

More Than Grammar: Why Pronunciation Matters in English Education in India

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Abstract—This article argues that pronunciation should occupy a central place in English education in India rather than remain a marginal skill overshadowed by grammar, reading, and writing. Drawing on research in pronunciation pedagogy, intelligibility, Global Englishes, speech technology, and teacher education, it shows that effective pronunciation teaching supports not only clearer speech but also listening ability, classroom participation, and learner confidence. The article rejects the goal of native-speaker imitation and instead supports intelligibility and comprehensibility as more realistic and educationally sound aims for Indian learners. Furthermore, it underscores the legitimacy and diversity of Indian English, suggesting that pronunciation instruction should prioritize features that facilitate comprehension, rather than attempting to eliminate local linguistic characteristics. The examination reveals considerable challenges within Indian educational contexts, including an emphasis on examination performance, a lack of oral assessment, insufficient teacher preparation, and the marginalization of pronunciation instruction to infrequent correction or reading drills. Consequently, the article advocates for a comprehensive methodology that integrates segmental and suprasegmental instruction, perceptual training, connected speech exercises, communication strategies, consistent low-pressure speaking practice, and judicious technological integration. The research suggests that a more comprehensive and fair English language education in India requires systematic pronunciation instruction, meaningful assessments, and support through teacher training programs and policy changes.

Index Terms—comprehensibility, English education in India, Global Englishes, Indian English, intelligibility, oral communication, pronunciation assessment, pronunciation teaching, speech technology, teacher preparation

I. INTRODUCTION

English now moves through Indian classrooms, lecture halls, hospitals, offices, airports, coding teams, and social media spaces. For millions of learners, it is not just a school subject. It is a gatekeeper to higher education, work, mobility, and public confidence. Yet in many schools the version of English that is most rewarded is still written English. Students learn to memorise essays, answer grammar questions, and read passages for marks. When the same students have to speak, many hesitate. They know the words, but the words do not come out with enough clarity or confidence. One missing piece is pronunciation.

Pronunciation is often treated as a surface feature, almost like decoration. That view is bad teaching. In real communication, pronunciation carries meaning, pace, emphasis, attitude, and confidence. A learner may know the difference between “record” as a noun and “record” as a verb on paper, yet still confuse a listener if the stress falls on the wrong syllable. A student may write an intelligent answer in an exam but avoid speaking in class because classmates laugh when a sound comes out differently. These are not small problems. They shape participation and self-belief.

At the same time, pronunciation teaching has often been distorted by a weak goal: sounding “native”. That goal is unrealistic for most learners and unnecessary for good communication. Strong research in pronunciation teaching now places intelligibility and comprehensibility at the centre, not accent imitation. In other words, the aim is not to make Indian students sound British or American. The aim is to help them speak in ways that listeners can follow easily and to help them listen well across different English accents (Derwing and Munro; Council of Europe; Nagle).

This article argues that pronunciation deserves a central place in English education in India. It should not be pushed to the side after grammar, vocabulary, reading, and writing. A balanced approach that combines sound work, stress and intonation, listening practice, teacher preparation, and fair assessment can improve communication far more than occasional correction ever will. Recent research, including work on classroom instruction, speech technology, and accent diversity, makes that case even stronger (Saito and Plonsky; Ngo, Chen, and Lai; Jeong et al.).

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

For much of the history of English language teaching, pronunciation has swung between extremes. At some moments it was treated as the centre of the lesson through drills and repetition. At other moments it almost disappeared because communicative teaching was wrongly taken to mean that attention to sound should be minimal. Levis describes this movement as a shift in teaching paradigms, while Morley had already warned much earlier that pronunciation was too important to remain marginal. That warning still matters because many classrooms today remain communicative in theory but writing-led in practice (Levis; Morley).

The research base is now much stronger than it was two decades ago. A major meta-analysis by Saito and Plonsky found that pronunciation instruction has a positive effect across a range of measures, although results depend on what is taught and how improvement is measured. Nagle develops this point further and argues that the field no longer needs to keep proving that pronunciation teaching works in principle. The more useful question is how to make instruction optimal for different learners, contexts, and goals. This shift is important for schools because it moves the debate away from doubt and towards design. The issue is not whether pronunciation deserves time. The issue is how to teach it well inside real classroom constraints (Saito and Plonsky; Nagle). Recent classroom research supports an explicit and meaningful approach. Galante and Piccardo show that pronunciation work grows when learners are given space to notice speech patterns, practise them carefully, and then use them in controlled yet communicative tasks such as performance and drama. Their work is important because it breaks the false

choice between mechanical drilling and free speaking. Learners often need both: focused attention to form and then a chance to use that form with purpose. A similar point appears in Uchihara, Karas, and Thomson's meta-analysis, which shows that perception training can improve production. Learners frequently need to hear contrasts clearly before they can produce them reliably. Good pronunciation teaching, then, is not just speaking practice; it is also listening training (Galante and Piccardo; Uchihara, Karas, and Thomson).

Another strong theme in the literature is the gap between belief and practice. Teachers commonly say pronunciation matters, but many feel unprepared to teach it. Bai and Yuan found that teachers understood its value yet often lacked confidence, training, and practical classroom routines. More recent work in another EFL context by Algethami and Al Kamli shows a similar pattern: pronunciation is seen as important, but real instruction remains limited by time, textbooks, and teachers' own uncertainty. This matters in India because the same conditions are common in school education: crowded classes, mixed proficiency, exam pressure, and limited specialist training in phonetics. When teachers are unsure, pronunciation gets reduced to occasional correction or textbook reading aloud, neither of which is enough (Bai and Yuan; Algethami and Al Kamli).

Technology has opened a new front in the literature. Automatic speech recognition, mobile apps, and web-based tools can give learners more practice than classroom time alone allows. Ngo, Chen, and Lai's meta-analysis reports a medium overall effect for automatic speech recognition in pronunciation learning, with stronger outcomes when learners receive explicit corrective feedback and work over longer periods. Yet the research is not uniformly rosy. Amrate and Tsai's systematic review finds that many computer-assisted studies still focus mainly on individual sounds, adult learners, and drill-like tasks. Stoughton and Kang reach a similar conclusion in mobile-assisted pronunciation research: the evidence base is still quite small, and many studies do not address broader communication measures. McCrocklin and Levis therefore argue that technology should support pronunciation learning, not replace pedagogy. In school terms, apps can help, but they are not a curriculum (Ngo, Chen, and Lai; Amrate and Tsai; Stoughton and Kang; McCrocklin and Levis).

The most important development in recent work may be the move away from the native-speaker benchmark. The CEFR Companion Volume replaced older assumptions with a more realistic phonology scale that separates overall control, sound articulation, and prosody. This matters because it allows teachers to judge speech by clarity and control rather than by imitation of a prestige accent (Council of Europe). Research on Global Englishes supports the same direction. Jeong et al. show that even brief classroom work with diverse accents can improve both understanding and attitudes. For India, this is crucial. Students do not only speak to British or American listeners. They speak to other Indians, to other multilingual speakers, and to global interlocutors with different accents. Yet despite this reality, school-level research in the Indian context remains thinner than it should be. The intervention study by Prahaladaiah and Thomas is therefore valuable: it shows that explicit phonological and phonetic work can improve pronunciation and oral reading among teacher trainees in Bengaluru. The literature, taken together, does not support keeping pronunciation at the edge of the curriculum. It points in the opposite direction: towards planned, teachable, and context-sensitive work (Jeong et al.; Prahaladaiah and Thomas).

III. PRONUNCIATION, INTELLIGIBILITY, AND IDENTITY

Any serious discussion of pronunciation in India must begin with a basic truth: Indian English is real, legitimate, and internally varied. There is no single Indian accent. Speech differs across regions, languages, social histories, and educational backgrounds. Wiltshire shows that Indian English includes both shared patterns and substantial variation in consonants, vowels, stress, intonation, and rhythm. This matters because pronunciation teaching can easily become harmful when it treats all local features as errors. A school system should not tell students that sounding Indian is a defect. It should help them understand which features reduce intelligibility in wider communication and which simply mark identity or local variety (Wiltshire).

This is why intelligibility is a better goal than accent reduction. Intelligibility asks a practical question: can a listener understand what the speaker says? Comprehensibility asks another: how easy is that

speech to process? These questions are more humane and more useful than asking whether the speaker sounds like an imagined native model. They also fit Indian reality better. A student from Kerala speaking to a classmate from Bihar, a nursing student speaking to a patient, and an engineer speaking in an online meeting all need speech that is clear, paced well, and easy to follow. They do not need to sound imported. Pronunciation teaching should therefore target meaning-bearing features such as key sounds, word stress, sentence stress, pausing, and repair strategies (Derwing and Munro; Council of Europe).

There is another reason to avoid narrow accent goals: communication is shared work. The burden should not sit entirely on the speaker. Listeners also need training to cope with accent diversity. When classrooms expose students only to one prestige accent, they prepare them badly for the world they will actually enter. The findings from Jeong et al. suggest that learners' understanding and attitudes can improve when they hear a wider range of English voices. In India this point is especially relevant because students already live in a multilingual ecology. Pronunciation teaching should therefore include both speaking for clarity and listening for flexibility. That combination is more realistic, more inclusive, and more educationally honest (Jeong et al.).

IV. WHY THE INDIAN CLASSROOM STILL STRUGGLES

If the value of pronunciation seems obvious, why does it still sit at the margin? One reason is simple: what gets tested gets taught. In many Indian schools, written English still dominates formal assessment. Marks come from grammar, reading comprehension, writing tasks, and memorised content. Speaking is either absent, lightly weighted, or treated as a general performance skill rather than a teachable language component. In such a system pronunciation becomes invisible. A teacher rushing to finish the syllabus is unlikely to spend ten minutes on stress patterns or connected speech when those features do not appear directly in high-stakes exams. The result is predictable. Students learn about English more than they learn to use it aloud.

A second reason is teacher preparation. Many English teachers work hard and care deeply about their

students, but they may not have had structured training in phonetics, phonology, or pronunciation pedagogy. Without that base, correction becomes inconsistent. Some teachers over-correct tiny accent differences that do not matter. Others avoid correction altogether because they fear embarrassing students or exposing their own uncertainty. In large classes, the challenge grows. It is hard to hear individual learners closely, and harder still to give focused feedback when forty or fifty students need attention. Mixed-language classrooms add another layer, because learners bring different sound systems and different recurring problems.

A third reason is that pronunciation is often misunderstood. Reading a passage aloud is sometimes treated as pronunciation teaching. It is not. A child can read a paragraph fluently and still place stress oddly, merge sounds that change meaning, or use flat intonation that makes speech hard to follow. In the same way, asking students to “repeat after me” once or twice is not enough. Pronunciation changes through careful noticing, repeated practice, feedback, and use in real communication. It also depends on listening. If students rarely hear good models, compare speech patterns, or record themselves, progress stays slow. This is why ad hoc correction seldom works.

Policy documents now create some room for change. The National Education Policy 2020 repeatedly stresses foundational language abilities, oral language development, and teacher preparation, which together support a stronger place for speaking in education (Ministry of Education). Yet policy language alone does not change classroom habits. Schools still need timetabled speaking work, teacher support, and assessment tools that make pronunciation visible. Until pronunciation is named in lesson planning, reflected in rubrics, and supported with materials, it will remain the part of English teaching that everybody says is important and almost nobody teaches well.

The cost of this neglect is not only linguistic. It is social and emotional. Students who are laughed at for how they say a word often start speaking less, not more. Some become dependent on memorised sentences because spontaneous speech feels risky. Others carry the idea that their English is “bad” even when their vocabulary and ideas are strong. Pronunciation teaching, when handled sensibly, can

reduce this fear. It gives students a way to improve something concrete. More importantly, it tells them that spoken English is learnable, not a gift some people are simply born with.

V. WHAT TEACHERS SHOULD ACTUALLY TEACH

If pronunciation deserves more time, what exactly should schools teach? The first answer is balance. Good pronunciation instruction combines segmental features, suprasegmental features, listening, and communicative use. Celce-Murcia, Brinton, and Goodwin argue for this broader model, and later work continues to support it. The point is not to turn every English lesson into a phonetics class. The point is to build a small, steady strand within ordinary teaching (Celce-Murcia, Brinton, and Goodwin; Nagle).

At the segmental level, teachers should focus on sounds that repeatedly affect meaning or cause confusion for their learners. In Indian classrooms these may include vowel length contrasts, distinctions between closely related consonants, final consonants, and consonant clusters. The exact targets will vary by learner background, which is why diagnosis matters. What matters most is that sound work should stay meaningful. Minimal pairs still have a place, but they work best when linked to vocabulary, sentences, and real communication. Students need to hear the contrast, say it, and then use the word in context.

Suprasegmental work is just as important, and in many cases more important. English meaning often depends on where stress falls, how the voice rises or falls, which words are emphasised, and where a speaker pauses. Gilbert’s work on prosody remains useful here because it reminds teachers that English has a strong rhythm and “music”. A sentence can contain all the right words and still sound confusing if the stress is misplaced. Learners therefore need explicit work on word stress, sentence stress, rhythm, and intonation, especially in common classroom genres such as giving an opinion, asking for clarification, presenting information, or reading dialogue aloud (Gilbert; Derwing and Munro).

Schools should also teach connected speech. Real spoken English is not a chain of isolated words. Sounds link across word boundaries. Weak forms appear in frequent function words. Speakers chunk information, reduce some sounds, and use pausing

strategically. When students only encounter citation forms from dictionaries, they may understand written English far better than spoken English. Teaching connected speech does not mean demanding fast or slurred delivery. It means helping learners notice how ordinary speech works so that listening and speaking support each other. Simple tools, including the International Phonetic Alphabet, can help students see the difference between spelling and sound and become more independent when learning new words (Celce-Murcia, Brinton, and Goodwin).

Finally, pronunciation teaching should include communication strategies. Students need permission and practice to slow down, repeat a word, rephrase a sentence, or ask, “Did you mean...?” These repair moves are part of competent speaking. They matter because even clear speakers are sometimes misunderstood, especially in noisy rooms or mixed-accent settings. A realistic pronunciation curriculum therefore teaches not only how to say words more clearly, but also what to do when communication breaks down. That is the kind of knowledge students actually use outside the classroom.

VI. PRACTICAL CLASSROOM STRATEGIES FOR SCHOOLS

The good news is that pronunciation does not require a separate expensive subject or a language lab. Small, regular routines can make a real difference. A school can start with ten minutes of focused pronunciation work two or three times a week. One lesson might target a sound contrast in current vocabulary. Another might focus on word stress in academic language. Another might use a short dialogue to practise contrastive stress, politeness, or question intonation. The key is consistency. Short work done regularly is usually more effective than one large unit taught and forgotten.

Listening should come early in this routine, not at the end of it. Before students can say a contrast clearly, they often need to hear it clearly. Teachers can use short recordings from varied speakers, ask students to identify stressed syllables, notice pitch changes, or sort words by sound pattern. Uchiyara, Karas, and Thomson’s meta-analysis supports the value of perception-based training, and Jeong et al. show that exposure to accent diversity can improve listening and attitudes. Even simple exercises such as choosing

which word was said, marking the stressed word in a sentence, or deciding whether a speaker sounds finished or unfinished can sharpen awareness (Uchiyara, Karas, and Thomson; Jeong et al.).

Shadowing and recording are also powerful. In shadowing, students listen to a short stretch of speech and repeat it with close attention to pace, stress, and intonation. This works well with short dialogues, speeches, news extracts, or classroom scripts. Recording adds another layer because it lets learners hear their own speech more clearly. A pronunciation journal, with short weekly recordings and reflections, can turn vague advice into concrete progress.

Pronunciation also improves when it is woven into meaningful speaking tasks. Galante and Piccardo’s work suggests that controlled speech practice and drama-based activities can increase awareness and growth. In school terms, this can mean role-plays, interviews, short presentations, poem performance, storytelling, or debate preparation. These tasks make prosody matter. Students begin to see that stress changes emphasis, intonation changes attitude, and pausing changes clarity. That kind of insight rarely appears in isolated drills alone (Galante and Piccardo). Technology can support this process, but it should be used with care. Automatic speech recognition tools and pronunciation apps can give learners extra practice, model speech, and immediate feedback. Ngo, Chen, and Lai found that such tools can be effective, especially when feedback is explicit and practice continues over time. Yet Amrate and Tsai warn that much technology-driven work still over-focuses on segmentals and drill patterns. Teachers should therefore use digital tools as part of a wider sequence: listen, notice, practise, record, get feedback, and then use the target feature in communication. Peer work also matters. The meta-analysis by Ngo, Chen, and Lai suggests that practice with others can be more effective than isolated work. In practical terms, students can compare recordings, give feedback from a simple checklist, or rehearse paired tasks before speaking to the whole class (Ngo, Chen, and Lai; Amrate and Tsai).

Perhaps the most important strategy is emotional rather than technical. Pronunciation work must happen in a low-shame environment. Students learn badly when every difference is treated as a failure. Teachers should correct patterns that affect clarity, not mock local identity. They should model carefully, invite

self-correction, and praise improvement that listeners can hear. In multilingual classrooms it can also help to compare English sounds with sounds from learners' home languages, because this turns interference into something explainable rather than mysterious. When students understand why a pattern is difficult, they often become more patient with themselves and more willing to practice.

VII. ASSESSMENT, TEACHER PREPARATION, AND POLICY

If schools want pronunciation to matter, assessment must change. This does not mean punishing accent differences or adding vague oral marks. It means using clear criteria linked to intelligibility. A simple school rubric can include four areas: whether key words are understandable, whether stress and intonation support meaning, whether pace and pausing help the listener, and whether the speaker can repair communication when needed. The CEFR Companion Volume is useful here because it treats phonology in terms of control and prosody rather than native-like perfection (Council of Europe). Once such criteria appear in speaking tasks, pronunciation stops being invisible. Teacher preparation is the next priority. Pre-service and in-service programmes should include basic phonetics, pronunciation pedagogy, and classroom feedback techniques. Teachers do not need to become phoneticians, but they do need enough knowledge to diagnose common problems, model sounds responsibly, and plan short, effective routines. The Bengaluru study by Prahaladaiah and Thomas shows that explicit phonological and phonetic intervention can improve performance among teacher trainees. That is an important reminder: teacher education is not a side issue. If teachers grow in confidence, students benefit immediately (Pralhadaiah and Thomas). At the school and policy level, the aim should be sustainability rather than grand announcements. A realistic plan might include an audio bank of short recordings, pronunciation notes in vocabulary lessons, two or three common speaking rubrics across grades, and regular low-stakes oral tasks. The National Education Policy 2020 already opens the door by valuing oral language and teacher development (Ministry of Education). What is needed now is implementation that treats speaking as part of

language learning, not as a decorative add-on for annual events or oral exams.

VIII. CONCLUSION

Pronunciation has spent too long as the skill everybody mentions and too few people teach. The evidence now points clearly in one direction. Explicit instruction helps. Listening training helps. Diverse accent exposure helps. Technology can help when it is used intelligently. Teacher confidence matters. Most of all, pronunciation matters because communication matters. A student who is not understood, or who is afraid to speak, is being kept at the edge of learning and opportunity (Saito and Plonsky; Nagle; Jeong et al.; Ngo, Chen, and Lai).

For Indian English education, the question is no longer whether pronunciation should be taught. It should. The real question is whether schools are willing to move beyond a narrow, exam-heavy view of English and teach the spoken language as carefully as the written one. They do not need to chase imported accents or impossible standards. They need to help learners speak clearly, listen flexibly, and use English with confidence in the real situations that matter to them. Once pronunciation is understood in that way, it is no longer the missing piece. It becomes part of a fuller and fairer English education.

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