

EXPERIENCED ESL TEACHERS' ATTITUDES TOWARDS USING PHONETIC SYMBOLS IN TEACHING ENGLISH PRONUNCIATION TO ADULT ESL STUDENTS

Oxana Kodirova, Brigham Young University

Lynn Henrichsen, Brigham Young University

Different opinions exist about the use of phonetic symbols in teaching English pronunciation to second language learners. However, little empirical research has been done to find out ESL teachers' opinions about the use of this linguistic tool. For this reason, via an online survey this study sought to identify ESL teachers' attitudes towards the use of phonetic symbols in teaching ESL pronunciation. A total of 120 teachers—most of them experienced in teaching pronunciation—took the survey. The analyses of qualitative data identified a contradiction between the teachers' opinions and what they practiced in class. On the one side, the teachers had predominantly positive attitudes towards the use of phonetic symbols, and about 80% of them agreed that it was a valuable use of class time. Despite this, one third of the teachers surveyed (n=40) did not report using phonetic symbols in their teaching. In addition, though the teachers said the main reason to teach phonetic symbols was to enable student independent learning, only three respondents reported using phonetic symbols for this purpose. The results of the study suggest that one of the factors causing this contradiction may be ESL teachers' lack of training in teaching phonetic symbols.

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INTRODUCTION

The standard orthography of many languages (including English) does not always represent the pronunciation of words accurately. The purpose of phonetic alphabets is to overcome this discrepancy between oral and written forms, providing a consistent one-to-one relationship between each symbol and the speech sound it represents (Avery & Ehrlich, 1992; Phonetic transcription, 2020, para. 2). One of the oldest and the most widely known phonetic alphabets is the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA).

Since it is hard to predict the pronunciation of English words from the way they are spelled, phonetic symbols have been used in teaching English pronunciation since the end of the 19th century (Celce-Murcia, Brinton, & Goodwin, 2010, Reed & Levis, 2015). However, it is unclear to what extent phonetic symbols are still part of language instruction nowadays. On the one hand, most dictionaries, many computer-assisted language learning sources, applications, textbooks, and even YouTube videos on pronunciation employ phonetic symbols, expecting users to know what the symbols stand for (see Figures 1-5). However, in language classroom teaching the use of phonetic symbols is not usually considered indispensable and often depends on the teacher's personal decision. As Mompean and Lintunen (2015) state, “[t]eachers are often uncertain as to whether to use phonetic notation or not. Their eventual decision is typically based on their own experiences as learners themselves” (p. 293).

The main objective of the study reported here was to find out whether (a) ESL teachers use phonetic symbols as a tool in their pronunciation instruction, and (b) what they think of the effectiveness of this tool.

Figure 1

Examples of Transcribed Words from Keynote Intermediate Student’s Book, Dummett, P., Stephenson, H., and Lansford, L. (2017, p. 10).

The image shows a screenshot of a lesson page titled "TED TALKS". It contains two columns of text. The left column has three numbered items: 1. A video icon and text: "Mark Bezos tells a story about a time he went to help at a fire. Watch the TED Talk. Choose the lesson (a-c) that you think Mark Bezos wants us to learn." followed by three options (a, b, c). 2. Text: "Work in pairs. What example did Mark Bezos give to illustrate this lesson? Discuss with your partner." The right column has one numbered item: 3. A video icon and text: "Watch the first part (0.00-1.06) of the talk again. Choose the correct option to make true sentences." followed by four numbered options. Below the text, there are two phonetic transcription examples. The first is "10 ▶ profit /'prɒfɪt/ N AM ENG" with a red arrow pointing to the word "profit" in the text above. Below it is "▶ profit /'prɒfɪt/ BR ENG". The second is "▶ gotten /'gɒt(a)n/ N AM ENG" with a red arrow pointing to the word "gotten" in the text above. Below it is "▶ got /gɒt/ BR ENG".

Figure 2

The Transcription of the Word “Water” in Google Translate.

The image shows a screenshot of the Google Translate interface. At the top, it says "Google Translate". Below that, there are two tabs: "Text" and "Documents". Under "Text", there are two language selection options: "ENGLISH - DETECTED" and "ENGLISH". The word "water" is entered in the input field. Below the input field, the phonetic transcription "ˈwɔːtər" is shown, with a red arrow pointing to it. Below the transcription, there are two icons: a download icon and a speaker icon. At the bottom, there is a section titled "Definitions of water" with the word "Verb" listed below it.

Figure 3

The Word “Bed” Transcribed in the Macmillan Dictionary



Figure 4

The Word Bed Transcribed at Dictionary.com



Figure 5

Example of Phonetic Symbols Used in One of the YouTube Pronunciation Video Instruction



Literature Review

Authors and researchers mention several reasons for using phonetic symbols in ESL/EFL classes. First, phonetic symbols help overcome the lack of invariable sound-spelling correspondence in English (Atkielski, 2019; Avery & Ehrlich, 1992; Heselwood, 2013; Wells, 1996; Yoshida, 2013).

Also, phonetic notation can serve as an effective tool to represent the speech sounds visually transforming them into a concept with a greater degree of tangibility (Beghoul, 2017; Pištora, 2017;). In other words, the visual display of sounds “enables the students to comprehend the elements of pronunciation visually as well as aurally” (Celce-Murcia et al., 2010, p. 54). It increases the students’ ability to differentiate between the sounds because they can see what they cannot hear.

In addition, phonetic symbols can be helpful in making pronunciation teaching more explicit. Arleo (1993) regards phonetic symbols as a “rational framework for pronunciation,” functioning similarly to grammatical explanations that “can save time for learners by allowing them to spot regular patterns in the target language” (p. 44). Thus, phonetic symbols increase students’ awareness of English phonemes. Another advantage of using phonetic symbols in class is enabling students’ independent learning. As Celce-Murcia et al. (2010) state, students who can decipher phonetically transcribed words in their dictionaries “will be better equipped to check pronunciation autonomously” (p. 54).

In contrast to these advantages of the use of phonetic symbols in class, there are also several reasons why teachers may avoid using phonetic symbols. First, there is no agreement among different sources in terms of which phonetic alphabet to use. For example, as shown in Figure 1, some sources employ the IPA to represent both British and American accents. However, Google Dictionary, prefers a different set of symbols (See Figure 2). Furthermore, since the IPA was first introduced, several different versions of the IPA symbols used to represent English sounds have been developed (Yoshida, 2013). For example, the Macmillian Dictionary and Dictionary.com transcribe the vowel in *bed* differently, as /e/ and /ɛ/ respectively. (See Figures 3-4). One of the reasons for such a variety of symbol sets is that the goal of the IPA, as the International Phonetic Association claims, is not to provide “a single ‘correct’ transcription, but rather the resources to express any analysis so that it is widely understood” (IPA, 1999, p. 30). Depending on the purpose and context, it can be used in different ways. Some authors may feel it necessary to adapt a transcription system used for a particular language to meet the needs of learners and teachers better (Wells, 2001, para. 1; Yoshida, 2013, p. 23). Therefore, the practice of different authors’ and phoneticians’ employing different sets of symbols usually are justifiable. However, language learners and teachers often are unaware of those reasons and get confused when they see the same English words transcribed differently in different sources (Roach, 2009).

Furthermore, success using phonetic symbols in class is unlikely without understanding phonetic theory and having experience both in using and teaching them. Unfortunately, since the teaching of pronunciation has been a neglected area in ESL/EFL teacher preparation for quite a long time (Alghazo, 2015; Beghoul, 2017; Derwing & Munro, 2005; Morley, 1991), teacher training programs often lack instruction relating to phonetics and phonology (Mompean & Lintunen, 2015). Because of insufficient training, many language teachers either feel a lack of confidence while teaching pronunciation and tend to avoid it or do not consider it important at all (Hismanoglu & Hismanoglu, 2010). Consequently, teachers may not use phonetic symbols in their classes despite the advantages of using these symbols (Atkielski, 2019; Henderson et al., 2015; Heselwood, 2013).

Another objection to using phonetic transcription in ESL classes is the fact that students have to master additional symbols that are not part of the traditional English (Roman) alphabet. This task may be overwhelming, especially for those whose native language is not based on the Latin alphabet (Beghoul, 2017; Pištora, 2017). Also, since pronunciation is usually considered to be the least important objective in an ESL course, teachers may feel they do not have enough time to teach phonetic symbols to their students (Arleo, 1993; Mompean & Lintunen, 2015). Finally, phonetic

transcription is not the only teaching tool that can be used to achieve the goal of improved pronunciation. To demonstrate the distribution of sounds, teachers may use numbers (Brown, 1991), colors (Thompson & Taylor, n.d.), respelling (Pištora, 2017), gestures and pointers (Allegra, 2018) or a combination of tools.

So, in the midst of these conflicting pros and cons, what do ESL teachers think about phonetic symbols? Unfortunately, very few studies have investigated this question, especially in teaching ESL. Most of the studies on this topic have dealt with teaching EFL. Though many studies have investigated ESL pronunciation teaching (Breitkreutz, Derwing, & Rossiter, 2001; Burgess & Spencer, 2000; Burns, 2006; Foote et al., 2011; Macdonald, 2002), very few have addressed the use of phonetic symbols, and none have investigated the teachers' views on the use of phonetic symbols.

Research Questions

Our specific research questions in the study reported here were as follows:

1. How do experienced ESL pronunciation teachers use phonetic symbols?
2. Do teachers' opinions for or against using phonetic symbols correspond to the pros and cons mentioned in the literature review?

METHODS

An anonymous online electronic survey was designed based on the research questions. It contained 23 (multiple choice, open-ended, and Likert scale) questions and consisted of two parts, one about the participants' demographics and professional experience and another addressing their opinions (See Appendix).

Participants

Overall, 120 ESL teachers participated in this study. However, some of the participants did not complete all the survey questions. Therefore, in the analysis, the number of respondents for a given item varies and will be indicated in brackets throughout this report. Participants for this study were recruited primarily from the English Language Center (ELC) at Brigham Young University, Utah, USA (≈ 50 participants) and from an online electronic discussion group consisting of over one hundred ESL pronunciation teaching experts (≈ 65 participants). A total of 104 participants reported having ESL teaching experience. Hence, the results can be considered as ESL teachers' opinions. The amount of ESL teaching experience varied widely. The average number of years was 10 with $SD = 7$ and ranging from less than a year to more than 20 years of experience.

The majority of the respondents (83%) were native speakers of English ($n=112$) and mostly (67%) from the USA ($n=117$). In their university education, half of the teachers (51%) majored in TESOL and 23% in Linguistics ($n=118$). Other majors were foreign language education, business administration, law enforcement, food science, education, mathematics, speech language pathology, anthropology, phonetics, and language testing.

Data Analysis

The qualitative data were analyzed using grounded theory methodology. For greater reliability, about one third of the data (on disadvantages of phonetic symbols) was reviewed by another rater. The agreement rate between the raters was of 94%.

RESULTS

A total of 94 respondents (out of 109 who answered the question about teaching experience) confirmed having experience teaching pronunciation to adult ESL students. They were further asked by means of a multiple-choice question what pronunciation teaching methods they used. Instruction using phonetic symbols was chosen by 54 respondents. About 75% of these respondents belonged to the listserv group. Among ELC teachers who reported using phonetic symbols in their work, only five teachers had less than five years of teaching ESL experience. Thus, the results are mostly the opinions of experienced pronunciation teachers.

Research Question 1

The first research question asked how experienced ESL pronunciation teachers use phonetic symbols. Focusing on specific sounds that are especially difficult (mostly vowels, the schwa sound, and certain consonants) was the most frequently mentioned way respondents used phonetic symbols in class. The number of responses that addressed this idea was 15. As one of the participants explained “[s]ometimes they [phonetic symbols] are not needed unless there is a novel sound, or if a students' L1 has only one sound where the L2 has two, it can be useful to have a symbol to represent it.”

Showing the contrast between sounds was another commonly mentioned class activity involving phonetic symbols (11 responses). The respondents used symbols to show the difference between minimal pairs and explain the pronunciation of homographs and words that are typically confusing to ESL students (e.g., “desert” vs “dessert,” “ether” vs “either,” etc.).

Seven respondents pointed out that phonetic symbols help the teachers and their students be “on the same page,” knowing exactly which sound/s they are working on. As one participant said, “[w]hen introducing a new sound or sound contrast, I often use a symbol that indicates the sound. They [phonetic symbols] are not a big deal and students don't have to memorize them, but they allow me an easier way to talk about a sound.”

Five participants mentioned the use of phonetic symbols to raise their students' awareness. One teacher provided some details on the process, “[a]t the beginning of the semester, I teach my students basic IPA and test them on knowing the symbols/anatomy involved in American English sounds. This sets them up for better understanding the lessons in the class and gives them the power to better analyze their own speech.” In addition, other class activities involving phonetic symbols were mentioned (the number of responses mentioning the activity is shown in parentheses):

- Teaching spelling and reading (5)

- Explaining the articulation of English sounds (4)
- Introducing and practicing vocabulary (4)
- Teaching how to use dictionaries (3)
- Transcribing words, phrases and sentences (3)
- Providing feedback (2)

Research Question 2

The second research question investigated ESL teachers' opinions about the use of phonetic symbols in teaching pronunciation. The results showed that 82% of 107 participants considered phonetic-symbols based instruction a valuable use of class time (see Figure 6). Furthermore, as Figure 7 demonstrates, 88% of 107 participants agreed that the students' ability to figure out the pronunciation of words in dictionaries with the help of phonetic symbols was an important skill to teach.

Figure 6

Responses to the item "I think using phonetic symbols to teach pronunciation is a valuable use of class time."

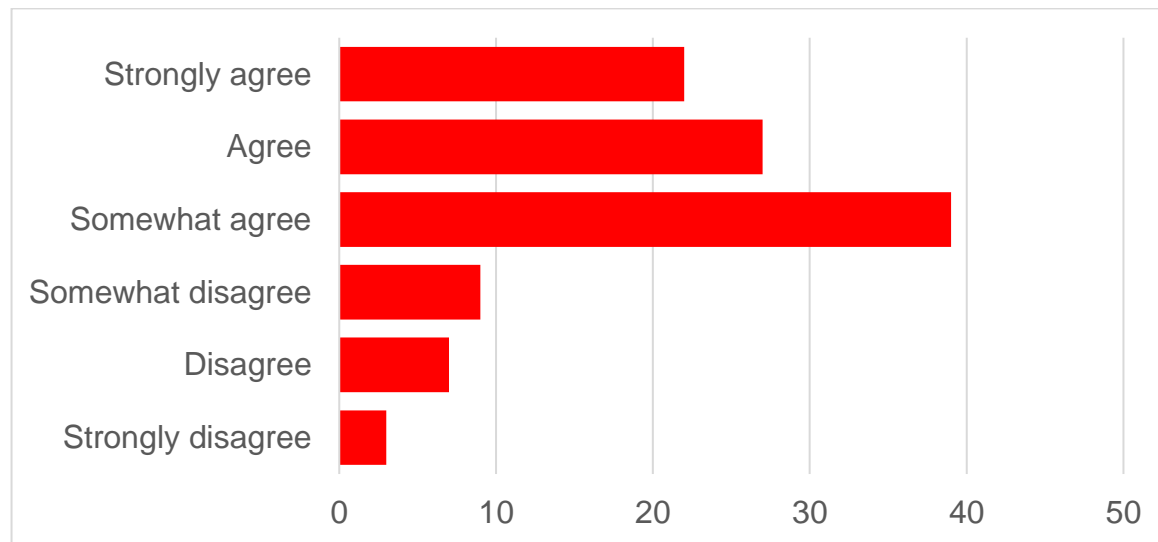
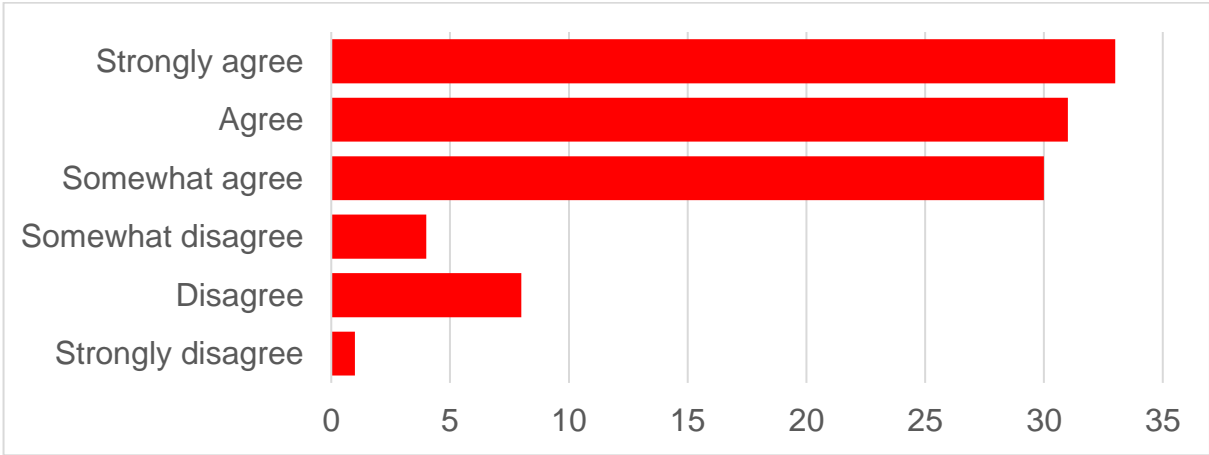


Figure 7

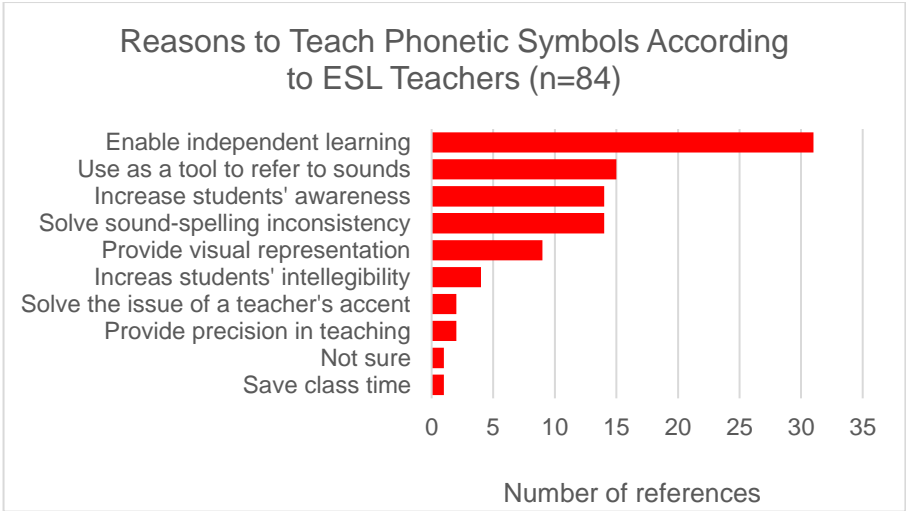
Responses to the item “I think ESL students’ ability to look up a word and figure out its pronunciation with the help of a phonetic alphabet outside the classroom is a useful skill that is worth teaching.”



As Figure 8 shows, helping students develop the skill to check pronunciation autonomously in their dictionaries was by far the most frequently mentioned benefit of learning phonetic symbols. As one respondent with seven years of teaching experience reported, “I have had multiple students use their understanding of phonetics to look up words on their own. It helps them be independent and build skills without the need for teacher feedback.”

Figure 8

Responses to the item “What (if any) are the advantages of using/teaching phonetic symbols in ESL classroom?”

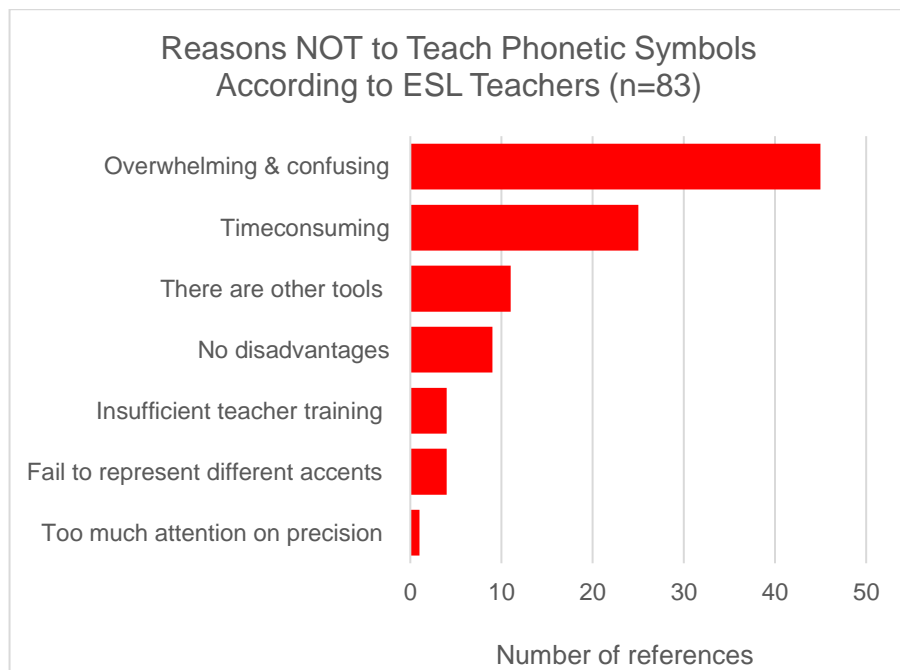


Eighty-three participants shared their thoughts about the disadvantages of the use of phonetic symbols in teaching pronunciation (Figure 9). Overall, there were 45 references to phonetic symbols as “difficult,” “overwhelming,” “burdening,” “complicated,” “stressful,” “confusing,” even “daunting,” etc. In about 90% of the situations, the respondents related this to the necessity for

students to remember an extra set of symbols apart from the regular English alphabet. The most common concern expressed by the respondents was about novice level students, students with poor literacy skills, and those whose first language does not use the Latin alphabet. For example, a listserv member with more than 20 years of ESL-teaching experience, who used phonetic symbols in teaching pronunciation stated: “[o]ccasionally a student who is less literate in their L1 or has less formal education can get overwhelmed at this new code.” Only two respondents connected the idea of phonetic symbols being confusing with the problem of different inventories of symbols. “[d]ictionaries and textbooks often use different symbol sets, so this can be confusing for students,” explained one of them. Three responses which reported phonetic symbols as possibly being confusing were related to teachers instead of students. For example, a listserv member who had 21 years of ESL-teaching experience, admitted “[s]ymbols are confusing. Honestly, I struggle to remember them.”

Figure 9

Responses to the item “What (if any) are the disadvantages of using/teaching phonetic symbols in ESL classrooms?”



DISCUSSION

The results not only showed that the participants’ views on advantages and disadvantages of the use of phonetic symbols in teaching pronunciation coincided with the reasons mentioned in the literature review but also revealed a contradiction between teachers’ opinions and their actual practice in class.

Overall, 82% of the participants, including those who hadn’t ever resorted to phonetic symbols in teaching, considered the use of this tool a valuable way to spend class time. And yet, the fact that teaching the symbols takes too much time was one of the most frequently reported problems. Students’ ability to decipher the pronunciation of phonetically transcribed words in dictionaries on their own was regarded as a useful skill worth teaching by 88% of the participants, and this skill was

the most frequently mentioned advantage of the use of phonetic symbols in ESL teaching. However, only three participants reported that at the time they took the survey they were actually teaching phonetic symbols to their students to help them use dictionaries independently.

The two main challenges that survey respondents confronted while teaching phonetic symbols (cognitive overload for students and lack of class time) can serve as a possible explanation for this contradiction. However, some of the teachers reported that it is possible to teach phonetic symbols within a short period of time and without overwhelming students. As one ELC teacher with more than 20 years of teaching ESL experience reported, “I can quickly and easily teach it [a phonetic alphabet], and I do teach it.” Another comment from one of the listserv respondents (11 years of ESL teaching experience) stated that “[s]ome teachers are scared of using the [IPA] chart as they are not confident to use it. In my experience as a teacher trainer, once the teachers are familiar with the chart, they are keen to use it with their learners.” Some authors support these ideas. For example, Atkielski (2019) states that “once they [students] learn the IPA (which they can often manage in an hour or two ...), the advantages of being able to understand and write phonetic transcriptions more than compensate for the time required to learn the alphabet” (p. 2). If these assumptions are true and it is feasible to teach phonetic symbols in a simple way without spending too much time on it, then it’s reasonable to suppose that the remaining challenges with respect to phonetic symbols instruction are caused by teachers’ lack of training.

According to our results, formal study was the main source of the participants’ knowledge about phonetics and phonology. However, there is a difference between instruction that provides knowledge about a linguistic topic and instruction that demonstrates how to teach this topic to others, especially to students without any linguistic background (Mompean & Lintunen, 2015). Therefore, even if ESL teachers are introduced to a phonetic alphabet, as a part of a linguistic course, it doesn’t mean they know how to teach it to students. Some of the survey participants’ comments illustrated this point vividly. “To me, the IPA is more of a linguistic tool than a teaching tool,” stated one of them. “I am not sure how to introduce difficult linguistic terms like alveolar, fricatives, etc. Thus, it may take many hours of class time,” responded another one (neither of these two respondents reported using phonetic symbols in class).

In sum, our study indicates that many teachers remain ill-informed regarding how to use phonetic symbols and concerned about spending too much time on them and overwhelming students. Consequently, if ESL teacher educators can help new teachers overcome these obstacles, the benefits of phonetic symbols may improve the quality of pronunciation instruction generally in the future. For instance, teachers may instruct their students how to check the pronunciation of words in dictionaries more often. Therefore, we recommend the inclusion of phonetic symbol instruction in ESL teacher-education programs—at least as an optional element.

Study Limitations

The study had some limitations. First, it was based on one type of data collection (an online survey) and was not supported by any other data collection approaches. In addition, the sample we used included mostly teachers with experience in teaching pronunciation. Therefore, our results can be considered representative of experienced ESL pronunciation teachers but not of the general population of ESL teachers. In the future, it would be helpful to survey ESL teachers both with and without pronunciation teaching experience.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Oxana Kodirova received her MA in TESOL at Brigham Young University, Utah, USA. She has been working as an EFL/ESL teacher since 2004 and is currently teaching ESL. In addition, she is working on her MA in Linguistics at Brigham Young University. Her main research interests are second language acquisition and neurolinguistics. Contact information: ksemiarostov@gmail.com

Lynn E. Henrichsen is a professor emeritus of TESOL in the Linguistics Department at Brigham Young University. In his nearly 50-year career as a language teacher and teacher educator, he has taught various courses in ESL pronunciation, as well as in how to teach pronunciation to English language learners. Contact information: LynnHenrichsen1@gmail.com

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Appendix.

Teacher questionnaire



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LANGUAGE

How many years of formal education do you have?

- Less than High School
- High school graduate
- Some college
- 2 year degree
- 4 year degree
- Professional degree
- Doctorate

What was your major or emphasis?

- TESOL
- World/Foreign Language Education
- Linguistics
- Other

In which country were you born?

How many years have you been teaching English as a second language to adults?

Please indicate how you learned about the following linguistics topics. Choose all that apply.

	Formal Study	Informal Study	None
Sounds (Phonetics, Phonology, etc.)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Meaning (Morphology, Semantics, Pragmatics, etc.)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Structure (Syntax, Grammar, etc.)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

With the following phonetic alphabets, what can you currently do without review or study?

	Very little to nothing	Can use it for my own language study	Can use it to teach students
International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA). Example: ['dɪstrɪ'bju:ʃ(ə)n]	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Google Phonetic Alphabet. Example: /dɪstrə'byooSHən/	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
LEAP. Example: /dɪstrə'byooSHən/	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Reading Horizons /dɪstrə'byuʃhɪn/	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other, please specify <input type="text"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Have you ever taught pronunciation to ESL adult students?

Yes

No

Other, please specify

What methods do you typically use in teaching pronunciation? Choose all that apply.

- Minimal Pairs
- Phonetic Alphabet Symbols Instruction
- Mirrors
- Drills (Listen & Repeat)
- Record and replay
- Articulation Demonstrations (Show diagrams of mouth)
- Other

How were you introduced to using the phonetic alphabet symbols for teaching pronunciation? Choose all that apply.

- One semester course entirely dedicated to pronunciation
- Part of Listening and Speaking course
- Part of General Teaching course
- Self study
- None
- Other, please specify

How confident are you in using the phonetic alphabet symbols that you know as a technique to teach students pronunciation?

Very little											Very much
0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Have you ever taught your students to use phonetic alphabet symbols to learn how to pronounce words on their own outside of class?

- Yes
- No
- Other, please specify

Could you explain briefly how you use Phonetic Alphabet Symbols Instruction in teaching pronunciation?

When you use phonetic alphabets in class, do you teach the whole alphabet or only selected symbols?

I teach the whole alphabet

I teach selected symbols

Other, please specify

Could you specify what symbols do you usually prefer to teach (for example, all vowels, th-sounds, shwa, the vowel in the word "cat", etc.)?

You didn't indicate "Phonetic Alphabet Symbols Instruction" Could you explain why?

I think using phonetic alphabet symbols to teach pronunciation is a valuable use of class time.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Somewhat agree
- Somewhat disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

If you were given a pronunciation course and didn't have an opportunity to do extra study or preparation, would you feel confident teaching your students how to use phonetic alphabet symbols (like IPA)?

- Not confident at all
- Slightly confident
- Somewhat confident
- Fairly confident
- Quite confident
- Completely confident

If you were given a pronunciation course and had the opportunity to do extra study and preparation, would you feel confident teaching your students how to use phonetic alphabet symbols (like IPA)?

- Not confident at all
- Slightly confident
- Somewhat confident
- Fairly confident
- Quite confident
- Completely confident

I would like to know more about teaching using phonetic alphabet symbols to my students.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Somewhat agree
- Somewhat disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

I think ESL students' ability to look up a word and figure out its pronunciation with the help of a phonetic alphabet outside the classroom is a useful skill that is worth teaching.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Somewhat agree
- Somewhat disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

What (if any) are the advantages of using/teaching phonetic alphabet symbols in ESL classroom?

What (if any) are the disadvantages of using/teaching phonetic alphabet symbols in ESL classroom?
