

Improving English Pronunciation among EFL Undergraduates in China

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ABSTRACT

Pronunciation is an important component of communication and plays a crucial part in learners' intelligibility, confidence, and willingness to speak in English. However, many English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners continue to face challenges in pronunciation despite having adequate knowledge of grammar and vocabulary. This study aimed to evaluate the effectiveness of a face-to-face Pronunciation Enhancement Program conducted for English major students in a university in China. The study employed a mixed-methods research design by integrating quantitative and qualitative data to obtain a comprehensive understanding of participants' perceptions of the program. The participants consisted of undergraduate English majors from different semesters. The intervention was implemented in a special English pronunciation program involving interactive pronunciation activities, guided speaking tasks, instructor modeling, and corrective feedback. Quantitative data were collected using a Likert-scale questionnaire, while qualitative data were obtained through open-ended written responses. The findings revealed that participants responded positively to the program. The quantitative results showed high levels of satisfaction, perceived usefulness, increased confidence, and motivation to continue improving pronunciation. The qualitative results further supported these findings, with students frequently reporting improved pronunciation accuracy, clearer speech, enhanced confidence in speaking English, enjoyable learning experiences, helpful feedback, and vocabulary gains. Thus, even though the pronunciation program was short, it was found to provide meaningful, immediate benefits when delivered through structured, engaging face-to-face instruction. The findings suggest that supplementary pronunciation-enhancement initiatives may be valuable in higher education settings to support the development of oral communication among EFL learners. The study contributes to the growing body of research on pronunciation pedagogy and offers practical implications for language educators seeking to strengthen students' speaking competence.

Keywords: pronunciation enhancement, English majors, mixed-methods, EFL learners, learner confidence

INTRODUCTION

The English language has been considered one of the most important languages for communication in education, business, technology, and international collaboration (Zhang, 2024; Martinaj, 2023). In the higher education context, proficiency in English is increasingly associated with employability and access to global knowledge networks (Chea & Lo, 2022; English et al., 2021). For university students majoring in English, the ability to communicate effectively in spoken English is particularly essential, as they are often expected to demonstrate advanced language competence in academic, professional, and intercultural settings. Among the many components of oral communication, pronunciation plays a crucial role in ensuring intelligibility, fluency, and confidence during interaction (Mutali, 2025). According to Tiwari (2023), one of the most challenging aspects of second language acquisition is pronunciation because while learners may develop competence in grammar, reading, and vocabulary, many continue to experience difficulties in producing English sounds accurately, applying stress and intonation appropriately, and speaking with clarity. These challenges may be more pronounced among learners whose first-language pronunciation differs significantly from English (Munro,

2018). In the Chinese context, English major students commonly receive substantial exposure to reading and writing but may have fewer opportunities to engage in intensive speaking for pronunciation development (Zhang, 2025; Zhang & Yuan, 2020). As such, some learners may possess strong theoretical knowledge of the language but still lack confidence in oral communication.

Poor pronunciation can have consequences beyond linguistic accuracy. Mispronunciation may hinder comprehensibility, create communication breakdowns, and negatively affect learners' self-confidence when interacting with proficient English users (Husna, 2021; Mutali, 2025). Research has shown that confidence and willingness to communicate are closely linked to speaking performance. This suggests that learners who feel anxious or uncertain about their pronunciation may avoid participating in communicative tasks (Alimoradi & Adib, 2022). Hence, it is vital to address pronunciation issues not only as a matter of improving speech production but also to support learners' motivation, confidence, and active classroom engagement.

To address these concerns, targeted instructional programs that focus on pronunciation training have gained increasing attention in language education. For example, short-term intensive programs, face-to-face training sessions, and interactive learning activities. These programs are found to provide learners with immediate corrective feedback, guided practice, and opportunities to raise awareness of pronunciation features (Saito, 2021; Mutali, 2025). The programs can also create an avenue in which learners feel comfortable speaking the language. Although previous studies have examined pronunciation teaching methods in various ESL and EFL settings, there remains a need for further research on the effectiveness of focused pronunciation enhancement initiatives conducted within university contexts, particularly among English major students in China.

In addition, while quantitative measures such as questionnaire ratings are useful for identifying levels of satisfaction and perceived improvement, they may not fully capture students' personal experiences and reflections. Qualitative feedback, including open-ended responses, can provide deeper insights into how learners perceive the usefulness, interest, confidence-building effects, and practical benefits of a pronunciation program (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). Thus, employing a mixed-methods design allows researchers to combine statistical trends with rich participant perspectives, hence offering a more comprehensive evaluation of educational interventions.

In line with this, the present study evaluates the effectiveness of a face-to-face pronunciation enhancement program conducted for university students majoring in English at a university in China. Specifically, the study investigates participants' perceptions of the program using both quantitative and qualitative data. It seeks to determine whether the program contributed to improvements in pronunciation, confidence, motivation, and overall learning experience. By examining students' responses, this study aims to contribute to the growing body of literature on pronunciation pedagogy and provide practical implications for language educators who wish to strengthen oral communication skills in tertiary education settings.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Pronunciation in Second Language Learning

Pronunciation is an essential component of second language learning and plays a central role in oral communication. It encompasses the production of segmental features such as vowels and consonants, as well as suprasegmental features such as stress, rhythm, intonation, and connected speech (Lasi, 2020). Effective pronunciation enables speakers to be understood clearly, thereby enhancing communication and reducing misunderstandings. While it may be difficult to achieve a native-like accent, intelligibility, comprehensibility, and communicative effectiveness are realistically achievable goals (Levis, 2020; Mutali, 2025).

For learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), pronunciation often receives less attention compared to grammar, reading, or writing. This imbalance may result in learners who possess strong receptive skills but encounter difficulties in spoken interaction. In Tiwari (2023), it was found that pronunciation remains one of the most neglected areas in language teaching despite its importance for communication. Consequently, this can lead learners to struggle with confidence, fluency, and participation in communicative settings.

Challenges Faced by Chinese EFL Learners

For Chinese learners, the acquisition of English pronunciation can be especially challenging due to phonological differences between Mandarin and English. Certain English sounds may not exist in the learners' first language, while stress patterns, rhythm, and intonation systems may differ considerably (Munro, 2018). As a result, learners may experience persistent difficulties with sounds such as vowels /θ/, /ð/, /v/, /r/, and consonant clusters, as well as sentence stress and natural speech rhythm.

Traditionally, English instruction in China has emphasized examination achievement, grammar knowledge, reading comprehension, and vocabulary acquisition, sometimes at the expense of oral communication skills (Zhang, 2025; Zhang & Yuan, 2020). Although higher education has increasingly highlighted the importance of communicative competence, many students still report limited opportunities for meaningful speaking practice. Even English major students, who receive more language exposure than non-majors, may feel uncertain about pronunciation accuracy and oral fluency in authentic communication contexts.

Pronunciation and Learner Confidence

Pronunciation is closely related to self-confidence and willingness to communicate in English. When learners believe their speech is unclear or inaccurate, they may become anxious and reluctant to speak aloud. Alimoradi and Adib (2022) contended that willingness to communicate is influenced by self-confidence, perceived competence, and communication anxiety. In language classrooms, learners who feel insecure about pronunciation may avoid interaction, thus reducing opportunities for oral communication and improvement.

In contrast, successful pronunciation support can increase confidence and motivation. According to Mutali (2025), learners who perceive improvement in speech clarity often demonstrate greater readiness to engage in conversation. Confidence is particularly important for English major students, who may be expected to participate in presentations, discussions, interviews, and professional communication. Hence, pronunciation training can contribute not only to linguistic development but also to psychological readiness for oral communication.

Pronunciation Instruction and Enhancement Programs

Research has shown that pronunciation can be improved through explicit and systematic instruction. Rather than assuming learners will acquire pronunciation naturally through exposure alone, many researchers have supported focused teaching that combines awareness, modeling, guided practice, corrective feedback, and repeated production opportunities (Lasi, 2020; Mutali, 2025).

Short-term Pronunciation Enhancement Programs may be especially useful in tertiary settings where curriculum time is limited. Intensive face-to-face sessions can provide concentrated practice, immediate feedback, and collaborative activities that raise learners' awareness of pronunciation features. According to Saito (2021), instruction can positively affect second language pronunciation development, particularly when learners receive opportunities for meaningful practice and feedback. Similarly, Mutali (2025) found that pronunciation teaching is more effective when integrated with communicative activities rather than isolated drilling alone.

Face-to-face delivery may also be advantageous by providing real-time interaction, peer learning, and instructor scaffolding. Through games, pair work, presentations, or guided speaking tasks, learners can practice pronunciation in a supportive environment that encourages experimentation and reduces the fear of making mistakes.

Mixed-Methods Evaluation in Language Education

The evaluation of educational programs requires consideration of both measurable outcomes and learner experiences. Quantitative approaches, such as questionnaires using Likert scales, are useful for examining patterns of satisfaction, perceived usefulness, and self-reported improvement. However, numerical findings alone may not fully explain why learners responded positively or negatively. According to Creswell and Plano

Clark (2018), qualitative methods, including open-ended responses, interviews, or reflective comments, give richer insights into participants' feelings, perceptions, and personal experiences. In pronunciation studies, qualitative feedback may reveal themes such as improved confidence, enjoyment, awareness of mistakes, or appreciation of corrective guidance. By combining quantitative and qualitative evidence, mixed-methods research offers a more holistic understanding of the effectiveness of pronunciation programs.

This approach is particularly valuable for short-term interventions, where statistical outcomes can be complemented by participants' immediate reflections on what they found meaningful or beneficial. Hence, a mixed-methods design is appropriate for studies evaluating Pronunciation Enhancement Programs.

Research Gap

Although previous studies have examined pronunciation teaching in various EFL settings, fewer studies have focused specifically on short-duration, face-to-face pronunciation enhancement programs for English major university students in China using mixed-methods evaluation. Much of the literature emphasises long-term classroom instruction or technology-assisted pronunciation learning, while less attention has been given to intensive one-day interventions that may still generate meaningful gains in confidence, awareness, and learner motivation.

The present study addresses this gap by evaluating the effectiveness of a face-to-face pronunciation enhancement program conducted for English major university students in China through both quantitative and qualitative data.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

A mixed-methods research design was employed for this study, integrating both quantitative and qualitative approaches to evaluate the effectiveness of a pronunciation enhancement program conducted for English major university students in China. The mixed-methods design was considered appropriate as it enabled the researchers to obtain a comprehensive understanding of participants' perceptions by combining numerical trends with descriptive insights (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). In particular, the study used a convergent parallel design in which quantitative and qualitative data were collected simultaneously during the same phase of the program and analysed separately before being integrated during interpretation. The quantitative component focused on measuring students' perceptions of the program through structured questionnaire items, while the qualitative component explored participants' reflections through open-ended responses.

Research Context and Participants

The study was conducted at a university in China involving undergraduate students majoring in English. Participants were drawn from different semesters of study, allowing representation from learners with varying levels of academic experience and language proficiency. As English majors, the participants were expected to possess prior exposure to English language learning, making them an appropriate group for evaluating pronunciation-focused instruction. A total of 55 students participated voluntarily in the program. Participation was based on availability and willingness to join the face-to-face session. Before data collection, participants were informed of the purpose of the study and assured that their responses would remain confidential and would be used only for academic research purposes.

The Pronunciation Enhancement Program

The intervention consisted of a one-day Pronunciation Enhancement Program designed to strengthen learners' English pronunciation skills, confidence, and speaking awareness. The program consisted of interactive activities such as pronunciation drills, sound articulation practice, stress and intonation exercises, guided speaking tasks, peer interaction, and instructor feedback. The face-to-face session helped participants to receive immediate corrective feedback, observe pronunciation modeling, and engage in real-time communication practice. This

enabled them to improve their speech clarity and provide a supportive learning environment that encouraged active participation and reduced anxiety related to speaking English.

Research Instruments

Two forms of instruments were used for data collection. The first form is a quantitative instrument, the structured questionnaire, and the second form is a qualitative instrument, written feedback through open-ended questions.

The structured questionnaire was administered at the end of the Pronunciation Enhancement Program to examine participants' perceptions of the program. The questionnaire consisted of Likert-scale items ranging from 1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree. The items measured dimensions such as perceived improvement in pronunciation, increased speaking confidence, usefulness of activities, satisfaction with program delivery, motivation to continue improving pronunciation, and overall learning experience. The questionnaire items were adapted based on previous educational evaluation studies and aligned with the objectives of the program.

To complement the questionnaire findings, participants were also requested to provide written feedback through open-ended questions. These responses allowed students to express their views regarding what they had learned, aspects they found useful, challenges they encountered, and suggestions for improvement. The qualitative component provided deeper insights into participants' personal experiences and perceptions and supported the quantitative results.

Data Collection Procedures

Data collection was carried out immediately after the program. Participants first completed the quantitative questionnaire, followed by the open-ended feedback section. Administering both instruments at the end of the session ensured that participants' responses reflected their immediate perceptions of the learning experience. All responses were collected anonymously to encourage honesty and reduce response bias. Participants were informed that their involvement was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time without penalty.

Data Analysis

The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 29 was used to analyze the quantitative data for descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations. In addition, reliability analysis using Cronbach's Alpha was conducted to determine the internal consistency of the questionnaire items. A Cronbach's alpha value of 0.70 or above was considered acceptable (Hair et al., 2019).

Qualitative responses were analyzed using thematic analysis following the procedures suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006). The responses were read repeatedly to ensure familiarity with the data before initial codes were generated. This was followed by grouping similar responses into broader themes. The themes that emerged from the data included perceptions such as improved pronunciation, increased confidence, an enjoyable learning experience, helpful feedback, and vocabulary development. Representative participant responses were selected to support the interpretation of the findings.

To ensure the validity of the study, mixed methods were used. This enabled triangulation between quantitative and qualitative findings. The questionnaire items were aligned with the objectives of the program, while qualitative responses provided confirmation and explanatory evidence. To ensure trustworthiness of the response, responses were coded systematically and reviewed multiple times to ensure consistency in theme development. The integration of both forms of data strengthened the credibility of the study's findings.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were observed throughout the study. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all respondents before data collection. Furthermore, the participants' anonymity and confidentiality were maintained, and no personally identifiable information was disclosed in the reporting of results.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Overview of Findings

The findings of the study are based on both quantitative and qualitative data collected from participants following the Pronunciation Enhancement Program. The results are discussed according to key dimensions of the program, such as pronunciation improvement, learner confidence, engagement, usefulness of instructional activities, and overall learning experience. The integration of quantitative and qualitative findings provides a more comprehensive understanding of students' perceptions of the pronunciation program.

Quantitative Findings

The quantitative data showed an overall positive response toward the Pronunciation Enhancement Program. Participants generally found that the program was beneficial, engaging, and effective in improving their pronunciation skills. Most of the respondents reported satisfaction with the face-to-face delivery mode, the teaching activities implemented, and the opportunity to practice speaking in an interactive environment. The participants also agreed that the program enhanced their confidence in speaking English. This suggests that pronunciation-focused activities may contribute not only to linguistic improvement but also to affective development, particularly in reducing hesitation and anxiety during oral communication. Besides that, the participants indicated that the program increased their motivation to continue improving their pronunciation. This is an important outcome, as motivation is closely associated with sustained language learning effort and long-term development. Overall, the quantitative findings suggest that the Pronunciation Enhancement Program successfully achieved its primary objectives of improving learners' pronunciation awareness, confidence, and learning motivation.

Table 1. Mean Scores and Standard Deviations of Questionnaire Items (Post-Program)

No.	Item	Mean	SD	Interpretation
1	I can say new English words correctly.	4.44	0.79	High
2	I can pronounce English sounds correctly.	4.45	0.79	High
3	I feel comfortable pronouncing English words in front of my classmates.	4.49	0.74	High
4	I can pronounce English words clearly enough for others to understand me.	4.44	0.74	High
5	I believe I can keep improving my pronunciation even when it is difficult	4.73	0.65	High
Overall Mean		4.51	0.74	High

Interpretation of Scale

Mean Range	Interpretation
1.00 – 2.33	Low
2.34 – 3.66	Moderate
3.67 – 5.00	High

Qualitative Findings

The qualitative responses supported the quantitative results. Analysis of participants' written feedback revealed several recurring themes.

Theme 1: Improved Pronunciation Skills

Most of the participants expressed that the program helped them pronounce English words more accurately. The participants indicated greater awareness of correct sounds, stress patterns, and articulation. For example, the participants commented, "I learned how to pronounce many words correctly," and "My pronunciation became clearer after the class."

This finding suggests that even a short-duration program can enhance learners' phonological awareness when instruction is focused and interactive. It supports previous research emphasizing the value of explicit pronunciation instruction (Saito, 2021).

Theme 2: Increased Confidence in Speaking

Many participants mentioned increased confidence as one of the most meaningful outcomes of the program. The participants expressed feeling less nervous when speaking in English and were more willing to communicate. Examples of responses included "I feel more confident to speak English now" and "The program made me brave to speak."

According to Alimoradi and Adib (2022), this finding is significant because confidence is strongly linked to willingness to communicate in second language contexts. When learners feel more secure about their pronunciation, they may be more likely to participate actively in discussions and presentations.

Theme 3: Interesting and Enjoyable Learning Experience

Many of the participants also repeatedly described the program as interesting, fun, and enjoyable. Participants appreciated the interactive teaching style and engaging activities used during the session. For example, the participants were reported as expressing "The activities were very interesting" and "Learning pronunciation can be fun."

This shows that positive emotional experiences may enhance learner engagement and receptiveness. Enjoyable learning environments are said to promote stronger motivation and retention (Damanik & Khan, 2025).

Theme 4: Helpful Feedback and Error Correction

The participants also valued receiving immediate corrections and guidance from the instructors. They appreciated knowing how to improve their pronunciation by recognizing their mistakes. For example, some of the participants commented that "The teacher corrected my mistakes clearly" and "I know what I should improve now."

This result aligns with studies suggesting that timely feedback is essential in pronunciation development, as learners may not always notice their own speech errors (Mutali, 2025).

Theme 5: Vocabulary and Knowledge Development

Some participants also reported learning new words and expanding their knowledge through the program. For example, some were reported to comment, "I learned many new words" and "I gained more knowledge in English."

Although pronunciation was the central focus, this suggests that well-designed speaking programs may support vocabulary growth and general language development.

Figure 1. Word Cloud Analysis of Qualitative Findings



The word cloud analysis was conducted to visually represent the most frequently mentioned words and phrases in the participants' open-ended feedback regarding the Pronunciation Enhancement Program. Larger words in the word cloud indicate higher frequency of occurrence, reflecting the themes most commonly emphasized by respondents. Overall, the visualization suggests that students had highly positive perceptions of the program, particularly regarding pronunciation improvement, confidence building, and the usefulness of the learning experience.

The most frequent phrase in the word cloud was “improves pronunciation,” indicating that participants perceived the program as effective at enhancing their pronunciation skills. This finding is particularly significant, as pronunciation improvement was the central objective of the program. The prominence of this phrase indicates that students recognized tangible benefits in areas such as clearer speech production, more accurate articulation, and better awareness of English sounds.

Another highly frequent term was “helpful,” which reflects participants' appreciation of the program's usefulness and practical value. The participants likely perceived the activities, guidance, and feedback as beneficial to their language learning development. Similarly, the frequent appearance of the word “interesting” indicates that the program successfully engaged learners and created a positive learning atmosphere. This suggests that the use of interactive activities and dynamic teaching methods contributed to learners' enjoyment and active participation.

The phrase “improves confidence” also appeared frequently in the word cloud, indicating the program's role in strengthening learners' self-assurance when speaking English. Confidence is an important factor in oral communication, and this finding suggests that students felt more comfortable and willing to use English after participating in the program. Increased confidence may lead to greater classroom participation and a stronger willingness to communicate in future contexts.

Besides that, recurring expressions such as “corrects mistakes,” “learn new words,” “comfortable,” “fun,” and “useful” further reinforce the positive nature of participants' experiences. These terms indicate that students valued the immediate corrective feedback provided during the program, appreciated opportunities to expand vocabulary, and enjoyed a supportive and enjoyable learning environment.

Overall, the word cloud analysis demonstrates that participants perceived the Pronunciation Enhancement Program as effective, engaging, and confidence-building. The dominant themes of pronunciation improvement, helpful instruction, enjoyment, and increased confidence strongly support the quantitative findings, indicating that the program successfully met its intended learning objectives.

CONCLUSION

The results of the study show that the Pronunciation Enhancement Program was positively perceived by English-major university students in China. Both quantitative and qualitative data indicate that the program contributed to improvements in pronunciation, confidence, engagement, and motivation.

One of the most important findings is that participants reported improved pronunciation after attending the program. This suggests that short-term interventions, when carefully structured, can produce immediate perceived benefits. While long-term mastery requires sustained practice, even brief programs may raise learners' awareness of pronunciation features and provide strategies for continued improvement. This supports previous studies emphasizing that focused instruction can positively influence second language pronunciation development (Saito, 2021; Mutali, 2025).

Another significant outcome was increased learner confidence. Many students felt more willing to speak English after the program. This is particularly relevant for English major students, who are often expected to perform oral presentations, participate in discussions, and communicate professionally in English. Confidence may therefore be as important as technical accuracy in language learning success. The present findings support Alimoradi and Adib (2022), who highlighted the importance of self-confidence in willingness to communicate.

The enjoyable and interactive nature of the program also played a key role in its effectiveness. Students responded positively to engaging learning activities, suggesting that pronunciation instruction should not rely solely on repetition or drilling. Instead, communicative, supportive, and dynamic teaching approaches may encourage participation and reduce fear of making mistakes.

The importance of immediate corrective feedback was also evident. Participants appreciated real-time guidance from the instructor, reinforcing the value of face-to-face learning environments where modeling and feedback can occur instantly. Although online learning platforms offer flexibility, in-person pronunciation training may provide advantages for sound modeling, articulation demonstration, and spontaneous interaction.

Finally, the study demonstrates the usefulness of a mixed-methods approach in evaluating educational programs. Quantitative data showed positive trends overall, while qualitative responses explained why students valued the program. This combination strengthened the interpretation of findings and provided richer insight into learners' experiences.

Despite the positive findings, several limitations of the study should be acknowledged. The study involved participants from only one university in China, which may limit generalisability. The program was conducted over one day, meaning long-term effects were not measured. Additionally, findings relied largely on self-reported perceptions rather than objective pronunciation tests. As such, future studies may investigate long-term pronunciation programs, compare online and face-to-face delivery modes, or examine objective speech performance changes through pre- and post-tests. Comparative studies involving multiple universities or diverse learner groups would also strengthen the evidence base.

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