

Research Article

English Pronunciation Errors of Pashto-Speaking Intermediate Students in District Buner, Pakistan: A Qualitative Error Analysis

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Abstract

Introduction: English is a compulsory subject at every level of schooling in Pakistan, but in rural government schools it is taught mainly through reading, writing and translation, and pronunciation is seldom addressed. Pashto-speaking students in such settings bring first-language habits into English, with consequences for how well they are understood.

Objective: The study set out to identify the English pronunciation problems of Pashto-speaking intermediate students in District Buner, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, to explain their likely causes, and to suggest how they might be addressed in teaching.

Method: A qualitative descriptive design was used. Ten male intermediate students from government boys' schools in Buner, all native speakers of Pashto studying in Urdu-medium schools, read aloud selected English words, sentences and a short passage while the researcher observed and transcribed their pronunciation. A 15-item questionnaire collected information on their exposure to spoken English. Deviations from British reference pronunciation were grouped by sound class and explained through contrastive comparison with Pashto and with English spelling.

Results: The clearest problems were the replacement of /w/ with [v], which affected every participant; dental stops in place of /θ/ and /ð/; unaspirated /p t k/; [e] for /i/; unrounded [ɑ:] for /ɒ/ and /ɔ:/; and difficulty with /ɜ:/, which most learners did not produce accurately. All participants pronounced /r/ after vowels, and spelling led to further errors such as a sounded /b/ in *climb* and full vowels in unstressed syllables. The affricates /tʃ/ and /dʒ/ and initial /l/ caused no difficulty. Questionnaire responses showed very limited contact with spoken English outside the classroom and a general habit of pronouncing new words from their spelling.

Conclusion: The errors follow two predictable sources, Pashto phonology and English spelling. A short list of high-impact targets, notably the /v/-/w/ distinction, aspiration, vowel length and the vowel /ɜ:/, together with explicit teaching of spelling-sound patterns and better-trained teachers, would make the most difference for learners in Buner.

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Introduction

English holds an unusual place in Pakistan. It is an official language, the language of higher education and most professional work, and a compulsory subject from the early years of school. For many children in government schools, however, English is something read and written rather than heard and spoken. Teaching tends to be bound to the textbook and driven by examinations, and many teachers have limited spoken English themselves [1]. Pronunciation is rarely taught and almost never assessed, so students form their picture of how English sounds largely from its spelling.

District Buner, in the Malakand Division of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, shows these conditions clearly. The 2023 census counted 1,016,869 residents, all of them classified as rural, up from 895,460 in 2017 [2]. Literacy among people aged ten and above was 43.75%, with a wide gap between males (60.61%) and females (27.40%) [3]. Pashto is the language of the home and the street, Urdu carries much of the classroom explanation, and English is met almost entirely in textbooks. By the time students reach the intermediate level (Grades 11 and 12) they have studied English for about ten years, yet many have rarely heard it spoken outside the classroom.

Pronunciation matters because of what it does to communication. Research over the past three decades has separated three things that are easily confused: how strong an accent sounds, how much effort a listener needs to follow it, and how much is actually understood [4]. A noticeable accent does not by itself block understanding; particular errors do. This has moved the goal of pronunciation teaching away from sounding native and toward being intelligible [5,6]. Jenkins's *Lingua Franca Core* offers a principled way to decide which features deserve class time when English is used mainly between non-native speakers [7]. For a teacher in Buner with a large class and a crowded syllabus, knowing which errors are common, and which of them get in the way of understanding, is far more useful than a general instruction to "work on pronunciation".

Significance of the Study

The study documents the pronunciation difficulties of intermediate students in a rural, almost entirely Pashto-speaking district, a group that earlier research has largely passed over in favour of university students. By linking each

problem to its likely source, it shows teachers whether a given error is better treated through listening and articulation practice or through explicit teaching of English spelling patterns. The findings are also intended to inform teacher training and syllabus planning in Buner and in similar districts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

Problem Statement

Earlier research on Pashto speakers has established which English sounds are difficult in principle [8–10]. Most of that work, however, has involved university students and has focused on one class of sounds at a time. Intermediate students in rural districts, who are at the stage where most learners end their formal study of English, have received little attention, and little is known about how their limited exposure to spoken English and their reliance on spelling shape their pronunciation. Without this information, teachers in districts like Buner have no clear basis for deciding what to teach first.

Research Questions

1. What English pronunciation problems do Pashto-speaking intermediate students in District Buner have?
2. What are the likely causes of these problems?
3. How can these problems be addressed in teaching?

Research Objectives

1. To identify the English vowels, diphthongs and consonants that Pashto-speaking intermediate students in Buner mispronounce.
2. To explain these errors with reference to the sound system of Pashto and to English spelling.
3. To propose teaching priorities for addressing the most important errors.

Literature Review

Explaining Second-Language Pronunciation Errors

The idea that learners' difficulties can be predicted by comparing their first language with the target language is known as the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis. As Wardhaugh [11] showed, its strong form, which claimed that first-language differences would predict all difficulties in advance, did not hold up, while a weaker form,

which uses the comparison to explain errors once they have been observed, proved far more useful. Corder [12] turned attention to what learners actually produce, arguing that errors are systematic evidence of a developing system rather than random failures. Error analysis in this sense remains the usual first step in describing a group of learners, and it is the approach taken here, with contrastive analysis used to explain the errors observed.

Current models are more specific about which differences matter. The Speech Learning Model and its revised version (SLM-r) propose that learners set up a new category for a second-language sound only when they perceive it as clearly different from the nearest first-language sound; sounds heard as “the same” are absorbed into the existing category and produced with its features [13]. The revised model also gives weight to the amount and quality of input, predicting more accurate categories in learners who hear more native-like speech. The Perceptual Assimilation Model for second-language learners makes related predictions from the listener’s side, classifying contrasts by how their members map onto first-language categories [14]. Both models predict, for example, that a learner whose first language has a single labial approximant will find it hard to keep English /v/ and /w/ apart.

Instructed learners face a further source of error. Students who meet most English words first in print tend to pronounce them as they are spelled, and this influence persists even after years of study [15]. In a language with spelling as irregular as English, errors of this kind, such as sounding silent letters or giving full vowels to unstressed syllables, may be as frequent as errors caused by the first language. The distinction matters in class: transfer errors call for listening and articulation practice, while spelling errors call for explicit teaching of how English spelling maps onto sound.

The Sound Systems of Pashto and English

Standard Southern British English (RP) has twelve monophthongs, which differ in both quality and length, and eight diphthongs [16]. Pashto has a smaller system of about seven vowels and does not use length in the way English does [17]. Several English vowels, including /æ/, /ɒ/ and /ɜ:/, have no close Pashto counterpart, while pairs such as /i:/- /ɪ/ and /u:/- /ʊ/ correspond to single Pashto vowels

and are therefore likely to be merged.

The consonant systems differ in well-documented ways. Pashto has retroflex stops, the affricates /ts/ and /dz/, and the velar fricatives /x/ and /ɣ/, but its native vocabulary lacks the labiodental fricatives /f/ and /v/ and the dental fricatives /θ/ and /ð/ [17]. Pashto has a single labial approximant /w/, so English /v/ and /w/ are likely to be confused. Pashto voiceless stops are unaspirated [18], whereas English /p/, /t/ and /k/ are aspirated at the start of stressed syllables [16]; without aspiration, English *pin* and *cold* can sound like *bin* and *gold* to listeners who expect aspirated stops. Table 1 summarises the main predictions.

Table 1: Predicted pronunciation difficulties for Pashto-speaking learners of English

English target	Situation in Pashto	Predicted realisation	Supporting sources
/f/	Absent from native vocabulary	[p]	[17]
/v/	Absent; Pashto has only /w/	[w]	[17]
/w/	The only labial approximant	[v] or [ʋ], as in Pakistani English	[19]
/θ/, /ð/	Absent	Dental stops	[8]
Aspirated /p t k/	Voiceless stops are unaspirated	Unaspirated [p t k]	[18]
/i:/- /ɪ/, /u:/- /ʊ/	No English-type length contrast	Merger or confusion	[8]
/ɜ:/, /ɔ:/	No close equivalent	Back or central vowel, often followed by [r]	[17]
Unstressed /ə/	Spelling suggests a full vowel	Full vowel	[15]

Non- prevocali c /r/	/r/ pronounce d in all positions	Rhotic [r]	[19]
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Pakistani English as a Point of Reference

Many of these features are not peculiar to Pashto speakers. Descriptions of Pakistani English report rhotic pronunciation, no stable contrast between /v/ and /w/, and dental stops in place of /θ/ and /ð/ [19]. A recent study of BS students from Urdu, Punjabi and Pashto backgrounds found shared Pakistani features alongside tendencies tied to each first language [9]. A form that differs from RP may therefore be a normal feature of educated local speech rather than a learner error. In this study British reference forms are used to identify deviations, because these are the forms taught in Pakistani textbooks and dictionaries, but the discussion separates deviations that threaten intelligibility from those that are simply features of a Pakistani accent, following the Lingua Franca Core [7].

Previous Studies of Pashto-Speaking Learners

Khan et al. [8], working with 50 undergraduates in Swat, reported stops in place of the dental fricatives (*things* as [tɪŋs]), devoicing of plural /z/, confusion of /i:/ and /ɪ/ with /eɪ/, and diphthong errors such as [ɒ] for /aʊ/ and [ɪə] for /eə/. Instrumental work on Pashto itself shows that its voiceless stops are produced without aspiration [18], which predicts unaspirated English /p t k/. In a sociophonetic study of BS English students at the University of Sargodha, Bilal et al. [9] found that Pashto speakers shared general features of Pakistani English, such as dental stops in place of the interdental fricatives, while also showing tendencies specific to their first language. Vowels have also been examined acoustically. Biland and Irshad [10] recorded ten undergraduates at the University of Buner reading a minimal-pair word list and measured the duration and formants of six English vowels. Male speakers produced longer vowels with lower formants than female speakers, but both groups kept the vowel contrasts distinct.

This work points in a consistent direction: the dental fricatives, aspiration and several vowel contrasts are recurring difficulties, although acoustic evidence suggests that more advanced learners can keep some vowel contrasts apart. The

samples, however, are all university students. There is also good evidence that instruction helps. Meta-analyses report medium to large effects of pronunciation teaching [20,21], and a review of instructional studies found that most reported significant improvement [22]. What has been missing is an account of intermediate learners in rural districts such as Buner, on which teaching at that level can be based.

Materials and Methods

Study Design

The study used a qualitative descriptive design based on error analysis. Learners' pronunciation was elicited through reading tasks, observed and transcribed by the researcher, and interpreted through contrastive comparison with Pashto. A short questionnaire provided background information on the learners' exposure to spoken English.

Participants and Setting

Data were collected in 2022 in government boys' schools in District Buner offering classes at the intermediate level. These are Urdu-medium institutions in which English is taught as a compulsory subject. Ten male intermediate students were selected at random from these classes. All were native speakers of Pashto from Buner. The small sample suits the qualitative aim of the study, which was to describe the kinds of errors learners make rather than to estimate their frequency in the wider population.

Instruments

Reading task: Participants read aloud a set of isolated English words, short sentences and a passage. The items were selected to include the English pure vowels and diphthongs, the main consonant classes (plosives, fricatives, affricates, nasals, the lateral and the semi-vowels), consonant clusters, and words whose pronunciation is not predictable from their spelling, such as *climb*.

Questionnaire: A 15-item questionnaire was given to the participants. It asked about the medium of instruction in their earlier schooling, the use of English at home and with friends and teachers, exposure to English news, television channels and films, contact with native speakers of English, the way they work out the pronunciation of new words, and their views on why Pakistanis speak English with different accents.

Procedure: Each learner read the material individually while the researcher listened and noted every deviation from the expected pronunciation. Deviant forms were transcribed in broad IPA (International Phonetic Alphabet). Symbols between slashes, such as /w/, stand for the target sound (phoneme) of British English; symbols in square brackets, such as [v], stand for the sound the learner actually produced; and letters in angle brackets, such as , refer to spelling. The mark : shows a long vowel, ^h shows aspiration (a puff of air), ' marks the stressed syllable, and → means “was pronounced as”. All symbols used in this article are explained, with example words, in Appendix A. The transcriptions reported in this paper were checked against standard descriptions of British English pronunciation [16,23]. Forms recognised as

acceptable British variants were not counted as errors; for example, a schwa before final /n/ or /l/ in words such as *sudden* and *little*, which some learners produced, is an accepted alternative to a syllabic consonant [23].

Data Analysis

Deviations were grouped into vowels, diphthongs and consonants. Each pattern was then assigned a likely source: transfer from Pashto, where the English target is absent from Pashto or works differently there; English spelling, where the learner followed the written form; or both, where either explanation was plausible. Questionnaire responses were summarised qualitatively and used to interpret the error patterns. Figure 1 summarises the procedure.

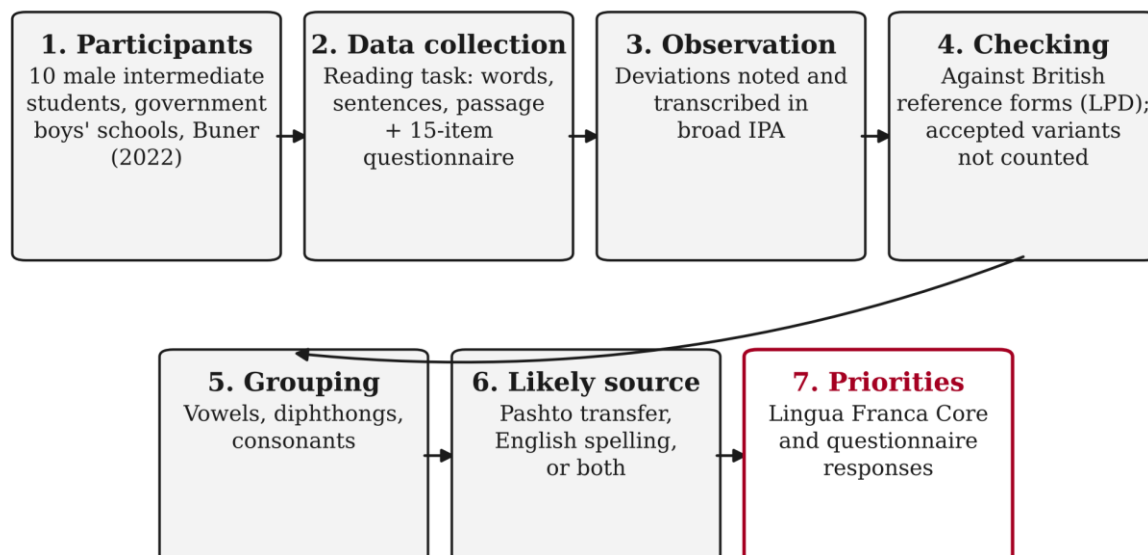


Figure 1: Research procedure

Ethical Considerations

The study was carried out with the permission of the heads of the participating schools, and the students took part voluntarily. No names or other identifying details were recorded in the analysis or are reported here.

Results

Figure 2 gives an overview of how widespread each pattern was among the ten learners. Because the observations were recorded descriptively rather than counted, the figure uses the observer's own categories (all, most, some, a few, none) rather than percentages. Patterns described without such a category, such as the replacement of the dental

fricatives, are not included.

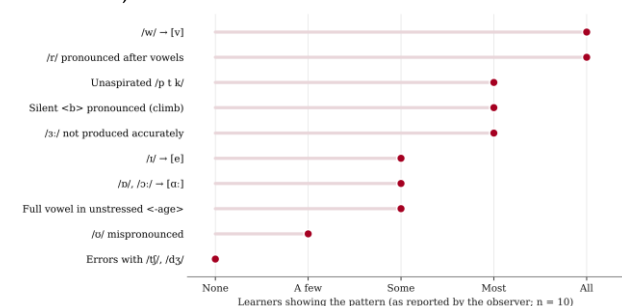


Figure 2: How widespread each error pattern was among the ten learners, based on the observer's descriptions

Vowels

The vowel errors fell into four groups (Table 2; Figure 3). First, some learners replaced the short

vowel /ɪ/ with the Pashto vowel [e], so that *kit*, *swim* and *bit* were heard as [ket], [swem] and [bet]. The long vowel /i:/ in *need* was shortened or lowered to [nɪd] or [ned], and /u:/ was generally given the right quality but shortened. Second, the rounded back vowels caused difficulty: /ɒ/ in *not* and /ɔ:/ in *walk* and *call* were replaced by some learners with an unrounded [ɑ:], since they did not round their lips enough. Third, the central vowel /ɜ:/, which has no equivalent in Pashto or Urdu, was produced accurately by only a few learners; the rest replaced it with [e], [ɔ] or [ʌ], usually followed by an [r], as in *turn* [tɜrn] and *hurt* [hɜrt]. Fourth, several learners gave a full vowel to the unstressed final syllable of words ending in <-age>, as in *language*, and the unstressed final /ə/ of *slipper* was replaced with [ɔr].

Learners were divided on /ɑ:/ a few produced it accurately and others did not. In *start* and *car* the main deviation was the following /r/, which all of them pronounced, and some learners also shortened or rounded the vowel, giving *car* as [kar] or [kɔr]. The vowels /ʌ/ and /u:/ were generally produced with the right quality, while /ɒ/ was mispronounced by a few learners.

Table 2: Vowel errors observed in the reading task

Word	RP form	Learner form	Deviation
kit	/kɪt/	[ket]	/ɪ/ → [e]
swim	/swɪm/	[swem]	/ɪ/ → [e]
bit	/bɪt/	[bet]	/ɪ/ → [e]
need	/ni:d/	[nɪd], [ned]	/i:/ shortened or lowered
garage	/ˈɡærɑ:ʒ/, /ˈɡærɪdʒ/	[ˈgerɑ:dʒ]	/æ/ → [e]
language	/ˈlæŋɡwɪdʒ/	[ˈlɛŋɡweɪdʒ]	/æ/ → [e]; unstressed /ɪ/ → [eɪ]
start	/stɑ:t/	[stɑ:rt]	/r/ pronounced
car	/kɑ:/	[kɑ:r], [kar], [kɔr]	/r/ pronounced; vowel shortened or rounded
not	/nɒt/	[nɑ:t]	/ɒ/ → [ɑ:]
walk	/wɔ:k/	[wɑ:k]	/ɔ:/ → [ɑ:]
call	/kɔ:l/	[kɑ:l]	/ɔ:/ → [ɑ:]

turn	/tɜ:n/	[tɜrn]	/ɜ:/ → [e] + [r]
hurt	/hɜ:t/	[hɜrt]	/ɜ:/ → [ɔ] + [r]
slipper	/ˈslɪpə/	[ˈslɪpɔr]	final /ə/ → [ɔ] + [r]

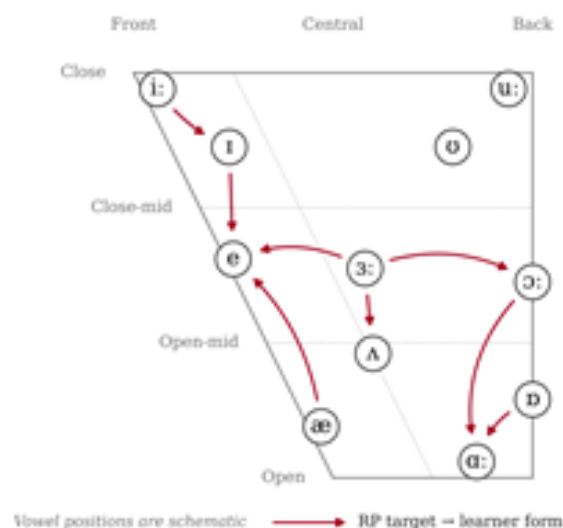


Figure 3: Vowel substitutions observed in the reading task, shown on a schematic vowel chart (/ɔ/ in *hurt* is placed at the position of /ɔ:/)

Diphthongs

The centring diphthongs /ɪə/ and /eə/ were affected by the spelling <r>: *ear* and *here* were pronounced [eər] and [heər], with the first element lowered and an [r] added, and *there* was pronounced [ðeər]. The closing diphthong /eɪ/ was reduced to a monophthong, as in *play* [ple], and /əʊ/ was replaced by a long Pashto-like [o:] (Table 3).

Table 3: Diphthong errors observed in the reading task

Word	RP form	Learner form	Deviation
ear	/ɪə/	[eər]	/ɪə/ → [eə] + [r]
here	/hɪə/	[heər]	/ɪə/ → [eə] + [r]
there	/ðeə/	[ðeər]	[r] added
play	/pleɪ/	[ple]	/eɪ/ → [e]

Consonants

The most widespread consonant error involved the semi-vowel /w/. Every participant replaced it with the labiodental [v], so that *want*, *ward* and *with* were heard as [vɑ:nt], [vɔ:d] and [vɪð]. The dental fricatives were replaced by stops: /θ/ in *thing* was

produced as an aspirated [tʰ], and /ð/ in *then* as a dental [d] or [tʰ]. Most learners did not aspirate the voiceless plosives /p/, /t/ and /k/ at the start of stressed syllables. The /r/ was pronounced in every position where it appears in the spelling, including word-finally and before consonants, as in *water* ['wɔ:tə] and *better* ['betə]. Most learners also pronounced the silent final /b/ of *climb* (Table 4). Some consonants caused no difficulty. All learners produced the affricates /tʃ/ and /dʒ/ correctly in words such as *chapter*, *chief* and *knowledge*, and pronounced word-initial /l/ without problems. The nasals /m/, /n/ and /ŋ/ were also produced accurately apart from the /b/ in *climb*. Beyond individual sounds, learners often placed stress on the wrong syllable of longer words.

Table 4: Consonant errors observed in the reading task

Word	RP form	Learner form	Deviation
want	/wɒnt/	[vɑ:nt]	/w/ → [v]; /ɒ/ → [ɑ:]
ward	/wɔ:d/	[vɔ:d]	/w/ → [v]
with	/wið/	[við]	/w/ → [v]
thing	/θɪŋ/	[tʰɪŋ]	/θ/ → [tʰ]
then	/ðen/	[dɛn], [tʰen]	/ð/ → dental stop
water	/'wɔ:tə/	['wɔ:tə]	final /ə/ → [e] + [r]; /ɔ:/ shortened
better	/'betə/	['betə]	final /ə/ → [e] + [r]
climb	/klaɪm/	[klaɪmb]	silent pronounced

Likely Sources of the Errors

Table 5 groups the observed patterns by their most likely source. Most can be traced to the Pashto sound system: sounds that Pashto lacks (/θ/, /ð/, /ɜ:/, /ɒ/), contrasts that Pashto does not make (/v/-/w/, /i:/-/ɪ/), and Pashto phonetic habits such as unaspirated stops. A second group follows English spelling. Several patterns, particularly the pronunciation of /r/ after vowels and full vowels in unstressed syllables, fit both explanations, and both are also features of Pakistani English more generally.

Table 5: Observed error patterns grouped by likely source

Likely source	Error patterns	Examples
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Pashto transfer	/w/ → [v]; /θ ð/ → dental stops; unaspirated /p t k/; /ɪ/ → [e]; /ɒ ɔ:/ → [ɑ:]; /ɜ:/ replaced; /eɪ/ → [e]; /əʊ/ → [o:]; misplaced word stress	with, thing, then, kit, walk, turn, play
English spelling	Silent letters pronounced; spelling-based vowels in <-age>	climb, language
Both	/r/ pronounced after vowels; full vowels for unstressed /ə/; /ɪə/ → [eə]	car, start, water, better, slipper, here

Questionnaire Findings

The questionnaire responses help explain these patterns. The participants differed in the medium of their earlier schooling, some having studied through English and others through Urdu. None of them had an English-speaking environment at home, and only a few said they used English with friends or teachers. A few listened to English news or channels, but most did not, and their answers about watching English films were almost entirely negative. Asked how they work out the pronunciation of a new word, most said they follow its spelling, and some said they ask friends or classmates. Few had ever spoken with a native speaker of English, and those who had found native speech hard to follow because they had so little experience of it. When asked why Pakistanis speak English with different accents, some pointed to the influence of their first languages and others to differences in the standard of teaching.

Discussion

The errors observed in this study closely match what a comparison of Pashto and English predicts (Table 1), and they agree with earlier work on Pashto-speaking university students. The replacement of the dental fricatives by stops and the confusion of /i:/ and /ɪ/ were also reported by Khan et al. [8], and the use of dental for interdental sounds appears among Pashto-speaking students in the study by Bilal et al. [9]. Biland and Irshad [10], by contrast, found that undergraduates at the University of Buner kept the vowel contrasts they tested acoustically distinct; the difference may reflect the higher level of their participants and their controlled minimal-pair task. That intermediate students in a rural district show many

of the same consonant patterns as university students suggests that these patterns are established early and are not corrected by further years of English study. In the terms of the SLM-r, sounds such as /ɪ/ and /ɔ:/ appear to have been absorbed into the nearest Pashto categories rather than learned as new ones [13].

The near-universal use of [v] for /w/ deserves particular attention. Pashto has a single labial approximant, and in Pakistani English the two sounds are often not distinguished [19], so learners have neither a first-language contrast nor a local model to draw on. The questionnaire results point the same way. The SLM-r predicts that the amount and quality of input shape how accurately learners form new sound categories, and these students reported almost no contact with spoken English outside the classroom. With little listening experience, they have no basis for hearing the difference between sounds such as /ɒ/ and /ɑ:/ or /ɪ/ and /i:/, let alone producing it.

Spelling played a clear role. Most participants said they work out new words from their spelling, and several errors, such as the /b/ in *climb* and the full vowel in *language*, follow directly from the written form. This is consistent with evidence that instructed learners who meet words mainly in print continue to be influenced by spelling even

after years of study [15]. The pronunciation of /r/ after vowels is a special case, since it is both a spelling effect and a normal feature of Pakistani English [19]; it is unlikely to cause misunderstanding, and the Lingua Franca Core in fact favours a rhotic /r/ [7].

Not every error is equally important. Using the Lingua Franca Core as a guide [7], the errors that most threaten intelligibility are those affecting the consonant inventory (the /v/-/w/ distinction), aspiration of /p t k/, vowel length (/ɪ/-/i:/) and the quality of /ɜ:/, all of which appeared in these data. The dental fricatives, by contrast, are routinely replaced by many speakers of English worldwide without loss of intelligibility, and rhotic /r/ is acceptable. Teachers in Buner would therefore gain most by concentrating on the first group. Practical steps include minimal-pair listening and production work (*vest-west*, *ship-sheep*, *pin-bin*), demonstration of lip rounding and aspiration, regular use of dictionary pronunciations, and explicit teaching of common spelling-sound patterns such as silent letters and the reduced vowel in unstressed syllables. Since meta-analyses show that pronunciation instruction produces real gains [20,21], the main obstacle is not the method but teachers' own training and the absence of pronunciation from the syllabus and examinations. Figure 4 summarises these priorities.

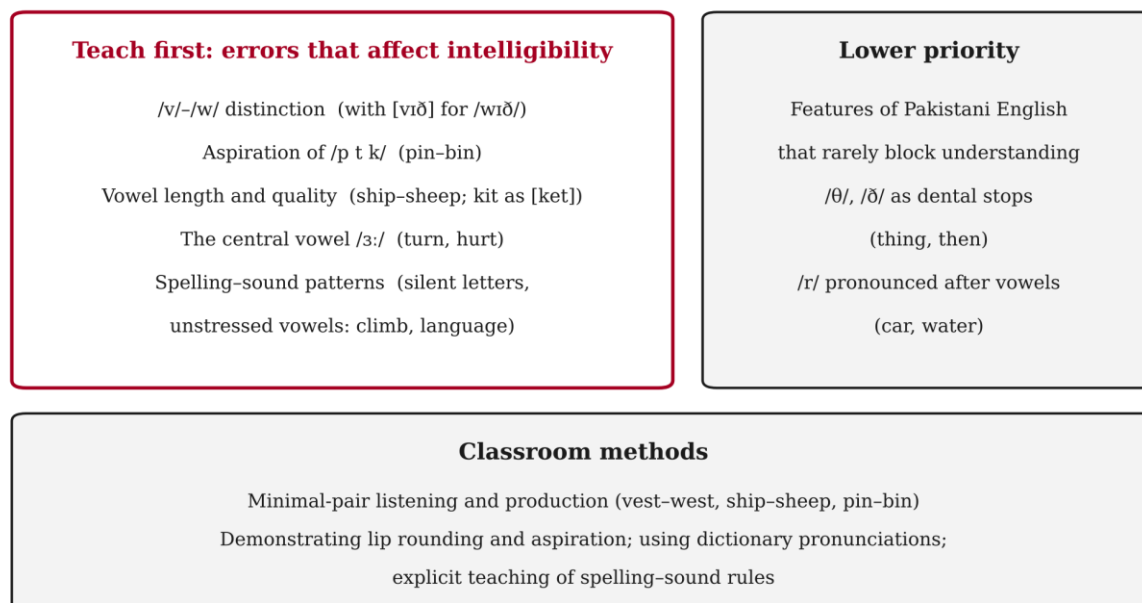


Figure 4: Teaching priorities suggested by the findings

Strengths and Limitations

The study adds evidence on a population that has received little attention, intermediate students in a

rural Pashto-speaking district, and it links each error to a likely source, which gives teachers a basis for choosing how to respond. Its limitations should

be kept in mind. The sample was small and included only male students, so the findings describe the kinds of errors that occur rather than how often they occur in the wider population. Pronunciation was judged auditorily by a single researcher, without acoustic analysis or a second rater, and only read speech was examined. Suprasegmental features such as stress and intonation were noted but not analysed in detail.

Future Perspective

Future studies in Buner should use larger samples that include female students, record the participants so that error frequencies can be counted and checked by a second rater, and include spontaneous speech alongside reading. Listener-based ratings of intelligibility would show which errors actually cause misunderstanding, and an intervention study targeting the /v/-/w/ distinction, aspiration and vowel length would test whether short, focused instruction can change these established habits.

Conclusion

This study examined the English pronunciation of Pashto-speaking intermediate students in District Buner. The learners' errors were systematic and largely predictable. The most widespread were the use of [v] for /w/, dental stops for /θ/ and /ð/, unaspirated /p t k/, [e] for /ɪ/, unrounded [a:] for /ɒ/ and /ɔ:/, and difficulty with /ɜ:/. Most of these can be traced to the sound system of Pashto, while others, such as sounded silent letters and full vowels in unstressed syllables, come from reading English as it is spelled. The learners' very limited exposure to spoken English and their habit of working out pronunciation from spelling help explain why these patterns persist after ten years of English study. Pronunciation teaching in Buner does not need to aim at a native accent. It should concentrate on the few features that most affect intelligibility, teach spelling-sound patterns explicitly, and be supported by teacher training and by the inclusion of speaking and pronunciation in the syllabus and in assessment.

Appendix A: Key to the Phonetic Symbols

The table explains every phonetic symbol used in this article. Example words are given in their British (RP) pronunciation unless they are marked as a learner form.

Table A1: Phonetic symbols and notation used in this article

Symbol	Meaning	Example
Notation		
/ /	Target sound (phoneme) of British English	/kit/ <i>kit</i>
[]	Sound actually produced by the learner	[ket] for <i>kit</i>
< >	Spelling (letters), not sound	 in <i>climb</i>
:	Long vowel	/i:/ in <i>need</i>
'	Stress on the following syllable	/'betə/ <i>better</i>
^h	Aspiration (puff of air)	[t ^h] for /θ/ in <i>thing</i>
[d]	Dental d (tongue touches the upper teeth)	for /ð/ in <i>then</i>
→	"was pronounced as"	/ɪ/ → [e]
Vowels		
/i:/	Long front vowel	<i>need, sheep</i>
/ɪ/	Short front vowel	<i>kit, swim</i>
/e/	Short mid front vowel	<i>bed</i>
/æ/	Short open front vowel	<i>cat, language</i>
/ʌ/	Short central vowel	<i>cup</i>
/ɑ:/	Long open back vowel	<i>car, start</i>
/ɒ/	Short rounded back vowel	<i>not</i>
/ɔ:/	Long rounded back vowel	<i>walk, call</i>
/o/	Short rounded back vowel	<i>book</i>
/u:/	Long rounded back vowel	<i>food</i>
/ɜ:/	Long central vowel	<i>turn, hurt</i>
/ə/	Weak central vowel (schwa) in unstressed syllables	<i>about, better</i>
[ɔ], [o:]	Short and long rounded vowels in learner forms	[hɔrt] for <i>hurt</i>
/eɪ/	Closing diphthong	<i>play, day</i>

/əʊ/	Closing diphthong	<i>go, home</i>
/aʊ/	Closing diphthong	<i>now</i>
/ɪə/	Centring diphthong	<i>here, ear</i>
/eə/	Centring diphthong	<i>there</i>
Consonants		
/p t k/	Voiceless plosives, aspirated at the start of stressed syllables	<i>pin, tea, cold</i>
/θ/, /ð/	Voiceless and voiced dental fricatives	<i>thing; then, with</i>
/f/, /v/	Labiodental fricatives (lower lip and upper teeth)	<i>fan; van, vest</i>
/w/	Semi-vowel made with rounded lips	<i>want, west</i>
[v]	Sound between /v/ and /w/, common in Pakistani English	for /w/ in <i>want</i>
/z/	Voiced post-alveolar fricative	<i>measure, garage</i>
/tʃ/, /dʒ/	Affricates	<i>chief; knowledge</i>
/ŋ/	Velar nasal	<i>sing, thing</i>
/g/	Voiced velar	<i>gold</i>

	plosive	
/r/	r-sound; in RP only before a vowel	<i>red</i> (silent in <i>car</i>)
/x/, /ɣ/	Pashto velar fricatives (no English equivalent)	—
/ts/, /dz/	Pashto affricates (no English equivalent)	—

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Use of AI tools

The authors used Claude (Anthropic) for help with language editing. All content was checked and revised by the authors, who take full responsibility for it.

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