

Phonemic awareness and pronunciation difficulties of Grade 7 learners

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the relationship between phonemic awareness and pronunciation difficulties among Grade 7 Learners. Specifically, it determined the learners' level of phonemic awareness as well as assessing the pronunciation difficulties. Descriptive-correlational research designed was employed. There are 30 grade 7 learners who served as the participants of this study which are selected through stratified random sampling with equal allocation. The data were gathered using a modified Phonemic Awareness Diagnostic Test derived from Kilpatrick's Phonological Awareness Screening Test (PAST) and a researcher made pronunciation speaking task consisting of minimal pairs. Descriptive statistics such as mean and standard deviation were used to describe the variables, while Pearson's R was used to determine the relationship between phonemic awareness and pronunciation difficulties set at 0.05 level of significance. Findings revealed that the participants showed a very high level of phonemic awareness ($M=18.07$, $SD= 1.31$) and a low level of pronunciation difficulties ($M=8.29$, $SD=3.74$) Correlation analysis indicated a statistically significant negative relationship between phonemic awareness and pronunciation difficulties ($r=-0.546$, $p=0.002$) that suggests learner with strong phonemic awareness tended to show fewer pronunciation difficulties. The findings highlight the importance of integrating phonemic awareness instruction into English Language Teaching to strengthen learners' pronunciation and oral communication skills.

Keywords: Phonemic awareness, pronunciation difficulties, pronunciation, English language learning, Grade 7 learners, Philippines.

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INTRODUCTION

English is one of the official languages of the Philippines and serves as the primary medium of instruction across the educational continuum, from basic to higher education. Its widespread use provides Filipinos with opportunities to develop communicative competence and remain competitive in global communication, particularly in the fields of education, business, and tourism. Consequently, English language instruction emphasizes the development of learners' language skills to enable them to communicate effectively in academic and professional settings.

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Basic education prioritizes the development of foundational literacy skills, including phonological awareness and pronunciation. However, as learners advance to higher grade levels, instructional emphasis gradually shifts toward reading comprehension, critical thinking, and communicative competence. This shift often results in reduced attention to pronunciation development despite its important role in effective oral communication. Pronunciation remains one of the persistent challenges among Filipino learners of English. According to Abellana (2025), pronunciation difficulties have become a significant concern because they contribute to the decline in English language proficiency among Filipino learners. Difficulties in pronunciation negatively affect intelligibility, academic performance, and communication confidence, making it more challenging for learners to express their ideas clearly and participate actively in classroom interactions.

One factor associated with pronunciation is phonemic awareness. Phonemic awareness refers to the learners' ability to identify, recognize, and manipulate individual speech sounds in oral language (Yeong & Liow, 2012). As a component of phonological processing, phonemic awareness plays an important role in language acquisition and literacy development. It has also been associated with oral communication and second-language pronunciation. Wardana et al. (2023) reported that learners who demonstrate strong phonemic awareness also exhibit greater accuracy in speech production and pronunciation. Similarly, previous studies have established that phonemic awareness is a critical predictor of reading development, spelling, and word recognition, while also supporting learners' ability to perceive and produce speech sounds accurately.

In the Philippine context, learners are commonly exposed to multiple phonological systems because of the country's multilingual environment. This situation often results in first-language interference, wherein learners substitute familiar native-language sounds for unfamiliar English phonemes. Such substitutions may lead to pronunciation difficulties and reduced intelligibility, making effective oral communication more difficult. Existing studies have likewise reported that Filipino learners experience pronunciation patterns influenced by their first language, particularly in the production of consonants, vowels, stress, and intonation. These findings indicate that pronunciation difficulties among Filipino learners are systematic and are shaped by their linguistic background.

The relationship between phonemic awareness and pronunciation has received increasing attention in language research. Learners who can accurately recognize, manipulate, and distinguish phonemes are more likely to develop accurate phonological representations, which contribute to clearer and more intelligible speech. Research has shown that phonemic awareness training improves the perception and production of second-language sounds and supports pronunciation development beyond its established role in literacy instruction. Consequently, phonemic awareness has been recognized as an important component not only in reading acquisition but also in oral language production.

The present study was anchored on the Speech Learning Model of James Emil Flege (1995), the Perceptual Assimilation Model of Catherine Best (1995), and the Phonological Deficit Theory. The Speech Learning Model explains that learners experience pronunciation difficulties when they fail to establish new phonetic categories distinct from those of their first language, resulting in the substitution of familiar native-language sounds for unfamiliar second-language sounds. Complementing this perspective, the Perceptual Assimilation Model proposes that learners perceive unfamiliar speech sounds based on their existing native-language sound system, which may lead to inaccurate phonemic discrimination and pronunciation. Meanwhile, the Phonological Deficit Theory posits that weaknesses in phonemic awareness limit learners' ability to recognize, identify, and manipulate speech sounds. Collectively, these theories suggest that pronunciation difficulties may reflect underlying phonemic awareness skills.

Although previous studies have examined phonemic awareness and pronunciation difficulties independently, few have explored the relationship between these variables among secondary school learners in the Philippine context. Existing literature has largely focused on early literacy or elementary learners, providing limited evidence on how phonemic awareness relates to pronunciation difficulties among junior high school students. Furthermore, empirical evidence remains limited regarding how pronunciation difficulties reflect underlying phonemic awareness skills within the multilingual educational setting of the Philippines. These gaps underscore the need to investigate the relationship between phonemic awareness and pronunciation difficulties among Grade 7 learners.

Guided by these theoretical and empirical considerations, this study determined the level of phonemic awareness and the level of pronunciation difficulties among Grade 7 learners of Jamindan National High School during the School Year 2025–2026. It also examined whether a significant relationship exists between phonemic awareness and pronunciation difficulties. The findings of the study are expected to provide empirical evidence that may contribute to English language instruction by strengthening the understanding of phonemic awareness as a factor associated with learners' pronunciation performance.

Statement of the problem

This study aimed to determine the relationship between phonemic awareness and pronunciation difficulties among Grade 7 learners of Jamindan National High School during the School Year 2025–2026. Specifically, it sought to answer the following questions:

1. What is the level of phonemic awareness among Grade 7 learners?
2. What is the level of pronunciation difficulties exhibited by Grade 7 learners?
3. Is there a significant relationship between phonemic awareness and pronunciation difficulties among Grade 7 learners?

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a descriptive-correlational research design to determine the level of phonemic awareness, the level of pronunciation difficulties, and the significant relationship between these variables among Grade 7 learners of Jamindan National High School during the School Year 2025–2026. The study was conducted at Jamindan National High School, a public secondary school in the Municipality of Jamindan, Province of Capiz, under the Department of Education. The school was selected as the locale of the study because it provided the respondents needed to investigate the relationship between phonemic awareness and pronunciation difficulties.

The respondents of the study consisted of 30 Grade 7 learners enrolled during the School Year 2025–2026. They were selected through stratified random sampling with equal allocation, wherein the Grade 7 population was divided into six sections, and five learners were randomly selected from each section, resulting in a total of 30 respondents. This sampling technique ensured that each section was equally represented in the study.

Two research instruments were utilized to gather the necessary data. Phonemic awareness was measured using a modified Phonemic Awareness Diagnostic Test adapted from David Kilpatrick's Phonological Awareness Screening Test (PAST). The instrument consisted of 20 items designed to assess the respondents' ability to recognize, identify, segment, blend, and manipulate phonemes. Pronunciation difficulties were measured using a researcher-made Pronunciation Difficulties Speaking Task composed of 26 minimal-pair words. The

respondents' oral performances were independently evaluated by three English teachers using the established scoring guide. Prior to the administration of the instruments, they underwent expert validation to establish their content validity.

After permission was secured from the Office of the School Principal, the researcher administered the modified Phonemic Awareness Diagnostic Test to the selected respondents. Upon completion of the written assessment, each respondent performed the Pronunciation Difficulties Speaking Task individually. The oral responses were audio-recorded solely for scoring purposes and were independently evaluated by three English teachers. To ensure confidentiality, participant codes were assigned in place of names throughout the data collection and analysis. The gathered data were encoded, tabulated, and prepared for statistical analysis.

The collected data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Mean and standard deviation were computed to determine the level of phonemic awareness and the level of pronunciation difficulties among the respondents, while Pearson's Product-Moment Correlation Coefficient (Pearson's r) was used to determine the significant relationship between phonemic awareness and pronunciation difficulties. All statistical analyses were performed at the 0.05 level of significance.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This chapter presents the results and discussion of the study conducted among Grade 7 learners of Jamindan National High School for the school year 2025-2026. The study employed a descriptive correlational design, with the participants selected through stratified random sampling with equal allocation. The data gathered used a modified Phonemic Awareness Diagnostic test and a researcher made pronunciation speaking task consists of minimal pair words. The data were analyzed using mean, and standard deviation, and Pearson R correlation set at 0.00 level of significance. The discussion is grounded in the data that were gathered and were interpreted directly to the objectives of the study particularly the level of phonemic awareness, level of pronunciation difficulties and the significant relationship between phonemic awareness and pronunciation difficulties among Grade 7 learners.

The findings revealed that the Grade 7 learners obtained a very high level of phonemic awareness, with a mean score of 18.07 and a standard deviation of 1.31. This indicates that the respondents demonstrated a high level of proficiency in recognizing, identifying, segmenting, blending, and manipulating individual speech sounds. Their performance reflects a strong understanding of the sound structure of words, enabling them to distinguish phonemes accurately and perform phonological tasks with confidence. The high level of phonemic awareness suggests that the respondents had already developed the foundational skills necessary for effective language learning and communication.

Furthermore, the result implies that the respondents possessed a well-established ability to process spoken language, allowing them to recognize sound differences and identify phonemic patterns within words. Such competence is essential in understanding how sounds function in the English language and in applying this knowledge to various language activities. Learners with a strong command of phonemic awareness are more likely to analyze words accurately, recognize similarities and differences in speech sounds, and respond effectively to oral language tasks. Their ability to manipulate phonemes also indicates that they have developed important phonological processing skills that support overall language proficiency.

The respondents' very high level of phonemic awareness may also indicate that they have benefited from previous language instruction and continuous exposure to English in classroom learning activities. Their consistent performance suggests that they have acquired sufficient experience in listening to, recognizing, and producing English speech sounds,

enabling them to perform successfully in phonemic awareness tasks. This level of proficiency demonstrates that the respondents were generally capable of processing spoken language efficiently, which contributes to clearer communication and a better understanding of the English sound system.

The respondents exhibited a low level of pronunciation difficulties, with a mean score of 8.29 and a standard deviation of 3.74. This finding indicates that the respondents generally pronounced English words with minimal errors and demonstrated satisfactory articulation of English speech sounds. Their performance suggests that they were able to produce most phonemes correctly and distinguish subtle differences in pronunciation, resulting in clearer and more intelligible speech. Although occasional pronunciation errors were observed, these appeared to occur infrequently and did not substantially affect the respondents' ability to communicate orally.

The low level of pronunciation difficulties further suggests that the respondents had developed an adequate understanding of English sound patterns and were generally able to apply appropriate pronunciation during oral tasks. Their ability to pronounce words with relatively few errors indicates that they were familiar with the phonological features of English and could produce speech sounds with acceptable accuracy. Such performance reflects their capacity to articulate words clearly, thereby reducing misunderstandings during oral communication.

Moreover, the findings imply that the respondents possessed sufficient confidence in producing spoken English, allowing them to express themselves more effectively during pronunciation activities. Their performance demonstrates that while pronunciation challenges may still exist for some learners, these difficulties were generally minimal and did not hinder their overall oral language performance. This suggests that the respondents had developed pronunciation skills that supported effective communication in classroom settings.

The analysis revealed a statistically significant moderate negative relationship between phonemic awareness and pronunciation difficulties, with a Pearson correlation coefficient of -0.538 and a p-value of $.002$. This finding indicates that respondents with higher levels of phonemic awareness tended to exhibit fewer pronunciation difficulties. The inverse relationship suggests that as learners became more proficient in recognizing, identifying, and manipulating speech sounds, the frequency of pronunciation errors decreased. Conversely, learners with relatively lower phonemic awareness were more likely to experience pronunciation difficulties during oral language tasks.

The result further implies that phonemic awareness and pronunciation are closely associated, as both involve the accurate perception and production of speech sounds. Learners who can recognize phonemic differences more effectively are generally better able to produce those sounds correctly during spoken communication. This ability enables them to articulate words more accurately, distinguish similar-sounding phonemes, and minimize pronunciation errors. As a result, stronger phonemic awareness contributes to clearer speech production and greater intelligibility in oral communication.

The significant relationship observed in the study also highlights the importance of developing learners' phonemic awareness as part of English language instruction. Since phonemic awareness involves the ability to recognize and manipulate the smallest units of sound in a language, strengthening this skill may help learners become more aware of correct sound production and improve their pronunciation performance. Although the present study does not establish a cause-and-effect relationship, the findings demonstrate that higher phonemic awareness is associated with fewer pronunciation difficulties among the respondents, emphasizing the close connection between these two language skills.

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings of the study, the Grade 7 learners demonstrated a very high level of phonemic awareness, indicating that they had developed strong skills in recognizing, identifying, segmenting, blending, and manipulating speech sounds. They also exhibited a low level of pronunciation difficulties, suggesting that they were generally able to articulate English speech sounds accurately and communicate with minimal pronunciation errors.

The study further established a statistically significant moderate negative relationship between phonemic awareness and pronunciation difficulties. This finding indicates that learners with higher levels of phonemic awareness tended to experience fewer pronunciation difficulties. Although the study did not establish a causal relationship, the results demonstrated that phonemic awareness was significantly associated with learners' pronunciation performance.

Overall, the findings highlight the importance of phonemic awareness as a language skill associated with accurate pronunciation. Strengthening learners' ability to recognize and manipulate speech sounds may contribute to improved pronunciation performance and support the development of effective oral communication among Grade 7 learners.

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