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## **Factors affecting EFL students' inaccurate pronunciation: The case of Nampula Secondary School, 12th grade**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The study titled “Factors Affecting EFL Students' Inaccurate Pronunciation” was conducted at Nampula Secondary School with the aim of analyzing the factors contributing to the incorrect pronunciation of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners. Utilizing a qualitative approach, the research adopted a case study methodology, involving 10 students and one English language teacher as participants. Data collection methods included interviews and observations of the teacher, while students were only interviewed. The findings identified several key factors leading to inaccurate pronunciation among EFL students: lack of interest in learning the target language, interference from their mother tongue, insufficient practice and knowledge, and inadequate teaching methodologies and resources. The study suggests that to improve pronunciation accuracy, the government should equip public schools with necessary language materials, hire qualified teachers specializing in pronunciation techniques, and encourage the integration of pronunciation content into lesson plans. Furthermore, teachers are recommended to employ more effective teaching strategies that emphasize pronunciation practice. On the students' part, it is advised that they take an active role in practicing pronunciation both inside and outside the classroom, taking responsibility for their own learning. The study highlights the importance of a supportive learning environment and continuous professional development for teachers to address pronunciation issues effectively. It also emphasizes the need for a collaborative effort between educators, policymakers, and students to foster an educational culture that prioritizes language proficiency and communication skills. The recommendations aim to enhance the overall effectiveness of EFL instruction, ultimately leading to better pronunciation outcomes for students.

**Keywords:** EFL learners; inaccurate pronunciation; factors; teachers.

### **INTRODUCTION**

In Mozambique, the teaching of English in public schools has undergone a significant change. Previously, students began learning English from the 8<sup>th</sup> grade onwards.

However, with the implementation of a new curriculum, students now start learning English from the 6<sup>th</sup> grade, exposing them to the language for a longer period of around 6 years. This change was influenced by the idea of enhancing effective communication skills after completing 12<sup>th</sup> grade 12, as suggested by freedom fighters (Adriano and Nkamta, 2018). The adoption of English was seen as a way to embrace its international status. This shift in the introduction of English aims to provide students with a better foundation in the language and improve their communication abilities. The Mozambique Education Strategic Plan for 2020-2029 highlights the importance of this change and its potential impact on students' language skills.

Mastering language skills, particularly pronunciation, is important for effective communication. However, many 12<sup>th</sup> grade students have difficulty pronouncing English words correctly, which hinders their ability to communicate effectively. This issue was observed during teaching practice at Nampula Secondary School, when students had difficulty pronouncing words correctly during discussions and when expressing their opinions. Thus, the negative impact of incorrect pronunciation on students' ability to communicate, stating that although they can write in English, they are faced with confusion and misunderstandings when they speak. Therefore, this research aims to explore the factors that contribute to mispronunciation among 12<sup>th</sup> grade students and the effects it has on their daily communication and interaction, in order to be able to recommend effective strategies to overcome this problem and improve students' communication skills in the future.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Concept of the term factor**

According to Rundell (2003), the term factor refers to the influences, forces, or conditions that contribute to the occurrence or outcome of an event. Similarly, the term effect is considered the result of a specific influence. Taking this into consideration, the term factor can be seen as synonymous with cause, as it influences an outcome or leads to something happening. In the context of the research being discussed, the term factor is used to describe the causes and results behind the incorrect pronunciation of English words among 12<sup>th</sup>-grade students.

### **EFL**

According to Harmer (2007), EFL, which stands for English as a Foreign Language, refers to the teaching of English to students whose native language is not English and the learning of English in non-English-speaking countries.

Learning a foreign language is useful for activities such as tourism, communication with native speakers, and reading foreign newspapers. EFL learners are students who learn English in non-English-speaking countries, like Mozambican students who learn English in Mozambique. However, EFL teaching has its drawbacks, as students tend to be passive and rely on teachers to obtain information for learning. According to Krashen (Krashen, 1982, as cited in Peng, 2019; Ugiebeme, 2022), Chinese students are learning English but not acquiring it, as they can read and write but struggle with natural communication.

### ***Factors underlying EFL learners' inaccurate pronunciation***

#### **Age**

Zhang (2009) says that the age at which language learning begins is a significant factor in second language acquisition (SLA). Research indicates that younger individuals have a better ability to acquire a new language and achieve more accurate pronunciation compared to adults. Adults who start learning a foreign language are less likely to achieve

native-like proficiency, particularly in terms of pronunciation (Hietan, 2012; Akpan & Uko, 2019).

This age factor has a crucial impact on language learning, especially when it comes to acquiring good pronunciation, particularly in English (Eba, et al., 2015; Nwagbo & Okide, 2017; Akpan, 2017). Starting language learning at an early age enhances the likelihood of attaining native-like pronunciation. There is a specific period, known as the Critical Period Hypothesis, during which language acquisition is easier, ending at approximately 12 years old. Beyond this period, language learning becomes increasingly difficult. These findings emphasize the importance of early language learning for mastery of pronunciation in a target language (Lenneberg, 1967, as cited in Ahmadi, 2011; Akpan, 2013).

### **Personality**

According to Zang (2009), personality plays a role in language acquisition, specifically in pronunciation. Extroverted individuals are more likely to have better pronunciation skills because they are sociable, courageous, talkative, expressive, and actively participate in activities.

This phenomenon can be observed in various settings, such as schools and classrooms. Introverted individuals, who are generally quieter and less likely to engage with others, may struggle with pronunciation as they are less exposed to the target language. On the other hand, extroverted individuals are more likely to interact with others and actively listen, consequently improving their pronunciation skills (Ndum & Tabi, 2021). In conclusion, personality traits, particularly an extroverted nature, can influence language learners' ability to acquire accurate pronunciation.

### **Amount of exposure**

According to Kenworthy (1988) and Yoshida (2009), the amount of exposure to English is a key factor in pronunciation learning. Students who live in an English-speaking country and have more opportunities to hear and imitate the language are more likely to acquire good pronunciation. However, it is not only about being in an English-speaking country but also about spending time with competent English speakers. Even if someone lives in a non-English-speaking country, if they have regular contact with someone who speaks good English, they can still develop good pronunciation. The amount of time spent listening to and imitating the sounds, intonation, and other aspects of pronunciation is crucial. Therefore, increasing exposure to English in daily life is important for improving pronunciation skills.

### **Motivation**

Motivation is a crucial factor in language learning. When students are highly motivated, they are more likely to work hard and achieve good pronunciation. Conversely, students with lower motivation may struggle to improve (Zhang, 2009).

There are two types of motivation: extrinsic and intrinsic. Extrinsic motivation is influenced by external factors such as society, family, and colleagues. This motivation is brought into the classroom from outside. Intrinsic motivation, on the other hand, is generated by what happens inside the classroom, particularly the teacher's methods (Harmer, 2001). The distinction between these two types of motivation is important as it highlights the role of both external and internal factors in driving students' motivation to learn a language. By understanding and leveraging these motivations, teachers can create a positive and productive learning environment that enhances students' language learning experience.

According to research, students' attitude and sense of identity play a crucial role in determining the accuracy of their pronunciation (Zhang, 2009). If students have a negative attitude or prejudices towards the target language and community, it can hinder their language learning progress. Identity is an important factor when learning a second language, as some individuals may fear losing their identity and therefore tend to speak the target language like their mother tongue, Yoshida (2009). Lack of empathy and identification with the target culture can also inhibit the learning process. On the other hand, having a positive attitude towards other cultures can greatly enhance language learning, particularly in terms of pronunciation. It is important to acknowledge these factors and promote a positive attitude towards the target language and culture to facilitate the development of accurate pronunciation skills (Yule, 2010).

### **Native Language of the students**

According to Ahmadi (2011), mispronunciations by non-native speakers are influenced by the sounds, rules, emphasis, and intonation of their native language. The influence of the first language (L1) on second language (L2) learning can be either positive or negative, depending on whether the sounds are similar or different. This phenomenon is known as language transfer. Yule (1996) defines transfer as using sounds, expressions, or structures from the L1 when speaking the L2.

Therefore, it can be concluded that when the L1 is significantly different from the target language, especially in terms of sound production, it is more challenging for students to produce sounds like native speakers. However, if there are similar sounds, students are more likely to produce sounds similar to those of native speakers.

### **Strategies used by teachers to teach EFL students' pronunciation**

Kenworthy (1988) reveals that the strategies used by teachers to teach EFL students pronunciation include focusing on three areas: sound, pitch, and intonation, and stress symbols. Sound refers to the individual phonemes that make up words, while stress involves emphasizing certain syllables in polysyllabic words. Stress symbols, such as (') and (,), are used to indicate where the stress or emphasis should be placed within a word (Harmer, 1998). There are two types of stress—primary and secondary—with the primary stress being the stronger and longer-emphasized part of a word. Some longer words may have both a primary and secondary stress. Not all words carry stress symbols, particularly one-syllable words, which are naturally emphasized when pronounced. Pitch refers to the level at which someone speaks, while intonation is the melody of speech that conveys meaning. Intonation is like the music of speech, having the rise and *fall* of voice as well as having effect on the meaning.

These strategies are important for EFL students to understand and employ proper pronunciation in English.

### **How to teach pronunciation**

Yoshida (2009) says that teaching pronunciation can be challenging and requires technical knowledge of phonology, an understanding of potential student difficulties, and a range of strategies, tools, and activities to support learning. Baker and Westrup (2000) suggest that the phonetic alphabet's 44 sounds can help students read any word and improve pronunciation skills through the use of a dictionary, which often includes a phonetic transcription. Learning the phonetic symbols well empowers learners to independently work on their pronunciation outside of the classroom. Maxom (2009) discusses the 44 individual sounds in the English language, which are categorized into single vowels, double vowels, and consonants. Understanding these sounds is crucial for developing accurate pronunciation. By incorporating the phonetic alphabet and utilizing

the resources available, teachers can effectively teach pronunciation and provide students with the tools to further enhance their pronunciation skills.

However, the best way to teach pronunciation, according to Baker & Westrup (2000) and Harmer (1990), is for the teacher to pronounce the words clearly and for the students to imitate them without using phonetic symbols. Thus, it is important for teachers to have a good understanding of English pronunciation in order to provide an accurate model for students. Gilakjani (2017) suggests that teachers should know information about pronunciation, understand potential difficulties for students, use different learning methods, keep lessons practical, adapt teaching methods to students' needs, emphasize the importance of accurate pronunciation, and provide opportunities for communicative practice. It is also important for students to learn that slow speech with good pronunciation is preferable to fast speech with incorrect pronunciation. By following these guidelines, teachers can effectively teach pronunciation to their students and help them overcome any difficulties they may have.

### **Effective activities to improve EFL learners' pronunciation**

In order to improve EFL learners' pronunciation, Baker and Westrup (2000) suggest several effective activities. "Stress word bingo" involves students choosing a word from a table and finding the stressed syllable on another table. "Minimum pair" activities introduce students to words with similar sounds to help them identify differences. Reading words, expressions, and sentences allows students to listen to the teacher and underline the stressed syllable. Sentence accentuation teaches students how the meaning of a sentence can change by emphasizing a specific syllable. Question and answer activities involve one student asking questions from a list while the other provides corresponding answers. Lastly, listening and repeating activities use models provided by the teacher or other sources for students to imitate accurately. These activities aim to enhance pronunciation skills by focusing on stress, sounds, and imitation.

### **Role of teachers and students**

According to Kenworthy (1988), teachers have to: help students listen to different sounds, make different sounds, design activities, give feedback, and evaluate students' pronunciation progress, while the students' role is to respond positively to the teachers' activities. Therefore, if students respond positively to the teacher's activity, progress can be made.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The research in question adopted an interpretive paradigm and a qualitative approach to explore the factors affecting the mispronunciation of English words in communication by EFL learners. The interpretive paradigm assumes that knowledge and meaning are acts of interpretation and that reality is socially constructed (Antwi and Kasim, 2015). This paradigm allowed the researcher to interpret the data according to the context and the experiences of the teacher and students. The qualitative approach was used to understand the experiences and perspectives of the participants through non-numerical data collected in their natural environment (Kauark et al., 2010 as cited in Momade, 2021).

The case study research method was chosen to obtain an in-depth understanding of the factors, combining semi-structured interviews, document analysis, and observation techniques. The study included 10 students of 12<sup>th</sup> grade and 1 English language teacher as participants, selected through probabilistic sampling, as all participants had an equal chance of being selected. The aim was to gather effective information about the factors influencing mispronunciation. The data collection process took place over a two-week

period, with the teacher being observed teaching English for four lessons in the first week and all the students being interviewed in the second week. The findings were presented in narrative form, without the use of statistical figures or percentages.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **The factors underlying EFL learners' inaccurate pronunciation**

The key factors underlying EFL students' incorrect pronunciation are lack of interest in learning the language, interference from the mother tongue, lack of practice, lack of knowledge, lack of school equipment for teaching pronunciation, and teachers' teaching methodologies.

Lack of interest in learning the language itself is a factor that depends on how teachers motivate their students. Motivation plays a crucial role in language learning, and highly motivated students are more likely to acquire good pronunciation (Harmer, 2001). The interference of the mother tongue is another factor that affects pronunciation, as non-native speakers often reflect the influence of their first language on sounds, rules, emphasis, and intonation (Ahmadi, 2011; Ugiebeme & Echeng, 2024). Lack of practice and knowledge are also fundamental factors, as without practice and knowledge, improvement in pronunciation is not possible (Yoshida, 2009). Teachers should make efforts to encourage students to speak English and analyze how the mother tongue interferes with their pronunciation in order to develop effective strategies to overcome these challenges.

### **The strategies used by the teachers to teach EFL learners' pronunciation**

The results of a study on the strategies used by teachers to teach pronunciation to English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners indicate that pronunciation is not taught as a standalone topic. Instead, repetition and repetition-after-me strategies are commonly used by teachers to teach pronunciation. However, this approach has limitations, and it would be beneficial for teachers to have dedicated time to discuss pronunciation and its role in effective communication. Additionally, teachers should provide various pronunciation activities throughout their lessons to help students improve.

According to Kenworthy (1988), teachers should help students listen to and produce different sounds, design activities, give feedback, and evaluate pronunciation progress, while students should respond positively to these activities. It is also important for teachers to be good role models in pronunciation, as students often imitate their teachers' pronunciation. Baker & Westrup (2000) suggest utilizing strategies such as word bingo stress, minimum pair activities, reading words, phrases, and sentences, sentence stress activities, and question and answer activities to develop students' pronunciation at different stages of the teaching and learning process. Teachers should be dynamic and active in their approach to teaching pronunciation and not be limited to repetitive activities.

### **Effective activities to improve EFL learners' pronunciation**

The results reveal that the effectiveness of various activities in improving the pronunciation of EFL learners has been highlighted. These activities include word bingo, minimal pairs, phonics tables, listening and repetition exercises, as well as question and answer activities. Proper pronunciation is considered crucial for effective communication, and teachers are encouraged to integrate these activities into their lessons. It has been emphasized that good pronunciation is essential, as students who can write proficiently often struggle with speaking (Maxom, 2009).

Teachers are responsible for providing a dynamic learning environment and serving as role models for pronunciation (Imbua & Tabi, 2019). While Received Pronunciation

(RP) is suggested as an ideal model due to its lack of geographical accent, it is acknowledged that few teachers naturally speak with this accent. As a result, teachers are advised to be familiar with different English varieties and tailor their instruction to meet the specific needs of their students, emphasizing accuracy and understanding of various pronunciations (Kelly, 2000).

Teachers should focus on teaching accurate pronunciation rather than worrying about whether it is American or British. The key is to ensure that students can produce the sounds correctly through various activities. Students learn best through hands-on experience and are motivated by dynamic teachers who take responsibility for helping them speak effectively (Kelly, (2000). Teachers need to invest in their own pronunciation knowledge to be effective as role models for their students. However, there are challenges in teaching pronunciation, such as difficulties in understanding intonation and producing certain sounds that are unique to English. To overcome these challenges, teachers should demonstrate correct pronunciation using gestures that show how the sounds are produced. It is crucial for teachers to master pronunciation themselves in order to effectively teach their students (Baker & Westrup, 2000).

## **CONCLUSION**

This study aimed to identify the factors that contribute to incorrect pronunciation in EFL students at Nampula Secondary School. The research found that the main factors include a lack of interest in learning their own language, interference from their mother tongue, limited practice, insufficient knowledge, inadequate equipment for teaching pronunciation, and ineffective teaching methods.

The study highlights that teachers should not solely rely on repetition strategies and “repetition after me” techniques for teaching pronunciation but instead focus on individual pronunciation problems and utilize various activities to develop students' pronunciation skills. It suggests that pronunciation should be given more attention in the curriculum, with dedicated time and activities for pronunciation instruction.

Additionally, the study emphasizes the need for appropriate equipment and resources to effectively teach pronunciation and the importance of incorporating activities like word bingo, minimal pair exercises, phonics tables, listening and repetition tasks, and question and answer activities. Overall, teachers should make use of their knowledge and diversify their approach to pronunciation teaching in order to see improvements in students' pronunciation abilities.

## **RECOMMENDATION**

The recommendations put forth in this study are aimed at the government, teachers, and students.

### **For the government**

- For the government, it is suggested that public schools be equipped with language materials specifically designed for teaching pronunciation. Additionally, qualified and experienced English language teachers should be hired, with a focus on their proficiency in teaching pronunciation.

### **For teachers**

- Teachers themselves are encouraged to incorporate pronunciation content into their lesson plans, select appropriate activities and materials to help students improve their pronunciation, sensitize students to activities outside of school that can enhance their pronunciation, motivate students to use the English language, correct pronunciation mistakes in a constructive manner, and provide opportunities for interactive language use in the classroom.

## For students

- Lastly, students are urged to take responsibility for their learning by applying the language skills learned in the classroom to activities outside of it, such as listening to English radio programs, writing notes in English, and reading books in English, in order to improve their pronunciation.

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