the driving motive for conducting the current study was investigate the teaching of a phonetics and phonology course in its settings. To identify the applicability of the phonetics and phonology course within the Expanding Circle, this paper sought to answer the following research question:

- To what extent does the teaching instruction in a phonetics and phonology course at an English department, within the Expanding Circle, meet EFL learners' pronunciation goals?

Data Collection

To adequately answer the above-mentioned research question, I visited the classroom in each session of the phonetics and phonology course and observed the entire lesson. There were 18 students in the class. The observations aimed to identify how the teaching of phonetics and phonology was progressing. The researcher observed how the convener of the course acted and how the students interacted during this time. The researcher kept detailed field notes as part of the data collection. The field notes included the strategies used by the convener to teach the phonetics and phonology course. In addition, the types of materials used to facilitate the students' learning of phonetics and phonology were collected for analysis, along with the approaches used by the convener to make the course more interesting. Also noted was how the course convener used body language and other teaching skills including those related to the motivation and encouragement of students.

The students were also observed to determine how they interacted during the lesson and engaged in the learning activities. This also provided an opportunity to note evidence of any difficulties with the learning materials experienced by the students. Furthermore, notes were taken on the relationship between the course convener and the students. This relationship was observed during interactions, when correcting student mistakes, when students asked for clarification, and when students were late to class. The observation lasted for 10 weeks, which included a two-hour lecture and a one-hour lecture each week.

Results and Discussion

One of the data collection procedures was to attend a classroom to observe both the convener-student and the student-student interactions. The purpose was to identify the teaching approach and how the convener implements the course materials. Notes were taken during each session. Many issues were observed during the semester, with the most important themes to emerge from the analysis of the notes presented and illustrated in Figure 1 below:
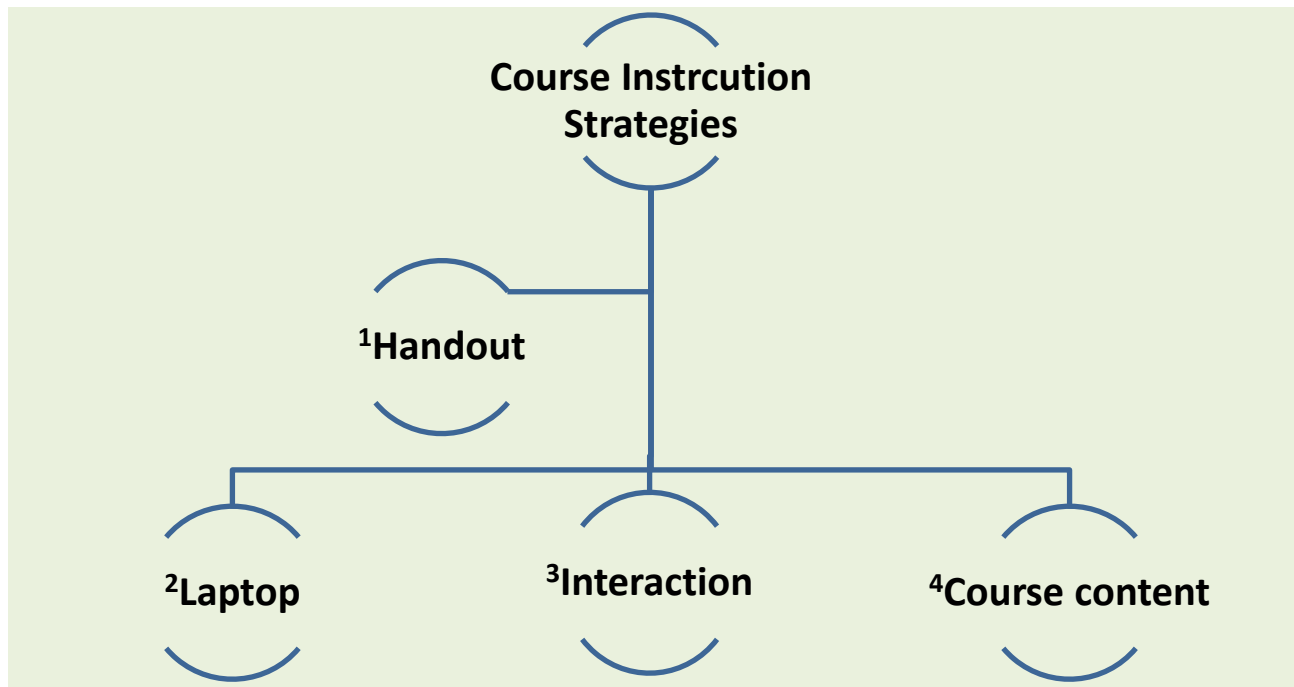
Figure 1. Themes to emerge from the analysis of field notes.

1- **Handout.** It was observed that the convener handed his students a four-page handout that contained some of the definitions and concepts the students needed to know. It also contained a summary of the relevant consonants and vowels, but not a chart of them. The students were not given an opportunity to discuss the concepts and consonants and vowel choices. Moreover, the hand-out did not contain information about phonology, even though the course is titled, 'Phonetics and Phonology'. The convenor also referred the students to a book containing pronunciation skills, but this book was not used in the classroom. During all class sessions, some students were selected to read aloud lines of text from the handout and in some cases the convener would add some comments if needed. As students in previous lectures pointed out, it felt like a reading class rather than a phonetics class. The rationale for this strategy articulated by the convener during a casual meeting in his office was that having the students read aloud would help him to identify any pronunciation issues they may have and to provide them with feedback as required. This approach by the convener aligns with Hayati (2010) who illustrated that even if a textbook is designed to support the teaching of reading, a skillful teacher can use it to support students to practice pronunciation. However, there was not sufficient feedback provided by the convenor when the students committed mispronunciations. Indeed, the convener did not take any corrective action or suggest suitable remedies. It was also noted that the same students (the more capable ones) were selected to read in every session and, as a result, many students did not have the opportunity to read aloud and potentially receive feedback during the semester. Overall, the handout did not appear to make a positive contribution to the students' pronunciation output.

2- **Laptop.** The use of a laptop during every lesson shows that the convener was concerned about his students' learning improvement. He used the laptop to play English sounds so that the students could listen to the correct articulation. Unfortunately, the speaker used for the recordings did not articulate the sounds clearly for the students. While observing from the back of the class it was hard to hear the sounds coming from the laptop. Moreover, the audio files containing English consonants and vowels were recorded by non-native speakers of English and the foreign accent was clear. Lastly, the students were often not given the opportunity to repeat the sound in order to practice the correct pronunciation.

3- **Interaction.** The number of students in the class group was not big, and this allowed the convener to involve them in discussions and to practice pronouncing English sounds. Nonetheless, the convener seemed to prefer the teacher-centered approach because the course is theory-driven. As stated by the convener during the first meeting, there were no labs available to provide a space for the students to practice. He therefore tended to adopt the teacher-centered approach to learning. Students were passive and had no role in the class except to sometimes read from the handout. The convenor tried at times to correct the students' pronunciation while they were reading, but this made some students reluctant to read in order to avoid being corrected in front of their classmates; namely, enacting a "peer-pressure avoidance strategy". This dynamic was evident during the classroom observations and prompted some

students to take a backseat in the classroom. Field notes confirmed Nair et al.'s (2017) finding that pronunciation correction is a facilitative tool at a primary level; however, it can become a barrier at the upper level (e.g., university level). The convener could use indirect pronunciation correction by highlighting the common pronunciation errors and by flagging them for attention at the end of the lecture, and by encouraging all students to repeat the correct pronunciation of these words. He also could have written them on the board and asked all students to read them aloud one by one. Furthermore, it was noted that Arabic language was dominant in the classroom. This confirms one of the participating student's claims that they were exposed to Arabic during the whole semester. As the convener stated later, he used Arabic to facilitate the English language learning process by using it to translate concepts, illustrate examples, and explain definitions, which was good to facilitate understanding. However, the convenor could have used Arabic when it was needed only, using English at all other times to expose the students to the language as much as possible. It was also noted that English was used only while reading aloud from the handout. The convener reported that he had noticed the students preferred to be taught using Arabic because they wanted to understand the concepts and what was being taught. This approach to acquiesce to the students' learning preferences did not help to achieve the goal of the course. If students are always given what they want, most would stay at home and pass the course without lifting a finger. In addition, the whiteboard was not utilized at all to facilitate teaching. The convener did not use it to explain terms or to write down the sound symbols, believing that the course was about sounds, so writing was not necessary. Moreover, when he was asked about this during casual meetings, he justified his actions by stating that everything is included in the handout and that there was no need to add further burdens. Lastly, the students were also told repeatedly that they needed to study because they were to be asked about the content in both the midterm and the final examinations. There was no mention of the importance of pronunciation for comprehensibility or intelligibility. As some students mentioned to me during informal conversations, the priority placed on the final examination led them to invest their efforts into passing the course only rather than to improve their pronunciation.

4- **Course content.** It was observed that while the students read the course handout some basic phonetics concepts were addressed such as consonants and vowels and how they are articulated. The handout did not include the different branches of phonetics (e.g., articulatory, acoustic and auditory), a chart for consonants and vowels, or a diagram of human anatomical organs to show the air stream mechanisms, places of articulation, and manner of articulation. What was presented included a list of sounds – consonants and vowels – with a few introductory lines about each sound. Furthermore, the materials were organized randomly: vowels, both simple and complex (diphthongs), were presented first, with the consonants presented later. The sound symbols were part of the handout, but there was no single exercise on how to transcribe the sounds or how to decipher the transcription. Moreover, the use of a dictionary as a source of transcription was not part of the teaching strategy. The course did not address some of the phonetics issues to emerge from the influence of the native language sound system (interference). Even though the course was titled Phonetics and Phonology, basic phonological concepts such as phoneme, allophones, segmental, suprasegmental, syllable system, phonotactics, stress, pitch, and intonation were not given focus. This explains why some English language teachers I know found it difficult to differentiate between phonemes and allophones or between segmental and suprasegmental key concepts. These findings corroborate the findings of Derwing and Munro (2005), and Hayati (2010) who pointed out that many teachers avoid teaching pronunciation because they do not have sufficient course-based knowledge of phonetics and phonology to feel confident to teach pronunciation. The current results also support the conclusion drawn by Celce-Murcia et al. (2007), and Roach (2009) in their studies that future English teachers should be exposed to phonological aspects to prepare them well for teaching pronunciation. Sufficient examples and illustrations were missing in this course and, more importantly, even though the time assigned to the course was three hours for each session, only an hour or less was invested in the class.

Learners' role in classroom

The classroom observations also revealed that most students were passive learners. Their initial motivation to improve their pronunciation skills (apparent at the beginning of the course) started to fade towards the end of the semester. The students were observed to primarily attend the course to gain extra credits for attendance and to be recorded as having completed the course. Most students indicated during classroom conversations that they attended the class for this reason rather than to improve their pronunciation. One explanation for these behaviors is related to the conveners' attitude toward teaching. To clarify, there was no time allocated for discussion, question and answer exchanges, learning interaction, the raising of phonetics issues, comparing sound systems (English and Arabic), and the like. As such, some students fell asleep during the lesson and others used their smartphones to chat with friends to pass the time.

Conclusion, limitations, and recommendations

This study set out to determine the extent to which the teacher's instruction methods in a phonetics and phonology course met the students' learning goals related to the development of their pronunciation skills. It can be inferred from the classroom observation notes that the instruction methods employed during the phonetics and phonology course did not facilitate pronunciation improvement in the English major students and did not meet their learning needs and goals. Lintunen and Mälilähde (2015) have stated that phonetics and phonology units are the cornerstones in foreign language teaching. They argue that such units are essential for providing students with important background information about the second language system and for improving their pronunciation skills and capabilities to teach pronunciation to future students. It was, in fact, evident that the contents of the phonetics and phonology course did not help to prepare the students to master pronunciation or to teach pronunciation in the future. This helps to explain why most participants in this study indicated that they do not feel confident to teach pronunciation.

According to Jia-wen (2017), many teachers tend to neglect teaching pronunciation in the classroom because they lack confidence and adequate phonetics knowledge. This aligns with Uchida's (2016) study in which he reported that teachers who are not well-qualified in phonetics and phonology tend to avoid teaching pronunciation because they lack confidence. The objective in undertaking the course in phonetics and phonology should not be simply to pass, but to master the pronunciation of each English sound and become confident to teach pronunciation skills to students in the future. The findings to emerge in this study suggest a relationship exists between the way a course of phonetics and phonology is delivered and the development of students' pronunciation skills. These findings are therefore likely to be disappointing to those who believe that a phonetics and phonology course is primarily designed to improve students' speaking and pronunciation abilities.

Notwithstanding the interesting insights related to the influence of phonetics and phonology instruction on L2 students' pronunciation development, the limitations of this study need to be considered and addressed in future research. As stated in the Methodology section, the sample of this study included only one convener and 18 students in the class. . Furthermore, the study was limited by its reliance on only one case-study English department. Future research should aim to include a larger and more diverse sample of English departments, course convenors, and L2 language students to provide a more nuanced understanding of the impacts of instructional approaches to teaching language systems on students' pronunciation development. Lastly, future studies on this aspect of language learning should aim to conduct in-depth interviews with students as part of its data collection to determine how they perceive the importance of phonetics and phonology in improving their pronunciation.

Based on the findings reported in the current study, it is recommended that the process to assign a teacher to a phonetics and phonology course should give more weight to the extent to which he or she is skillful in this field and internally motivated to teach the course; and less weight to the teacher simply having a degree in linguistics. This is crucial to improving the balance between teaching phonetics and phonology to L2 students to improve their understanding of theory and to supporting their pronunciation development and confidence to teach pronunciation in the future.

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