

TECHNOLOGY REVIEW

THE ENGLISH PRONUNCIATION BY YOBIMI GROUP

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INTRODUCTION

Intelligibility is the basis of successful oral communication. Our speech is said to be intelligible if the listeners can understand the message. In contrast, an appeal to native pronunciation has little connection to intelligibility (Derwing & Munro, 2015). The English Pronunciation by Yobimi group is a mobile application for beginner learners who have difficulties or questions on how to pronounce words properly and how to distinguish various English sounds. The application advertises that it will help its users “pronounce English like native speakers” (*English Pronunciation*, n.d.). It accommodates American and British English pronunciation training, and provides translation of the explanation of the sounds for Hindi, Vietnamese, and Portuguese L1 speakers. It also provides learners with exercises on phonetic symbols, which can improve the perception of L2 sounds (e.g., Fouz-González & Mompean, 2020; Mompean & Fouz-González, 2021). The app was released on Google Playstore in July 2016 and last updated in October 2020. It has more than 100,000 downloads and is also available on Apple store. There is no paid version of the app. Below, we describe the Android version followed by a general discussion of its strengths and weaknesses.

DESCRIPTION

The app is based on three main sections: Basic, Advanced, and Pronunciation Tips. Learners are free to select any lessons from any section without the need to follow a particular order. Short descriptions of each section will be provided next.

Basic Section

The Basic section provides lessons on segmentals (i.e., short vowels, long vowels, diphthongs, voiced consonants, and voiceless consonants, as in Figure 1). Each lesson provides a vocal tract image of the sound, a short explanation, along with examples of how it is produced in words, phrases, and sentences in either general US or UK varieties (see Figure 2). Learners can practice the sound in words, phrases and sentences by clicking the microphone button to record themselves. Then the app will give feedback on the screen as “Excellent” if the learners’ pronunciation was sufficiently accurate or “Keep trying” if it is not.

Figure 1
English Pronunciation App Interface



Figure 2
Some Features of the App



The book icon at the bottom right corner (see Figure 2) provides three additional activities (Listening, Writing, and Test Phonetic activities) related to the target sound (see Figure 3). In the Listening activity (see Figure 4), learners hear the target sound in a word, write the word they hear in the space provided, and then check their answer. The app gives feedback on the screen either as “correct” or “wrong”. The number of items in this exercise varies from 10 - 64 items per sound.

Figure 3
More Features in Basic section



Figure 4
Listening Activity



In the Writing activity (see Figure 5), learners see a word written in phonetic symbols, write the orthographic version of the word in the provided space, and click the button to check their answers. However, in the Testing phonetic activity (see Figure 6), the task is reversed. Learners are provided with the orthographic version of the word and they write its phonetics. The IPA symbols are provided on the screen. Learners click the check button to check their answers. In both activities, the app gives feedback on the screen as “correct” or “wrong”.

Figure 5
Writing Activity



Figure 6
Testing Phonetics Activity



Advanced Section

The Advanced section provides lessons on suprasegmentals. The topics are linking sounds (sixteen lessons), syllable stress (three lessons), sentence stress (nine lessons), and intonation (six lessons). All lessons provide a short explanation of the topic (see Figure 7) along with audio examples. However, only some lessons provide audio “Drill” exercises (see Figure 8). Answers to the exercises are shown by clicking the plus button before the word “Answer”. It should be noted here that the lessons in this section do not follow the same format; each lesson’s content and outline are different.

Figure 7
One Example of Linking Lessons



Figure 8
One Example of Intonation Lessons



Pronunciation Tips

The Pronunciation Tips section contains various topics: silent letters, homophones and homographs, pronounce specific word, pronounce specific spelling to sound, pronounce specific practice topic, and other lessons. All lessons in this section have a short explanation of the topic along with audio examples. As in the Advanced section, not all lessons have the same format or outline. Some lessons provide audio exercises with answer keys, while others only provide audio examples.

EVALUATION

In this section we evaluate the main strengths of this app, followed by some weaknesses. As to its strengths, the app nicely introduces the basic features of English pronunciation. All in all, the app has a user-friendly interface and can be navigated easily. It describes sounds along with an image of the vocal tract (i.e., the place of articulation). This feature is useful especially for beginners who may not perceive the target sound accurately (or at all) when they play the audio. On the other hand, the addition of the sound descriptions does not mean that learners will improve their L2 perceptions or acquire the L2 sound, but it does give them clues that may facilitate their noticing ability, especially if the description is given in the learners' L1, which the app does in three languages. Additionally, the app gives learners the choice to select from two major dialects in the English speaking world, General American or the British English. Another feature that we like is the interesting images at the beginning of each lesson which gives a nice touch to the app.

One more appealing feature is the option to listen to the pronunciation feature in sentences, phrases, or individual words. Learners can easily choose to listen to the target sound in a sentence if they want to know how the pronunciation feature appears in longer utterances that are similar to real-life situations. If they are not yet ready to process the pronunciation feature in sentences, they can listen in isolated words. Whatever option they prefer, a microphone button allows them to record themselves and check their production through Google speech recognition. Although the Google service is not always accurate in recognizing non-native speakers' production (Ashwell & Elam, 2017), giving learners a way to mimic the target sound is an added value of the app

Another feature in this app that might benefit beginner learners is the phonetic symbols provided in the examples and exercises. Users can learn how to pronounce the words correctly by matching the examples of the target sounds they hear with the phonetic symbols that they read. The use of phonetic symbols in pronunciation training might also help improve L2 learners' perception of L2 sounds. The app classifies different sounds under related headings (e.g., diphthongs, voiced consonants, etc.) which can help beginners stay focused and organized. However, the categorization is not always accurate. For example, the app puts the voiceless consonants under the voiced consonant heading and vice versa. This incorrect categorization could mislead beginner learners.

Weaknesses

There is always room for improvement in technology and this app is no exception. Considering that this is a pronunciation training app, users unfortunately cannot hear their recordings. We believe allowing users to hear themselves could help them acquire the target sounds faster. Moreover, although the app provides three translations of the written description (in Hindi, Vietnamese, and Portuguese), it does not give targeted pronunciation training based on these L1s. Thus, this is a key feature for future development of the app. For example, if a user selects Hindi as their L1, then they should receive pronunciation training on /v/ vs. /w/ sounds because Hindi speakers have been found to struggle with these two sounds (Grover et al., 2021). They should also have the opportunity to record themselves and compare their speech to that of more intelligible L2 examples (not necessary to be native speaker sounds).

In the Advanced and Pronunciation Tips sections, all the explanations are text-based. There are no visual materials provided (e.g., drawings or diagrams) to help illustrate new concepts, as provided in the Basic section. For some visual learners, the addition of this feature will be useful. Most importantly, detailed feedback based on learners' performance was not given. We expected the app to give learners thorough feedback using spectrograms and soundwaves to explain to the learners why their production was or was not accurate. This is a more complex feature but the idea here is to show learners why their speech is different from that of the target sound and what they should do to enhance it. Finally, the video feature is not working properly. We tried to play the videos from three different devices but they were not working, thus the app developers may need to look into this issue.

With a stated goal of achieving native speaker pronunciation, the app does not achieve what it is claimed to do. Nonetheless, it gives a well-rounded introduction of English pronunciation for beginners and is easy to use. It aims to help second language learners of English at the beginning of their journey in learning English pronunciation.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, English Pronunciation by Yobimi offers a comprehensive description of segmental and suprasegmental features along with examples and short activities. The app serves as self-access materials and that is useful for autonomous learners as well as regular classroom students. However, if it is to be used in classrooms, teachers might introduce this app after their students are comfortable reading phonetic symbols. Despite some weaknesses, the app has the potential to help English L2 learners to improve their pronunciation especially if it is accompanied by L2 oral production opportunities where thorough individual feedback is provided.

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