

Exploring Effective Approaches to Pronunciation Instruction in Foreign Language Learning: A Case Study in English Language Teaching in Ecuadorian Public Schools

Exploración de enfoques eficaces para la enseñanza de la pronunciación en el aprendizaje de lenguas extranjeras: un estudio de caso en la enseñanza del inglés en escuelas públicas ecuatorianas

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Abstract

This research aimed to explore the most effective methods for teaching pronunciation in English as a foreign language to Ecuadorian students aged 15 to 16. The study collected the thoughts of twenty English teachers working in public and private schools, collected through questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. The main aim is to identify the most frequent phonological errors among learners, as well as the pedagogical strategies that teachers consider most appropriate to remedy them. Preliminary results show that learners have particular difficulties with certain phonemes absent from their mother tongue, as well as with intonation, rhythm and shape reduction. In response to these challenges, teachers recommend activities such as guided repetition, active listening, the use of minimal pairs, and the integration of corrective phonetics into lessons. The study also highlights the importance of student motivation and institutional context in learning pronunciation. In conclusion, this research suggests ways to improve teacher training and promote a more systematic and conscious approach to pronunciation in the EFL classroom in Ecuador.

Keywords: Phonological acquisition; Pronunciation; English as a foreign language; Phonetic mistakes; Teaching strategies

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Resumen

Esta investigación pretende explorar los métodos más eficaces para enseñar la pronunciación del inglés como lengua extranjera a estudiantes ecuatorianos de 15 a 16 años. El estudio se basa en las respuestas de veinte profesores de inglés que trabajan en escuelas públicas y privadas, recogidas a través de cuestionarios y entrevistas semiestructuradas. El objetivo principal es identificar los errores fonológicos más frecuentes entre los alumnos, así como las estrategias pedagógicas que los profesores consideran más adecuadas para subsanarlos. Los resultados preliminares muestran que los alumnos tienen especiales dificultades con ciertos fonemas ausentes en su lengua materna, así como con la entonación, el ritmo y la reducción de formas. Para responder a estas dificultades, los profesores recomiendan actividades como la repetición guiada, la escucha activa, el uso de pares mínimos y la integración de la fonética correctiva en las clases. El estudio también destaca la importancia de la motivación del alumno y del contexto institucional en el aprendizaje de la pronunciación. En conclusión, esta investigación sugiere formas de mejorar la formación de los profesores y promover un enfoque más sistemático y consciente de la pronunciación en el aula de EFL en Ecuador.

Palabras clave: Adquisición fonológica; Pronunciación; Inglés como lengua extranjera; Errores fonéticos; Estrategias de enseñanza

Introduction

The acquisition of phonological skills in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) has become a topic of interest in research on second languages. Students, particularly younger ones, often encounter challenges in mastering the sounds of the English language because there are differences between the phonological systems of their native language and those of the English language, understanding these challenges to develop effective strategies is crucial to facilitate language acquisition and improve communication skills in general.

Research by (2014) and Smith (2016), highlights the importance of phonological acquisition in young English learners who have it as a foreign language, emphasizing its role in linguistic competence in general. On the other hand, studies by Johnson in 2015 and Lee in 2017 have shown that phonological skills are closely linked to reading and writing skills, which shows the need for specific interventions that improve phonological acquisition in younger students.

On the other hand, the teaching of pronunciation in the acquisition of foreign languages has been widely studied and debated in the field of applied linguistics and languages, in recent research the importance of accurate pronunciation for effective communication has been recognized since this directly influences intelligibility as well as comprehensibility (Celce-Murcia et al., 2010). Despite the growing attention to this topic, the teaching of pronunciation is often relegated to a secondary level in educational programs, especially in environments where English is learned as a foreign language (EFL).

At the international level, there are studies that explore the benefits of incorporating explicit strategies in pronunciation instruction in the classroom, these studies show that systematic phonetic and phonological instruction together with the use of technology and interactive practices improves intelligibility as well as students' auditory perception (Gordillo, 2020). On the other hand, the research carried out by Neri et. al. (2008), which analyzes the impact of using technology when teaching pronunciation to students of English as a Foreign Language, researchers imple-

ment speech recognition software and interactive feedback exercises, in the results of this research it is found that students who received technology-assisted instruction significantly improve their intelligibility and pronunciation compared to those who they followed traditional methods. Similarly, in the study by Saito et. al. (2017), it was investigated how explicit phonetic and phonological instruction when combined with auditory perception exercises and educative feedback contribute to the improvement of pronunciation in students of English as a second language, the results of this research indicate that participants who were involved in explicit instruction improve producing specific sounds in English and useful improvements are noted in the perception of phonetic differences which increases its intelligibility in general. Also, approaches such as phonological awareness and corrective feedback have been proven to be effective in improving the pronunciation of EFL students (Levis, 2018). It is important to point out that much of this research was carried out in countries where English has a greater presence, leaving a gap in the study of this phenomenon in Latin American contexts.

Within the local context in Ecuador, English has taken on a fundamental role in the educational system as a key skill for globalization and professional development. since 2016, the implementation of the English curriculum by the Ministry of Education has made efforts to strengthen the communicative competence of students (Ministry of Education of Ecuador, 2016), also in previous studies it was shown that teachers tend to concentrate on grammatical and written instruction, very often neglecting pronunciation (Cevallos and Tovar, 2018). The lack of emphasis on pronunciation results in students not achieving intelligibility, which affects their confidence and fluency in oral communication (Derwing & Munro, 2015).

In the country, the teaching of pronunciation has several challenges such as the lack of specialized training in phonetics and phonology for English teachers in the public sector. according to the study by Cando and Herrera (2019), Many teachers do not consider themselves to be adequately prepared to teach pronunciation effectively and since their training was prioritized in grammar and writing, the limitations of time in the classroom, the large size of classes and the lack of adequate technology must also be considered, which hinder the implementation of innovative strategies for teaching pronunciation.

Another recurrent problem to consider is the influence that the mother tongue has on the pronunciation of English, as in other Spanish-speaking contexts, Ecuadorian students have difficulties in certain phonemes of the English language that do not exist in Spanish, such as the sounds: /θ/ and /ð/ sounds in “think” and “this”, respectively, which leads to systematic errors in pronunciation that affect speech intelligibility (Arteaga, 2019).

Some studies address the challenges of teaching English in Ecuador but little focus specifically on pronunciation, which generates a gap in research on how public-school teachers perceive the teaching of pronunciation, what are the strategies they use and which are considered most effective, there is also not enough information on the barriers faced by both teachers students in this field. For example, the study by Mendoza et al. (2024), analyzes the perceptions of Ecuadorian

teachers about teaching pronunciation in the classroom of EFL using surveys and interviews, it is found that most teachers consider pronunciation as an important aspect but admit that not enough time is dedicated to it in curricular planning due to a lack or lack of specific training. They also point out that there are no pedagogical resources in public institutions to address the teaching of pronunciation effectively.

In the same vein, Salazar and Carrión (2021), examined the different strategies used by English teachers in Ecuador to teach pronunciation and the barriers they face, as a result it was obtained that many teachers rely on traditional methods and lack phonetic and phonological training applied to teaching, it was also identified that the main barriers include the lack of time in the curriculum and the scarcity of technological resources and appropriate materials in the classroom.

Within this context, the present study aims to close the gaps that exist in research using a detailed analysis of pronunciation teaching practices in Ecuadorian public schools, specifically this research explores methodologies used by teachers to teach pronunciation, with the intention of identifying the main challenges they face, determining strategies that could improve pronunciation teaching in the classroom. To achieve this objective, a qualitative approach was used that involved interviews and surveys of English teachers in public schools, through this methodology the study provides a deep understanding of the reality of teaching pronunciation in these environments to generate recommendations regarding its improvement. It is believed that the findings of this study will be valuable not only for teachers and curriculum designers but also for policy-makers interested in improving English language teaching in the country.

Theoretical Framework

The teaching of pronunciation in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) is tangled with various learning theories and linguistic models that explain the way in which students acquire phonological skills. In this section, the main theories that support the study of phonological acquisition in Ecuadorian students will be presented, which inform pronunciation instructional strategies.

The Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH)

The Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH) (Lenneberg, 1967), suggests that there exists a window that occurs during early childhood in which individuals acquire phonological aspects of a language with competence similar to the native language. After this period, this phonological acquisition is more challenging because neuroplasticity decreases, this theory has direct implications for Ecuadorian public schools, in which students begin to learn English. At different ages, which can affect their pronunciation skills (Abrahamsson & Hyltenstam, 2009), it is mentioned that adolescents in Ecuadorian public institutions can still have an improvement in their pronunciation with training. However, they still have difficulty developing phonetic accuracy similar to those who are native of the target language.

Theories of Second Language Acquisition (SLA)

Within the field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA), theoretical support was provided in the teaching of pronunciation, among the most relevant are:

- Krashen's Input Hypothesis (1982): This theory emphasizes the how important comprehensible input is in the learning of a second language, in which it is mentioned that students who are exposed to a spoken language acquire a pronunciation slightly above their current level. In Ecuadorian schools, limited exposure to authentic pronunciation models presents a challenge (Lightbown & Spada, 2013).
- Interactionist Theories (Long, 1996): Within the context of second language acquisition, Long's interaction hypothesis highlights the role that meaningful interaction plays during pronunciation development, opportunities for conversational practice, corrective feedback, and phonetic modeling are necessary elements to improve pronunciation skills (Gass and Mackey, 2007). The country's public schools, due to class sizes and limited communicative activities, make pronunciation-focused interaction difficult.

The Role of Phonological Awareness and Explicit Instruction

The ability to recognize and manipulate sound patterns, known as phonological awareness is a primary factor in the development of pronunciation (Yopp & Yopp, 2000). Phonetic characteristics within teaching, such as minimal pairs and articulation techniques, give a significant improvement to pronunciation in students of English as a foreign language (Celce-Murcia et. al., 2010). Also, the study by Derwing and Munro (2015), shows that explicitly training pronunciation in the long run is more effective than implicit pronunciation alone.

Literature Review

Language acquisition data are commonly considered to provide decisive evidence for linguistic theory, while not playing a critical role in phonological theory. However, the main goal of linguistics is to comprehend the nature of language knowledge and its acquisition (taking into account the entire system of a language: morphology, syntax, phonology, semantics, and pragmatics). Chomsky (2004), stressed the importance of understanding how the lexicon develops and what lexical representations entail, which is crucial for understanding syntactic knowledge. This principle extends in a similar way to phonology, gaining insight into the formation of phonological representations, which is essential for understanding phonological knowledge and acquisition. In Chomsky's view, the growth of the mental lexicon is closely intertwined with phonological knowledge and representation. In the process of acquiring a language, phonological development develops together with success since these two processes are interconnected. Children not only

learn words with meanings but also how to pronounce them correctly, this process involves acquiring knowledge about the sounds of the language, the structures of syllables, phonotactic rules and phonemes.

The storage of phonological representations of words known as the mental lexicon includes information about their sound structure, the stress of syllables and phonetic characteristics. These forms of representation are necessary to recognize and produce words accurately. For example, knowing phonological representation allows a speaker to distinguish between similar words that are different in their pronunciation, such as “cat” and “bat” (Saussure, 1961).

To understand the grammar of the language it is important to have phonological knowledge since phonological rules and patterns can affect the pronunciation of words and the structure of sentences. For example, in English, the plural form of nouns is often marked by adding a /z/ sound (e.g., “cats”), which is a phonological rule that speakers must learn.

In essence, understanding how the mental lexicon develops and what lexical representations entail is crucial to phonology because phonological knowledge is an integral part of the mental lexicon. Phonological representations of words play a crucial role at processing language, speech production, and the overall acquisition of language proficiency.

Despite the numerous studies that provide information on phonological acquisition, the study of phonological acquisition does not have a more central involvement in phonological theory. Several factors contribute to this. According to Fikkert (2000), firstly, phonological theories have evolved over the decades, which has led to changes in the approach of acquisition studies. Second, the lack of comprehensive longitudinal database analyses and the absence of complementary experiments have limited the broader impact of data on children’s language. In addition, most studies tend to investigate specific phenomena in the linguistic data of children and young people, such as group reduction or consonant harmony, without considering these phenomena in the context of the development of the phonological system as a whole.

The most recent research on the teaching of pronunciation in English classrooms reveals several challenges and strategies that are key in improving phonological acquisition. Baker (2014), explored various pronunciation teaching practices in different EFL settings, showing that teachers frequently neglect pronunciation due to time constraints, lack of assessment tools, and lack of materials. These results are in line with the Ecuadorian context where pronunciation is rarely emphasized within the curriculum. In the research of Loor et al. (2025), indicates that pronunciation is frequently mistreated in Ecuadorian classrooms because of various factors, including deficiencies in teacher training, limited curriculum, and limited pedagogical resources.

Similarly, Cevallos and Tovar (2018), state that a large part of English teachers in Ecuador do not considered themselves as adequately prepared to teach pronunciation in an effective way since they lack formal instruction in phonetics and phonology, revealing that teachers focus mainly on grammar and vocabulary, but not in pronunciation since these aspects emphasize standardized

assessments. In the same way, Carrasco and Gómez (2023), through the implementation of interviews with teachers and students found that many lack the confidence to teach pronunciation, where teachers indicated that they very rarely received training in phonological instruction during their professional preparation process, which often generates a dependence on traditional methods such as repetition, limiting the use of interactive or communicative techniques.

Although pronunciation teaching is limited in many Ecuadorian schools, there are studies that highlight effective strategies that are successfully implemented in the local context, such as the study conducted by Ortega and Benítez (2019), in the city of Quito in which the use of explicit phonetic instruction within the public education system was explored. reaching the conclusion that students who received systematic training in segmental and suprasegmental characteristics had a significant improvement in intelligibility. these results are aligned with international research that suggests that implementing explicit pronunciation training provides better results than implicit learning (Derwing & Munro, 2015).

In addition, López and Herrera (2022), in their study on the impact of corrective feedback in Ecuadorian secondary schools, found that students who received real-time phonetic corrections and feedback from their peers demonstrated greater accuracy in the production of sounds in English, so the authors recommend integrating formative pronunciation assessment within the curriculum with the intention of improving production skills of the students' speech.

The technological factor is another important point to consider as it improves pronunciation teaching by providing interactive and personalized learning experiences, as Lee (2021), indicates, when he explored the use of mobile applications in pronunciation training, observing that those students who used pronunciation applications showed an improvement compared to those who used the traditional classroom. Despite these benefits, public education in Ecuador faces technological limitations such as lack of access to computers, unreliable internet connections, and limited training of teachers regarding digital tools. However, Abad-Céleri et al. (2024), emphasize the lack of training of teachers in EFL on their pronunciation skills, which can limit their willingness to incorporate technology into the educational process, since if teachers are not comfortable with their own pronunciation, they may be hesitant to introduce technology-based pronunciation activities into the classroom. This suggests that digital pronunciation tools should be included in teacher training programs as part of phonetic and phonological teaching.

Metodología

Type of Study

The present study is carried out under a mixed methodological approach that combines both qualitative and quantitative data to have a deeper understanding of the effective approaches to teaching pronunciation in English learning, the qualitative methodology will allow an in-depth exploration of the didactic strategies and perceptions about teaching pronunciation while the

quantitative methodology will reveal through analysis the patterns of students' pronunciation difficulties and will evaluate the effectiveness of the applied approaches.

Study Sample

The study will be carried out in Ecuadorian public and private schools with a sample of English teachers (n=20), of which 15 belong to public institutions (five institutions) and 5 to private institutions (three schools), selected through a purposive sampling based on their experience in pronunciation teaching.

Data Collection Techniques

- Structured questionnaire applied to teachers.
- Semi-structured interviews with teachers to explore pedagogical strategies.

Data Analysis

- Questionnaires: A descriptive statistical analysis will be applied to identify patterns.
- Interviews: Content analysis will be used to categorize strategies and perceptions

Results

The teaching-learning process of foreign language pronunciation is the subject of constant debate within the field of applied linguistics and language didactics, in the Ecuadorian context the teaching of pronunciation within the classrooms of English as a foreign language (EFL) has significant challenges, especially in public schools where it is limited by factors inherent to the availability of resources. teacher training and methodologies that are used, influencing student results. This study examined the different didactic approaches implemented by English teachers in Ecuadorian public institutions in order to identify the different effective strategies and those areas of improvement in pronunciation teaching.

The results of this research arise from the analysis of interviews applied to teachers and the practical teaching evaluations observed in the classroom, with special emphasis on the identification of the most used strategies, the perception of teachers about the effectiveness and the difficulties that are recurrent and that both teachers and students face during the development of phonological competence. It also explores the different attitudes of teachers towards the explicit teaching of pronunciation and how it is integrated into the English curriculum.

The results are presented in a way that facilitates a detailed understanding of current practices and the impact on student learning with a view to serving as the basis for the formulation of

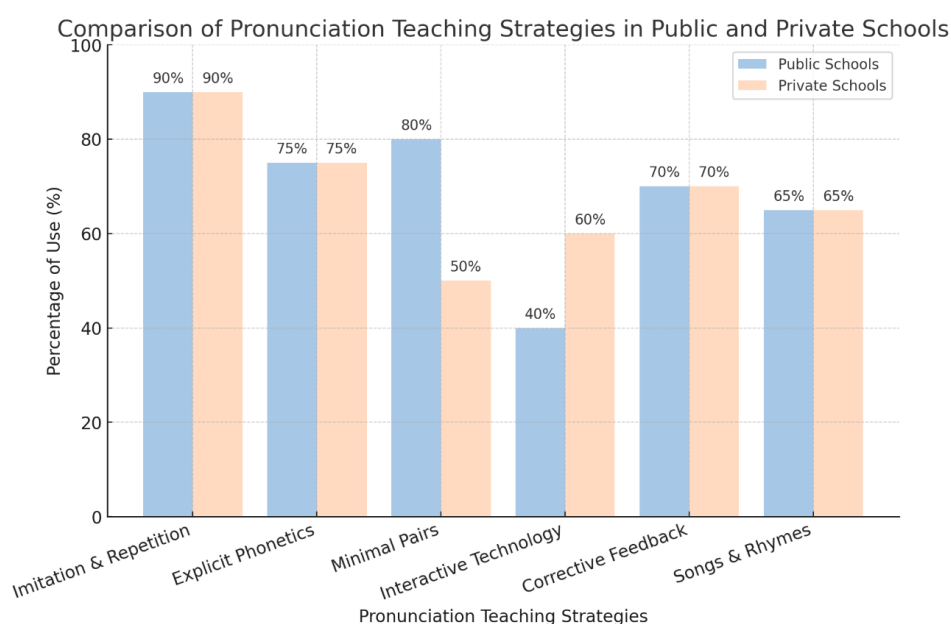
recommendations aimed at optimizing the process of teaching pronunciation in the Ecuadorian context of EFL.

For the results obtained presented below, it should be noted that the study was carried out by collecting information from a questionnaire applied to 20 teachers, of which 15 are part of public institutions (five institutions) and 5 are private institutions (three schools).

Approaches and strategies used in teaching pronunciation.

Figure 1 reveals that teachers in public and private institutions employ a combination of strategies to teach pronunciation. The most common technique used in both modalities is imitation and repetition (90%), followed by the use of explicit phonics (75%). In public institutions, the most common approach after these is the use of minimal pairs (80%), while in private institutions there is a greater use of interactive technologies (60%). Likewise, corrective feedback is used in 70% of the cases, and the use of songs and rhymes in 65%.

Figure 1. Comparison of Pronunciation Teaching Strategies in Public and Private Schools. Own source.

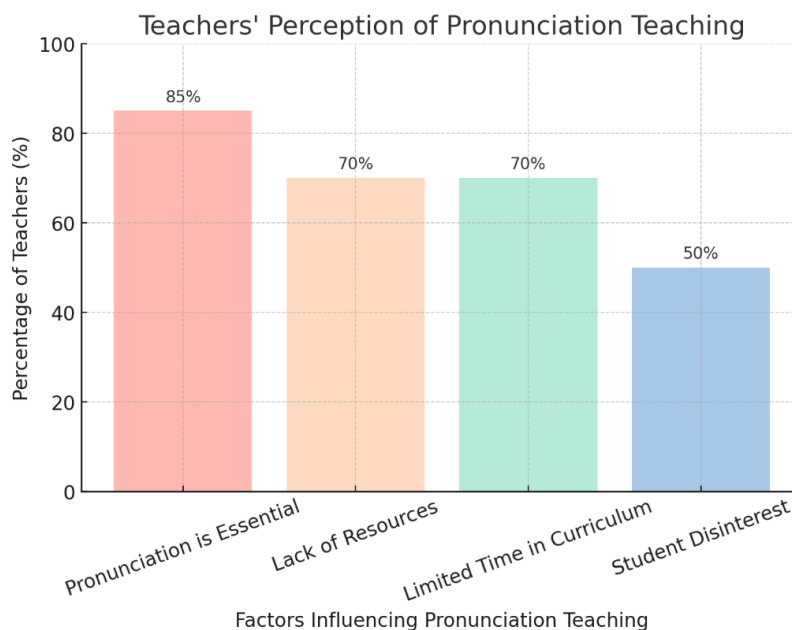


Source: own elaboration

Teachers' perceptions of pronunciation teaching.

Figure 2 illustrates that eighty-five percent of teachers consider the teaching of pronunciation to be a fundamental aspect in the development of communicative competence in English. However, 70% of teachers in public institutions mentioned that they face difficulties due to the lack of adequate resources and time in the curriculum. On the other hand, teachers in private institutions stated that they have more didactic tools, but that students do not always show interest in practicing pronunciation.

Figure 2. Teachers' perceptions of pronunciation teaching. Own source



Source: own elaboration

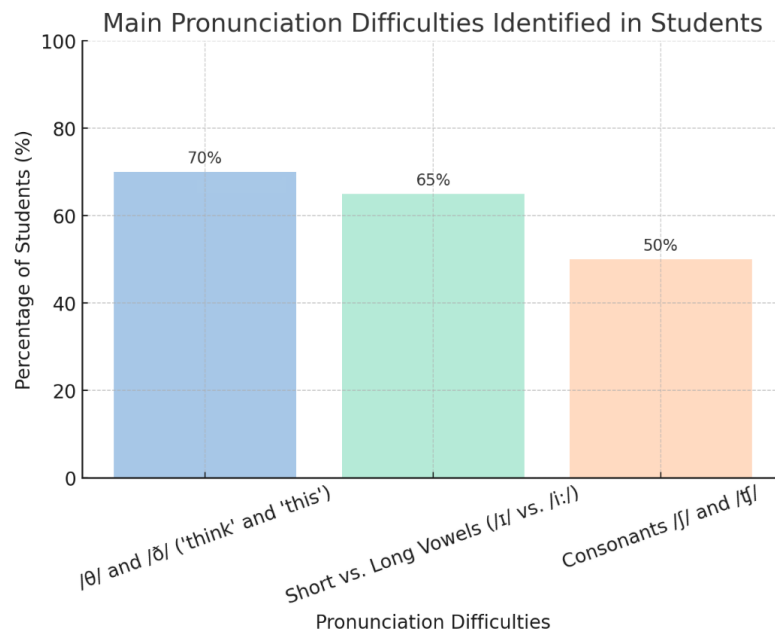
Main pronunciation difficulties identified in students.

Teachers identified the following pronunciation problems as the most frequent:

- Difficulty with phonemes /θ/ and /ð/ (as in “think” and “this”) (70%).
- Confusion between short and long vowels, such as /ɪ/ and /i:/ (65%).
- Problems with the articulation of consonants such as /ʃ/ and /tʃ/ (50%).

These errors were more pronounced in students from public institutions, which teachers attribute to less exposure to English outside the classroom. Figure 3 illustrates graphically these data.

Figure 3. Main pronunciation difficulties identified in students. Own source.



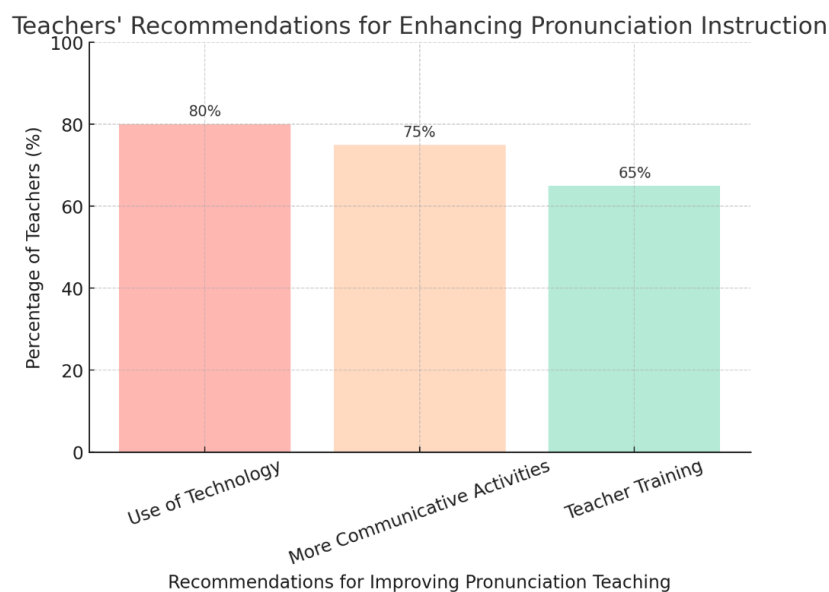
Source: own elaboration

Teachers' recommendations to improve the teaching of pronunciation

Among the recommendations most highlighted by teachers are:

- Incorporation of more technological tools for pronunciation practice (80%).
- Increased use of communicative activities that promote oral interaction (75%).
- Increased teacher training in innovative pronunciation teaching methodologies (65%).

Figure 4. Teacher's Recommendations for Enhancing Pronunciation Instruction. Own Source.



Source: own elaboration

The findings of this study reflect the importance of teaching pronunciation in English language learning and the challenges faced by teachers in this process. There is evidence of a preference for traditional methods complemented with technology in private institutions, while in public institutions, resource limitations are perceived. The most recurrent difficulties in pronunciation are related to the articulation of specific phonemes and lack of exposure to the language. Finally, teachers highlight the need to improve training in innovative methodologies and access to effective teaching tools. These results establish a basis for further discussion, where their implications will be analyzed in relation to previous studies and recommended pedagogical strategies.

Discussion

This study investigated effective approaches to teaching pronunciation in English learning in Ecuadorian public and private schools. The research question sought to identify the most effective methods to help students improve their pronunciation skills. The findings indicate that there is a combination of imitation and repetition, explicit phonetic instruction, and minimal pair exercises that are commonly used in all institutions. However, differences were also observed between public and private schools, with public schools relying more on traditional methods and private schools resorting to implementing technological approaches.

The results reveal the importance of pronunciation teaching in language learning, a fact that is emphasized by 85% of the teachers surveyed, in addition to the challenges identified as limited educational resources, lack of exposure to English outside the classroom and the difficulties of students with specific phonemes, highlight the complexity of achieving effective pronunciation learning results. Readers should bear in mind that the teaching of pronunciation has to be explicitly and integrated into broader communicative practices, through appropriate technological support and teacher training that addresses existing gaps.

Contextualizing Findings within Previous Research

Comparing these findings to existing literature, they align with studies that emphasize the role of phonetic instruction and repetition in pronunciation improvement (Celce-Murcia et al., 2010). Explicit phonetic instruction has been widely acknowledged as an effective strategy for teaching pronunciation (Derwing & Munro, 2015). The heavy reliance on imitation and minimal pairs in public schools aligns with previous research highlighting the accessibility and practicality of these methods in resource-limited settings (Foote et al., 2016).

On the other hand, the use of technology in pronunciation instruction—more prevalent in private schools—supports findings from research emphasizing the effectiveness of digital tools in facilitating pronunciation practice (Lord, 2008; Thomson & Derwing, 2014). The discrepancies between public and private institutions may be influenced by factors such as financial constraints, class sizes, and institutional support for innovation in pedagogy. Future research should focus on

exploring the effective integration of methodologies in the various educational contexts of foreign language teaching.

Unexpected Results and Their Interpretation

In the present research, two unexpected results were found, the first being related to the low participation of students in the practice of pronunciation despite having access to technological means in private schools, this is contrary to previous research that suggests that technology improves learning motivation (González-Lloret, 2018), the teachers surveyed in this study indicate that many of the students lack interest in pronunciation exercises, This discrepancy may be due to factors such as the student's low self-confidence for oral communication or limited extrinsic motivation.

The second result refers to the fact that corrective feedback, although widely used (70%), is not perceived as effective by teachers, being that they expressed their concern that excessive correction discourages students from participating in oral activities. this result suggests that it is necessary to strike a balance between corrective feedback and positive reinforcement with the idea of fostering a productive learning environment, this aligns with research on the affective impact of error correction on language learning (Sheen & Ellis, 2011).

Limitations of the Study

The study provides valuable information on pronunciation teaching approaches, but even so, limitations such as sample size must be recognized, which, although adequate to obtain qualitative information, is not fully representative of all Ecuadorian schools, so it is necessary that in the future the study can include a broader demographic to strengthen the generalization of the findings.

Second, reliance on self-reported data by teachers can lead to biases as responses reflect personal teaching philosophies rather than actual classroom practices.

Third, the study focused mainly on teachers' experiences and perspectives, and student feedback on pronunciation learning was a secondary component, including direct assessments of students as pre- and post-tests on pronunciation prediction to have a more complete assessment of instructional effectiveness.

Future Research Directions

Based on the findings of this study, it is recognized that the exploration of this topic should be deepened, it is advisable to first examine the long-term impact of the different methods of teaching pronunciation on student performance, particularly by comparing traditional techniques with those that use technology.

Second, it is motivated to investigate student participation in pronunciation practice in order to identify strategies that improve participation, and future studies may explore the integration of gamified learning elements or collaborative pronunciation exercises that lead to greater participation.

Third, due to the importance of teacher training, it is recommended in future research to evaluate the effectiveness of professional development programs in teaching pronunciation, and that they should explore how increased training influences teaching effectiveness and student outcomes.

Conclusion

The present study highlights the need for a balanced approach to pronunciation teaching that incorporates both explicit phonetic teaching and communicative practice, the existing evidence between the difference between public and private schools underscores the need for an equitable distribution of resources that give rise to professional development opportunities for teachers in all types of educational institutions.

The results also reaffirm the importance of pronunciation in English language proficiency suggesting that technological integration, corrective feedback strategies and innovative pedagogical approaches improve learning outcomes, as pronunciation remains a critical component within communicative competence it is necessary to explore and implement best practices that support effective instruction. The results of the present study contribute to expanding the discourse of pronunciation teaching and provide a solid basis for future research aimed at optimizing language teaching in various learning environments.

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Declaration

Conflict of interest

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